

On Captain America and ‘Doing’ Popular Culture in the Social Sciences

Written by Jason Dittmer

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JASON DITTMER, MAY 5 2015

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I didn’t know I was going to end up the ‘comic book guy’[1] of political geography. I started off quite respectable, really, looking at the news media as a space in which processes such as NATO and EU expansion were not only represented but also worked out discursively. A bit constructivist, maybe, but at least I was looking at high politics and broadsheet newspapers. I mean, everyone knows the importance of news media in the framing of politics. Sure, it didn’t have obvious policy relevance, but when someone at a cocktail party asked me what I did, I could hold my head high. ‘NATO expansion,’ I would say, and heads would nod sagely. This was ‘real’ work, validated by almost every cocktail party and academic conference I went to.

Of course, as with every slippery slope, it is hard to pinpoint when I started down my path. You only notice when you’re incapable of going back. My gateway drug was teaching. Sure, I could *tell* students about the social construction of regions like Eastern Europe, identifying the competing discourses with reference to the tables found in my dissertation. Or, I could *show* them *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992), and then lead a discussion about the portrayal of West and East in the film. While this was obviously a sordid excuse to show a movie in class, I promised myself that I would elevate the discussion through my own insights into the original novel. Even then I knew that some forms of popular culture were more respectable than others.[2] Lo and behold, talking to students about political geography through pop culture actually produced better results (Dittmer 2006).

‘That was great,’ I thought to myself. ‘I should do more of that.’ So I threw myself into my new project, a study of *Captain America* comics from 1940 to the present. ‘I’ll do this for a year and then write a book about it,’ I remember thinking. It ballooned to include other nationalist superheroes from the UK and Canada, went down a different theoretical path and took ten years rather than one, but otherwise I totally called it (Dittmer 2013). Inspired by scholars such as Klaus Dodds (also featured in this Edited Collection) and his work on the geopolitics of political cartoons and the *James Bond* films, I knew there was a literature to which my work could speak and draw from. When my first attempt on the subject was accepted in one of the top journals in geography (Dittmer 2005), I knew I was onto something. I smugly submitted the abstract to a conference and prepared myself for praise.

At the conference, I stood up and started outlining the geopolitical significance of Captain America in the post-11 September 2001 era. As I got a few minutes in, I saw some meaningful looks shared between some of the senior professors sitting in the front rows. A few minutes later, there was outright laughter – and not at my *bon mot* about Captain America’s pirate boots.[3] It was the kind you don’t want during your presentation: derisive laughter. It was my first experience of the Foucauldian meaning of ‘academic discipline’ – the internalisation of academic norms in ways that shape subsequent behaviour. To be clear, this was my worst ever experience of this type, and in general I have had very positive responses. I attribute this largely to the generosity of scholars in geography: it is a remarkably open-minded and inclusive discipline. But how was I to reconcile this negative experience with my publication success? It was then that I realised that the academy had a schizophrenic relationship with popular culture. It was clearly important, because we swim in a sea of popular culture. Yet it was also ubiquitous, and therefore debased.

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Understanding this tension is, I think, central to 'doing' pop culture studies in the social sciences.

Conceptualising Popular Culture in IR

The social sciences in general have a tendency to privilege the big, the macro and the structural. This has, until now, been especially true of international relations and political geography, which have sought macro-scaled generalisations that explain the empirical patterns seemingly evident around us. This is why few scholars have a problem saying that popular culture matters. Of course it matters; how else could we scapegoat it for society's ills? The problem of course is that popular culture is an umbrella term for so many things, from media objects (like *Captain America* or *The Hunger Games*) to games we play (whether sports, board games, or *Candy Crush*), to social networking (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.), that when you focus in on a single element of popular culture, it *feels* petty. How could Captain America be really responsible for anything, good or bad, in global politics?

In truth, I agree. The problem lies in our conceptualisation of popular culture as a *thing*: an object that can be grasped, considered and analysed. This was one problem with my original idea for my Captain America study. All I thought I had to do was read all the comics and render my verdict. Rather, popular culture is a *doing*. It is what we do, in common, with others. This liveliness is what is lost when popular culture is reduced to a thing. Captain America is not just the comics with his name on them, rather, he is the multiplicity of forms that proliferate around that signifier as people read, write, draw, talk about, think about and generally live with Captain America in their world (thankfully I finished the book before the *Captain America* movies started coming out, or else I would still be working). For this reason, in my study I had to take into account (imperfectly) a wide range of sites, processes and moments: not only the writers of Captain America and their creative acts, but also the political economy of comics publishing over time, the various audiences that made sense of these comics, the British and Canadian localisations of the Captain America archetype, the differing political economies and traditions of the British and Canadian comics scenes, the larger narratives and orientations towards nationalism in all three countries, and so on. Captain America emerges via the dynamic interaction of all these things/places/times, rather than as a discrete thing. Any attempt to focus in on one element – for instance, creators' intent or my own reading of the comic – imputes too much power to that one element. Rather, it is the entire assemblage that produces effects.

