Outlaw Kings and Rebellion Chic

By Alister MacQuarrie / March 27, 2019

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Four hundred die-hard rebels flee an alien moon ahead of the imperial fleet, 'the spark that will light the fire' of galaxy-wide revolution. An émigré queen brings an army of traitors, nomads, and freed slaves to the shores of her mother country, promising to 'break the wheel' of feudal politics. A secret society of teenage wizards, under the name of their dead teacher, vow to destroy the Dark Lord or die trying.

Then what?

The Non-Ideological Hero

The revolutionary is everywhere in pop culture, but revolutionary politics are conspicuous by their absence - or by their vilification. As the liberal order collapses and open authoritarianism takes its place, our films, TV dramas, and videogames are filled with rebel heroes. Yet the heroic rebel on screen is often very evasive about the principles behind their actions. In many cases, the rebel hero does not take up arms for any specific idea of a better world. Rather, the rebel hero most often turns to force because of personal injury. Even while engaging in political violence, they are non-ideological heroes.

Mark Fisher argues that modern liberal democracy presents itself as non-ideological beyond ideology, a ground state[1]. In a similar way, the heroic rebel in pop culture stands above (say it with a sneer) politics. What beliefs the non-ideological hero does have are often vaguely defined. They may dislike bigotry, despite casual prejudices, but have no particular interest in structural racism as a social problem; they may be called upon to restrain marginalised comrades who 'go too far'. The non-ideological hero is against tyranny, again in a general sense, but has no particular interest in the political process, or in building institutions to resist tyranny. Though not always privileged by the old status quo, they are satisfied by a change at the top, trusting that, if good people are left in charge, things will work out.

David Mamet once wrote that the archetypal American hero is a peaceful man pushed far enough that "the very tenets of pacifism themselves would be offended if he did not come out and fight"[2], This is perhaps the epitome of the non-ideological hero: a man of peace with tremendous capacity for violence, with no interest in anything very much beyond self-defence.

British and American culture has always had a strong tendency to abhor 'ideology', which is discussed as if it is something suspicious, even foreign. Particularly under Clinton in the US and Blair in the UK, politicians insisted they were pragmatists first and foremost, unconcerned with ideology or dogma, even as they triangulated in ways that seemed to largely serve the needs of capital. In the time since, that hostility to ideology among elite liberals has transformed into a kind of performative ignorance - a virtuous void. Witness commentators and politicians from the centre, many nominally intelligent and well-educated, proudly declaring they have no idea what 'neoliberalism' is (and presumably no concept of Google); or that Corbyn's Labour party is a vanity project for elitist, south-coast, alternative, intellectual, left-wing, etc. Anna Soubry, in a recent interview, seemed to find the idea that the newly-minted Independent Group might have a specific political platform absurd. They believe in sound economics and common decency, *of course!* Quite self-explanatory.

Separately, there is in screenwriting a kind of uncodified rule: villains act, heroes react. The hero, according to traditional Hollywood structure, can't fulfil their destiny until an extraordinary event drags them out of the world they know. More often than not, that event begins with the villain. Harry Potter is only the Chosen One because Lord Voldemort killed his parents. Luke Skywalker would have stayed on Tatooine dreaming of adventure, until Darth Vader's attack on a rebel ship sends a secret message to his farm. Frodo would be safe and happy in Hobbiton if not for Sauron. Heroes rarely set out to change the world. Villains want change, and heroes run to keep up.

Yet go back to Mamet's line. In many of these stories, the hero is, reluctantly or proudly, a violent figure - and they're good at it. Not only that, but their violence is entirely justified, either because their enemies are not fully human (the cloned Stormtroopers in *Star Wars*, the degenerate orcs of *Lord of the Rings*) or because a state of war excuses it (as with *Harry Potter's* Death Eaters, or the servants of corrupt leaders in *Game of Thrones* and *The Hunger Games*). Mamet justifies heroic violence by saying his peaceful man "is given so much provocation" that he can't stand it no more[3].

Again, this is typical of heroes: violence is made permissible by extreme personal injury. Often their family is under attack, like William Wallace in *Braveheart*, who leads a rebellion against the English after his childhood sweetheart is brutally executed; or Luke Skywalker, again, whose aunt and uncle are killed by Imperial forces; or Katniss Everdeen, who volunteers to take part in the titular games to protect her sister. Many of these characters live with occupation, oppression, and state brutality as part of their daily lives, but they don't turn to violent resistance until their families are directly threatened or killed. When heroes commit political violence, it must be to avenge a personal injury. This is supposed to be substantively different from political violence committed for ideological reasons, which receives a much less sympathetic treatment.

