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Batman and the problem of constituent power

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(Here is the original version of the Batman essay that appeared in New Inquiry. It is indeed a bit long and much of it probably not strictly necessary, so I understand why it was edited, but one or two of the arguments that got lost in the editing process were ones I was rather happy with, so I thought I might put the original out there too just in case anyone's interested.)

BATMAN AND THE PROBLEM OF CONSTITUENT POWER

On Saturday, October 1, 2011, the NYPD arrested 700 Occupy Wall Street protestors as they were attempting to march across the Brooklyn Bridge. Mayor Bloomberg justified it on the grounds that they were blocking traffic. Five weeks later, the same mayor closed off the Queensboro bridge to traffic for two solid days to allow for shooting of Christopher Nolan's last installment of his Batman Trilogy. At the time, many remarked upon the irony.

A few weeks ago I went to see the film, *The Dark Knight Rises*, with some friends from OWS—most of whom had been arrested on the bridge themselves. We had all known that the movie was supposed to be effectively one long piece of anti-Occupy propaganda. But afterwards we all agreed: we never imagined it would be such a bad film. We'd at least expected to have fun.

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Let me clarify one thing from the start: it really is a piece of anti-Occupy propaganda. Some still deny it. Nolan, the director, claims the script was written before the movement even started, and that the famous scenes of the occupation of New York ("Gotham") were really inspired by Dickens' account of the French Revolution. This is probably true. But it's disingenuous. Everyone knows Hollywood scripts are being rewritten continually while movies are in production, and that when it comes to messaging, even details like where a scene is shot ("I know, let's have the cops face off with Bane's followers right in front of the New York Stock Exchange!") or a minor change of wording ("let's change 'take control of' to 'occupy'") can make all the difference. Then there's the fact that the villains actually do attack the Stock Exchange. Still, it's precisely this ambition, the filmmaker's willingness to take on the great issues of the day, that ruins the movie. It's sad, because both *Batman Begins* and *The Dark*

Knight had moments of genuine eloquence. In them, Nolan shows he does have some interesting things to say about human psychology, and particularly, about the relation of creativity and violence (it's hard to imagine he wouldn't, as a successful action film director). *The Dark Knight Rises* is even more ambitious. It dares to speak on a scale and grandeur appropriate to the times. As a result it stutters into incoherence.

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Still, moments like this are potentially enlightening, because they provide a kind of window, a way to think about what superhero movies, and superheroes in general, are really all about. What is the reason for the sudden explosion of such movies to begin with—one so dramatic that it sometimes seems comic book–based movies are replacing sci-fi as the main form of Hollywood special effects blockbuster almost as rapidly as the cop movie replaced the Western as the dominant action genre in the '70s.

Why, in the process, have familiar superheroes suddenly been given complex interiority: family backgrounds, ambivalence, moral crises and self-doubt? Or why (equally true but less remarked-on), does the very fact of their receiving a soul seem to force them to also choose some kind of explicit political orientation? One could argue that this happened first not with a comic-book character, but with James Bond, who in his traditional incarnation, as preternatural foil of evil masterminds, was always a kind of cinematic version of the same thing. *Casino Royale* gave Bond psychological depth. By the very next movie he was saving indigenous communities in Bolivia from evil transnational water privatizers.

Spiderman too broke left, just as Batman broke right. In a way this makes sense. Superheroes are a product of their historical origins. Superman is a Depression-era displaced Iowa farm boy; Batman, the billionaire playboy, is a scion of the military-industrial complex that was created, just as he was, at the beginning of World War II; Peter Parker, a product of the '60s, is a smartass working-class kid from Queens. But again, in the latest movie, the subtext became surprisingly explicit ("you're not a vigilante," says the police commander, "you're an anarchist!"): particularly in the climax, where Spiderman, wounded by a police bullet, is rescued by an outbreak of working class solidarity as dozens of crane operators across the city defy orders and mobilize to help him. Nolan's movie was the most ambitious, but it also falls the most obviously flat. Is this because the superhero genre does not lend itself to a right-wing message?

Certainly, this is not the conclusion cultural critics have tended to come to in the past.

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Some things are obvious. Let's start by looking specifically at the comic book stories, since this is where everything else (the TV shows, cartoon series, blockbuster movies) ultimately came from. Comic-book superheroes were originally a mid-century phenomenon and like all mid-century pop culture phenomena, they are essentially Freudian. That is to say, insofar as they had anything to say about human nature, or human motivations, a certain pop Freudianism is what one would expect. Sometimes it

even becomes explicit, as in *Forbidden Planet* with its "monsters from the Id." Usually, it's just subtext.