A lot of the worst scholarship on popular culture and IR/geopolitics starts from a desire to validate the scholar's own interest in the material. Of course there is nothing wrong with having an affection of some sort for the subject material; indeed, I hope for your sake that you do. Another version of the worst scholarship is critique shorn of any understanding of why people might like, for instance, superheroes. Intuiting the attraction to popular culture is a crucial corrective to this all too common perspective. But, paradoxically, both the need to validate *and* the need to critique often turn into a need to inflate, to impute power. It is here that the scholar's urge to look at the macro (to take one random example, the entire run of *Captain America* from 1940 to the present) can be counterproductive. Few non-scholars would do anything so Sisyphean, so how useful is any analysis of this macro-discourse? Rather, the key aspect of thinking through popular culture as assemblage is, in my opinion, to consider the ways in which the popular culture assemblage 'leaks' into other aspects of political life. This requires not a 'completist' macro-sensibility but a willingness to see the macro as emerging from the myriad baroque micro-interactions between creators, artefacts, audiences and those who re-appropriate and re-create from pop culture artefacts (Allen 2003; Jenkins 2012). It is in these lively relationships that the power of popular culture can be found.

'Doing' Popular Culture in IR

Cultivating this sensibility towards popular culture research in IR means turning attention to new sites of research, new concepts and new notions of the political. One such move means focusing less on singular, specific pop culture forms in favour of clusters of related forms that work in assemblage with one another. As I said earlier, popular culture is about doings, about lively interactions between people, pop culture artefacts and the wider world of politics. It is these interactions that ought to be the focus of attention, rather than a single kind of popular culture, no matter how salient it seems. It is for this reason that my project became less about Captain America and more about nationalist superheroes as a way of narrating geopolitics. By doing so, I could not only trace the connections between creators, audiences and contemporary political issues, but also follow the circulation of the nationalist superhero

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archetype from the US to Canada and the UK, and track the ongoing interactions between them. These connections ought to be traced as carefully as possible, rather than assumed to exist. A range of spaces of interaction have become popular in research, from conventions to social media to specialist web forums.

Further, the materialisations of popular culture are important for several reasons. First, there is, of course, the archive – whether a literal archive, or the encoding of a digital media object (like a DVD or hard drive), or something else. Second, there is the materialisation of popular culture in other forms that persist through time – notably the human body. The human body emerges as important because not only do traces of popular culture materialise in the body – a somatic archive of sorts – but also because the body serves as a site of affective interaction, where new forms of popular culture interact with previous ones, *and* with experiences of current events, as resources for political subject formation (Massumi 2002; Protevi 2009).

This focus on the body points us to the need for new conceptualisations of the political, and terms to help account for them. The frequently heard refrain from the 11 September 2001 attacks, that 'it was like watching a movie,' illustrates how the human body, and its cognitive sense-making abilities, are shaped by ongoing engagements with particular ways of seeing/known embedded in popular cultural forms and with the generic forms of narration that accompany those forms. Of course, this capability was latent within the bodies of New Yorkers, activated by the events of the day. This indicates how our bodies may carry within them all sorts of political capabilities that are entirely virtual, or latent. All of this is to say that popular culture does not determine who we think we are, who we think the enemy is, or how we will react in a crisis. Rather, popular culture provides many different sets of resources that *may* be activated under appropriate circumstances. It is a set of capabilities, or lines of flight, that are powerfully world-shaping, but not powerful in the traditional sense. Getting comfortable with that is a key part of moving past the power of the macro, and embracing the power of the baroque.

The laughter at that conference, and the denial of legitimacy it entailed, is not inherent to the study of popular culture. Rather, it is inherent in a particular view of power as something localisable in certain sites or structures, like the state. International Relations and political geography have both traditionally disciplined their subjects to look at those sites or structures and to assume the rest is beneath notice. When scholars of popular culture try to match the grandiosity of that vision of power, the objects they study fail to pass muster. Paradoxically, it is by looking at the diffuse and interacting sites of popular culture – the body, the artefact, the hashtagged Twitter discussion, the archive, and so on – that the enlivening power of popular culture emerges. It is all the more important, and legitimate, for it.

Notes

[1] https://socialvirion.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/comic_book_guy1.jpg.

[2] 'The Geek Hierarchy', <http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_29_shKT4Elw/R1L0LSjRtsI/AAAAAAAAACSo/J5mUYyrb-y4/s1600-R/geeks.gif>.

[3] Harris, Sonia (2013) 'Jack Kirby's Captain America pirate boots', *Comic Book Resources*, <<http://goodcomics.comicbookresources.com/2013/02/20/committed-10-great-superhero-boots/6/>>.

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