

Superheroes and Violence: What the Punisher Teaches Us about American Politics

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The skull emblem of The Punisher—a vigilante superhero—has become a popular symbol among law enforcement personnel and has also appeared alongside Confederate flags in Charlottesville, VA, and at the January 6th, 2021 Capitol attack. A new article by Menaka Philips argues that closely examining images of the superhero, and of heroic violence in particular, may help provide some insight into the politics of violence in the United States. Understanding how and why certain groups associate with characters like the Punisher can also help scholars understand the role of race and gender in shaping popular conceptions about violence, and about how different groups are allowed to use it in the United States.

In her article, Philips compares and contrasts the Netflix-Marvel show *The Punisher*, with two other Netflix shows, *Jessica Jones* and *Luke Cage*. *The Punisher* follows the story of Frank Castle, a former soldier who turned into a vigilante assassin after the tragic murder of his wife and children. Castle, a white man, operates with near impunity and uses extreme violence to punish those he decides are criminals. Luke Cage, a Black man whose powers include super strength and being bulletproof, fights to reclaim Harlem. Finally, *Jessica Jones*, a woman with extraordinary strength, is a private investigator whose primary antagonist is Kilgrave, a man who manipulates and controls Jones before she ultimately overcomes him.



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as a model Black citizen. He must exercise violence through small motions and shows deference to the police when he is almost arrested. His legitimacy as a Black superhero requires restraint.



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Similarly, *Jessica Jones* is only permitted to use violence after enduring repeated abuse. Philips points out that in many ways, *Jessica Jones* is a remarkable story to see on screen, the portrayal of PTSD and gender-based violence in the show is very important and progressive. At the same time, however, Jones' ability to use violence first requires her suffering and vulnerability at the hands of Kilgrave. Violence must always be her absolute last resort, accessible only after she has endured unbearable pain.

But for Castle, a white man, violence is the driving force of his actions and, because he is "punishing criminals," he is allowed to kill those whom he has decided are evil. As Philips notes, this type of violence represents the idea that the authorities may not always be able to deal out true justice and so it is the responsibility of men like Castle to punish evil-doers. Where the violence Jones and Cage use is constrained by their gendered and racial identities, Castle's status as a white man affords him an unrestricted access to violence in his policing of the line between good and evil. While other heroes like *Jessica Jones* or *Luke Cage* must moderate their violence, the Punisher does not.

Philips argues that the close affiliation between law enforcement and the symbol of the Punisher is indicative of the fact that these men feel threatened and perceive white masculinity to be under attack. She suggests that those who adopt his logo do so because it seems to represent this lost status and their resulting rage. The idea of unrestricted violence to police the line of good and evil may be particularly symbolic for people who have usually had access to this violence but, in the wake of movements for police accountability, are finding this access challenged for the first time. Philips concludes not by suggesting that we all become Punishers, but by suggesting that the Punisher and his appropriation provides important insight into the popular imagination, and that to move forward as a country we must seriously grapple with how the American public differentiates between legitimate and illegitimate uses of violence in ideas about the heroes depending on the identity of the perpetrator.■

Philips, Menaka. 2021. "Violence in the American Imaginary: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Superheroes." *American Political Science Review*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000952>