Umberto Eco once remarked that comic book stories already operate a little bit like dreams; the same plot is repeated, obsessive-compulsively, over and over; nothing changes; even as the backdrop for the stories shifts from Great Depression to World War to post-war prosperity the heroes—whether Superman, Wonder Woman, the Green Hornet, or the Mighty Thor—seem to exist in an eternal present, never aging, always the same. The repeated plot takes the following form: a bad guy—maybe a crime boss, more often a powerful supervillain—embarks on a project of world conquest, destruction, theft, extortion, or revenge. The hero is alerted to the danger and figures out what's happening. After trials and dilemmas, at the last possible minute, the hero foils the villain's plans. The world is returned to normal until the next episode when the exact same thing happens once again.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out what's going on here. The heroes are purely reactionary. In the literal sense: they have no projects of their own. (Or to be more precise, as heroes they have no projects of their own. As Clark Kent, Superman may be constantly trying, and failing, to get into Lois Lane's pants. As Superman, he is purely reactive.) In fact, superheroes seem almost utterly lacking in imagination: like Bruce Wayne, who with all the money in the world, can't seem to think of anything to do with it other than to design even more high-tech weaponry and indulge in the occasional act of charity; just as it never seems to occur to Superman that he could easily end war or carve free magic cities out of mountains. Almost never do superheroes make, create, or build anything. The villains, in contrast, are endlessly creative. They are full of plans and projects and ideas. Clearly, we are supposed to first, without consciously realizing it, identify with the villains. After all, they're having all the fun. Then of course we feel guilty for it, re-identify with the hero, and have even more fun watching the superego clubbing the errant Id back into submission.

The moment you start arguing that there's any message in a comic book, of course, you are likely to hear objections. These are just cheap forms of entertainment. They're no more trying to teach us anything about human nature, politics, or society than, say, a Ferris wheel. Of course to a certain degree this is true. Pop culture does exist simply for the sake of pleasure. But if you pay close attention, you find they also tend to make the very pleasure into a kind of argument. Horror Films provide a particularly clear example of how this works. They are, typically, stories of transgression and punishment—in the Slasher film, perhaps the purest, most stripped-down form, you see the same plot movement of first identifying with the monster (the camera literally takes the monster's point of view), and only later, shifting to looking through the eyes the heroine who will eventually destroy him. The plot is always a simple story of transgression and punishment: the bad girls sin, they have sex, they fail to report a hit-and-run accident, maybe they're just obnoxious; as a result, they are carved apart. Then the virginal good girl carves apart the culprit. It's all very Christian and moralistic. The sins may be minor and the punishment utterly disproportionate but the ultimate message is: of course they really deserve it; we all do; whatever our civilized exterior, we are all fundamentally corrupt and evil. The proof? Well, look at yourself. You're not evil? Then why are you getting off on watching this sadistic crap?

Authoritarian regimes often make a point of setting up similarly sadistic forms of entertainment, always, to make the same subtle political point. Roman games are just the most notorious example. Where in Athens, the largest occasions for citizens to gather together in public were democratic assemblies, where citizens voted on the great issues of the day, Roman grandees instead sponsored vast organized lynch mobs, where voting consisted of casting thumbs up or down to decide whether to cut some defeated gladiator's throat. The underlying message—that democratic self-governance would be disastrous, as it would instantly descend into just this sort of violent mob psychology—was so effective that opponents of democracy have pointed to the behavior of the Roman circus ever since.

Beside all this, a superhero comic book might seem pretty innocuous. And in many ways it is. If all a comic is doing is telling a bunch of adolescent boys that everyone has a certain desire for chaos and mayhem, but that ultimately such desires need to be controlled, the political implications would not seem especially dire. Especially because the message still does carry a healthy dose of ambivalence, just as it does with all those contemporary action-movie heroes who seem to spend so much of their time smashing up suburban shopping malls and suchlike. Most of us would like to smash a bank or shopping mall at least once in our lives. And as Bakunin put it, "the urge for destruction is also a creative urge."

Still, I think there is reason to believe that at least in the case of most comic book superheroes, the mayhem does have very conservative political implications. To understand why though I will have to enter a brief digression on the question of constituent power.