Revolution Without Revolution

When we see violent characters who kill for primarily political reasons, they are often anti-heroes at best, outright villains at worst. The idea of the full circle revolution - of the secret dictator hiding in the throat of every rebel leader, waiting to leap out and betray the non-ideological hero - is utterly pervasive. It appears in videogames, where good old-fashioned all-American heroes like Jim Raynor of *Starcraft* or Booker DeWitt of *Bioshock Infinite* are betrayed by villainous revolutionaries Arcturus Mengsk and Daisy Fitzroy (and after all they've done for them!). It is common in films, from supervillains like Magneto and Killmonger, liberationists written as would-be conquerors, to the rebels of *The Hunger Games*, who vote to continue the games as soon as they're in power, except with the children of the dethroned elite rather than the children of the poor. The same reversal is mentioned in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, where rebel slaves, once liberated, enslave their former masters; in the TV version, an evil fundamentalist visits the kind of cruelty on the King's Landing nobility that they visited on others. In all these examples we see an echo of the primal fear of every oppressive class, the nightmare at the heart of modern white supremacy: what if someone did to us what we've done to them? Liberation is re-imagined as the world turned not so much upside-down but mirrored.

Game of Thrones' High Sparrow (Jonathan Pryce) provides an instructive example. Writing in Vox, Emmett Rensin notes the near-universal hatred for his character among fans and critics alike. The High Sparrow, violent, homophobic and misogynist though he and his flock may be, is no worse than many characters *Game of Thrones* presents as sympathetic. Given their ardent egalitarianism and their com-

mitment to the poor, the Sparrows should appeal more to modern viewers than the scheming nobles. Their body count is certainly much lower than non-ideological hero Jon Snow, or Daenerys, a revanchist warlord with a questionable commitment to liberation.

Rensin attributes the hatred of the High Sparrow to his hypocrisy, but I don't think that's quite right. What is terrible about the High Sparrow is that he has no personal grievance. He didn't see his father killed by the 'good guys', like Killmonger. His family weren't murdered by his oppressors, like Magneto. By his own account the High Sparrow was a cobbler who became disillusioned, found religion, and now, thanks to the vagaries of a civil war among the elite, finds himself in a position to overturn the social order. The feudal system of Westeros never injured him personally. He simply came to believe it should be torn down, and acted accordingly.

We seem to find this faintly repellent. We are so used to looking for an ulterior motive that, when we can't find one, we grow uncomfortable. If a good person can commit violence simply because they believe it's right, without any hidden ambition, then nothing stops us from acting to change the world. We can no longer hide behind the cosy fiction that any of us could be a hero if only we were pushed far enough. The High Sparrow strips us of our excuses.

So if killing for personal injury is more comfortable for us, and killing for ideological reasons is villain's work, then what are our rebel heroes actually fighting for? After all, they are certainly committing political violence. But to what end? Sticking with *Game of Thrones,* the dragon-riding Daenerys is among the most open about her political goals. The scion of an ousted royal family, Daenerys initially wants only to reclaim her throne. But by freeing slaves to build herself an army she becomes 'the Breaker of Chains', a liberator figure. When asked what her ultimate plans are, Daenerys compares the power struggle between noble families that defines Westeros - the 'game of thrones' itself - as a rotating wheel, and vows to break it, once and for all. Easy enough to say. But judging by Daenerys' actions, 'breaking the wheel' does not mean abolishing either monarchy or aristocracy. Her court contains freed slaves and mercenaries, but remains mostly aristocratic. Her allies in Westeros are old noble houses - the spokes in the wheel - and she demands their fealty as any queen would. She has no clear vision for how to change the fortunes of the poor she intends to rule, except that she, Daenerys, is good, and her rival is wicked.

Her imitators are similarly vague. *Outlaw King* and *Mary Queen of Scots,* both strongly influenced by *Game of Thrones,* are at pains to portray their respective heroes as woke monarchs. *Outlaw King's* Robert the Bruce is a humble, mild-mannered, decent sort, who fights 'for the people, not the land'. But it's not obvious that 'freedom' in this context means anything more than peasants bowing to Scots nobles instead of English - the wheel turning again. In *Mary Queen of Scots,* Mary deserves the throne because she's the plucky underdog. Simply by positioning two monarchs as rebels, we are supposed to sympathise, without even the semblance of a cause.

In the *Star Wars* films, the heroes don't just pose as rebels, they are explicitly a violent rebellion against the Galactic Empire, a dictatorship that replaced a nominally democratic republic. So far, so good; they fight to restore the Old Republic. Yet nowhere in the films is it ever explained what the republic actually stands for. In the prequel films, it appears to be institutionally corrupt and vastly unequal, with the only law enforcement provided by unaccountable warrior monks. Is that what the rebels of the original trilogy want to restore? In *The Last Jedi,* perhaps the most explicitly political Star War, the rebels *seem* to have principles. A trip to an alien casino full of arms dealers suggests the machinations of intergalactic capitalism behind the imperialist New Order. But it's still done in winks and nudges. Nobody in the rebellion is calling for the overthrow of space capital; no rebels argue with equal vehemence for the Girondin position. When one character delivers the triumphant line "That's how we're gonna win. Not fighting what we hate, saving what we love", she seems to mean only the love the rebels have for each other. It is unclear what they fight for beyond that. When there is friction, in *The Last Jedi* or spin-off *Rogue One*, it's over tactics, not politics. Rebellion in *Star Wars*, rather than a means to an end, is a camouflage that conceals a total void of ideology.

