

Amazon, American, or Israeli? The Pitfalls of 'UN-iversalising' Wonder Woman

Written by Robert A. Saunders

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ROBERT A. SAUNDERS, OCT 30 2016

Back in 2009, Barack Obama's smiling visage graced the cover of *The Amazing Spider-Man #583* just a week before his presidential inauguration, while this year Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau appeared on a variant cover of *Civil War II: Choosing Sides #5*, sporting boxing gloves and ready to take on his (political) foes. While comic book junkies like me recognised these events as major milestones on the road to mainstream recognition of the link between popular culture and world politics, they pale in comparison to what happened earlier this week. Wonder Woman, a fictional character that dates back to the early 1940s, has prompted an international backlash at the United Nations. The controversy stems from a 21 October 2016 ceremony in which the superhero was named a UN Honorary Ambassador for the Empowerment of Women and Girls. As the UN web page on the project notes:

The Wonder Woman campaign will highlight what we can collectively achieve if women and girls are empowered – along with examples of women and girls who have made and are making a difference every day by overcoming barriers and beating the odds to reach their goals.

Accordingly, the campaign encourages people to speak out against discrimination, work against gender-based violence, support leadership opportunities for women and girls, promote access to quality education, and to generally celebrate 'real life' wonder women everywhere.

In the wake of the honour, more than 600 UN staff signed a petition criticising the choice due to concerns associated with her appearance (namely that she is a 'large breasted, white woman of impossible proportions') and that she sports a U.S. flag-themed costume. In excess of 10,000 other people have joined the UN staff in criticising the decision. As the petition rightly points out, the choice of 'an overtly sexualised image' is a curious one if the goal is to promote empowerment of women and girls on the global stage. The petitioners go on to argue that an 'animated character surely cannot be charged with what is a very important role' (though as they point out, it is not unprecedented given that Tinkerbell and Winnie the Pooh were previously tapped for such outreach). Lending support to the concerns of the anti-Wonder Woman campaigners, a recent *New York Times* article cited a number of high profile women in global governance who have come out against the decision to grant this role to Wonder Woman, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the appointment of (another) man to lead the organisation at a juncture where many UN-watchers had predicted the ascent of the first female secretary general. Most dramatically, the ceremony resulted in an exceedingly rare protest within the UN chambers and severe criticism of Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Cristina Gallach, the highest UN official to attend (Ban Ki-moon had been set to speak at the event but was a no-show).

These well-argued and undeniable criticisms of the choice of Wonder Woman, however, only scratch the surface of the potential pitfalls of the selection of Princess Diana of Themyscira as the new face of women's empowerment. Created by American psychologist William Moulton Marston and his wife Elizabeth Holloway Marston, Wonder Woman (inspired by the birth control advocate Margaret Sanger and whose voluptuous figure was purportedly based on that of their 'cohabitant' Olive Byrne), is a decidedly complex character if one considers the full arc of her narrative. A demigoddess fashioned out of clay, Diana once ruled an island of Amazons, who were supposedly created to protect a 'man's world', but later abandoned the mission to establish their own distaff society. However, in

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the context of World War II, Diana chose return to this original calling (in the forthcoming Wonder Woman film [2017], the Great War becomes the catalyst for this origin story as Diana takes on the 'Hun' in defence of American democracy). As historians of the comic book industry have pointed out, the original Wonder Woman was quite the feminist, often binding her (male) victims in what many have labelled as a soft rendering of sadomasochistic fantasies.

However, in the über-conservative 1950s, Wonder Woman, like other comic book heroines, was 'domesticated' and, owing to the puritanical Comics Code Authority (1954), fleeced of her fetish for bondage. While always (and somewhat inexplicably) an American patriot, her advocacy of the 'American way' mirrored that of other alien or immigrant superheroes of the day (most notably Superman and Aquaman). During the second half of 1970s, Wonder Woman burst onto the small screen in her own television series starring Lynda Carter (who appeared at the UN appointment ceremony). Reflecting changing gender dynamics, the maturation of the U.S. sexual revolution, and the country's bicentennial *Kulturkampf*, the show revelled in schmaltzy patriotism and (the promise of) sex. In the 1990s, Wonder Woman discarded her star-and-stripes costume for a straps-and-black leather version, harking back to her S&M roots and prompting a firestorm of criticism from the American right. As part of DC Comics growing film franchise, Wonder Woman is now appearing on the big screen and being played by the Israeli model and actor Gal Gadot. With a well-received cameo in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) and her own feature film on the way, the most recent iteration of the first female superhero is alive and well.

As the emissary of man-free society, a feminist-inspired dominatrix, an American jingoist of the first order, a paragon of U.S. interventionism, and a star vehicle for one of Israel's top models, there is no shortage of reasons why the choice of Wonder Woman is a dangerous one for the UN. While the organisation is no doubt dedicated to universalising positive attitudes to the empowerment of women and girls, it will be nearly impossible to avoid sustained criticism of the 'mascot' for the current campaign. Given the retrograde attitudes towards the promotion women's rights in many member states in the Islamic world, anti-American sentiment among major world powers like China and Russia, the sexism accompanying the rising tide of nationalist-conservative sentiment in developed countries, and feminist concerns about overtly sexualised representations of women in comic books, Wonder Woman seems doomed. However, as anyone who reads comic knows, you can't keep a superhero down for long.

Echoing the spirit behind the UN's decision to promote Wonder Woman to the level of ambassador, Carolyn Cocca, author of *Superwomen: Gender, Power, Representation* (Bloomsbury, 2016) argues in her blog Talking Comic Books: 'Not only do we still need Wonder Woman, but we also need many more wonder women'. Not because we need to see more buxom, lasso-wielding goddesses taking on super-powered villains, but because we need to see more women – of colour, of differing abilities and body types, and of all sexual orientations – taking positions of power. Given that DC Entertainment now has a female president, Diane Nelson (who was on hand at the UN ceremony), perhaps things are moving in the right direction.

About the author:

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