This void is at the heart of nearly all on-screen rebellions in mainstream culture. They fight for platitudes ('freedom', 'the people', 'the light', 'the old ways'). Rarely do we see any contention or exposition of those platitudes. They are self-evident. Explanation is unnecessary - and messy. The Empires of fiction are bad because they do bad things to us, and we're good because we're not them. But as the High Sparrow reveals, it's a symbiotic relationship. When the Empire does bad things to us, maybe then we'll become the heroes we always wished we could be. In this is the seed of all those asinine ideas that Trump would be good for art, or would bring the Left together, or provide the jolt that the system needed. And until the Empire injures us personally, we are quite justified in doing nothing.

Who Profits?

A popular culture in which rebellion is vague enough to be meaningless, in which the heroic rebel is non-ideological and motivated by personal injury more than anything, is rather convenient for the ruling class. And in making personal injury a prerequisite for rebellion, rebellion is neutered. In *Star Wars*, the rebels are fully justified in fighting, because the Empire is a brutal dictatorship that can only be removed by force. So too for *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Hunger Games*, *V for Vendetta*, or many other films about plucky rebels. In *The Shape of Water* or *Stranger Things*, the American government provides cover for violent conspiracies that exist above the law. In these situations, the liberal democratic system (or its fantastic equivalent) no longer functions. Rather, it is the breakdown of the rule of law that allows the heroes to suffer personal injury. To the extent that they fight for anything, they fight for the restoration of 'normality' - always usefully vague.

Violence that does not proceed from personal injury requires no such breakdown. This kind of primarily ideological violence can be directed against a perfectly functional system - functional, at least, for the perpetrator - simply because it appears the 'just' thing to do. No wonder, then, that in our mass media, the characters practising ideological violence are cast as morally unsound. If normality is not self-evident but a site of contention, then it problematises easy narratives of rebels vs tyrants. And if dispute over the political system is enough to justify force, then that implies violence against the modern Western state, even its violent overthrow, could be justifiable. This is understandably concerning for many writers, who tend to come from backgrounds closer to the Lannisters than the 'smallfolk'.

The Empire of *Star Wars*, for all its Nazi imagery, also drew on American conduct in Vietnam. The fall of the republic in *Revenge of the Sith* invited parallels to Bush-era power grabs and the early War on Terror; as did the oppressive regime of *V for Vendetta*, repurposed by the Wachowskis from the original comics' fears about Thatcherism and the National Front. Reflecting on the themes of *The Hunger Games* ten years on, Constance Grady points out that most of its readers are far closer to the villainous elites in the Capitol than the poor children fighting for their amusement in the arena. The *Harry Potter* books make it clear that, however evil Voldemort may be, all the structural violence and supremacist ideology he represents was already deeply embedded in the wizarding government before he took over, echoing all the ways empire has warped the very roots of the British state. In *Game of Thrones*, neither the rule of the Targaryens nor any of their suc-

cessors could be considered just or fair for the commons. At what point is the violent overthrow of these systems justified? And by whom?

The closer rebel characters come to a definable ideology, the more likely they are to be written as villains. At the same time, the emotive aspects of rebellion - the heroism of the underdog, the thrill of fighting the power - are rendered safe for public consumption by taking out any explicit political ideology. Even when rebels jump out of the screen, like the Guy Fawkes masks borrowed from *V for Vendetta* by real protestors, they are often diluted. In the transition from comic to film to symbol of protest, the more detailed exploration of anarchism in the original text is lost, leaving a void that can be filled by a wide variety of groups whose only common thread is opposition to authority. The effect of all this is to suggest that violence is somehow more sympathetic the less its perpetrators believe - that heroism decreases the more detailed your policy proposals get. If Luke Skywalker was fighting for galactic communism, or Daenerys intended to create a series of peasants' councils to govern Westeros, or Harry Potter wanted to smash the Ministry of Magic and overturn wizard supremacy, we would have to confront serious and difficult questions about when political violence is appropriate, for whose benefit, and for what purposes. I don't believe those are questions pop culture is incapable of asking. They are questions we do not want to ask.

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1. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (zer0 Books, London, 2009) ↩
2. David Mamet, *Some Freaks* (Faber and Faber: London, 1989), p. 110 ↩
3. Mamet, ibid. ↩