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Costumed superheroes ultimately battle criminals, in the name of the law—even if they themselves often operate outside a strictly legal framework. But in the modern state, the very status of law is a problem. This is because of a basic logical paradox: no system can generate itself. Any power capable of creating a system of laws cannot itself be bound by them. So law has to come from someplace else. In the Middle Ages the solution was simple: the legal order was created by God, a being who, as the Old Testament makes abundantly clear, is not bound by laws or even any recognizable system of morality (again, this only stands to reason: if you created morality, you can't, by definition, be bound by it). Or if not by God directly, then by the divinely ordained power of kings. The English, American, and French revolutions changed all that when they created the notion of popular sovereignty—declaring that the power once held by kings is now held by an entity called "the people." But of course, "the people" *are* bound by the laws. So in what sense can they have created them? Through those revolutions themselves. But of course, revolutions are acts of law-breaking. It is completely illegal to rise up in arms, overthrow a government, and create a new political order. Cromwell, Jefferson or Danton were surely guilty of treason according to the laws under which they grew up, as surely as they would have been had they tried to do the same thing again twenty years later.

So laws emerge from illegal activity. This creates a fundamental incoherence in the very idea of modern government, which assumes that the state has a monopoly of the

legitimate use of violence (only the police, or prison guards, have the legal right to beat you up.) It's okay for police to use violence because they are enforcing the law; the law is legitimate because it's rooted in the constitution; the constitution is legitimate because it comes from the people; the people created the constitution by acts of illegal violence. The obvious question, then: How does one tell the difference between "the people" and a mere rampaging mob?

There is no obvious answer.

The response by mainstream, respectable opinion is to try to push the problem as far away as possible. The usual line is: the age of revolutions is over (except perhaps in benighted spots like Gabon, or Syria), we can now change the constitution, or legal standards, by legal means. This of course means that the basic structures will never change. We can witness the results in the US, which continues to maintain an architecture of state, with its electoral college and two party-system, that—while quite progressive in 1789—now makes us appear, in the eyes of the rest of the world, the political equivalent of the Amish, still driving around with horses and buggies. It also means we base the legitimacy of the whole system on the consent of the people despite the fact that the only people who were ever really consulted on the matter lived over 200 years ago. In America, at least, "the people" are all long since dead.

We've gone then from a situation where the power to create a legal order derives from God, to one where it derives from armed revolution, to one where it is rooted in sheer tradition—"these are the customs of our ancestors, who are we to doubt their wisdom?" (And of course a not insignificant number of American politicians make clear they'd really like to give it back to God again.)

For the radical Left, and the authoritarian Right, the problem of constituent power is very much alive, but each takes diametrically opposite approaches to the fundamental question of violence. The Left, chastened by the disasters of the 20th century, has largely moved away from its older celebration of revolutionary violence: preferring non-violent forms of resistance. Those who act in the name of something higher than the law can do so precisely because they *don't* act like a rampaging mob. For the Right, on the other hand—and this has been true since the rise of fascism in the '20s—the very idea that there is something special about revolutionary violence, anything that makes it different from mere criminal violence, is so much self-righteous twaddle. Violence is violence. But that doesn't mean a rampaging mob can't be "the people" because violence is the real source of law and political order anyway. Any successful deployment of violence is, in its own way, a form of constituent power. This is why, as Walter Benjamin noted, we cannot help but admire the "great criminal": because, as so many movie posters put it, "he makes his own law." After all, any criminal organization does, inevitably, begin developing its own—often quite elaborate—set of internal laws. They have to, as a way of controlling what would otherwise be completely random violence. But from the right-wing perspective, that's all that law ever is. It is a means of controlling the very violence that brings it into being, and through which it is ultimately enforced.

This makes it easier to understand the often otherwise surprising affinity between criminals, criminal gangs, right-wing political movements, and the armed representatives of the state. Ultimately, they speak the same language. They create their own rules on the basis of force. As a result, they typically share the same broad political sensibilities. Mussolini might have wiped out the Mafia, but Italian Mafiosi still idolize Mussolini. In

Athens, nowadays, there's active collaboration between the crime bosses in poor immigrant neighborhoods, fascist gangs, and the police. In fact, in this case it was clearly a political strategy: faced with the prospect of popular uprisings against a right-wing government, the police first withdrew protection from neighborhoods near the immigrant gangs, then started giving tacit support to the fascists (the result was the rapid rise of an overtly Nazi party; 50% of Greek police were reported to have voted for the Nazis in the last election). But this is just how far-right politics work. For them, it is in that space where different violent forces operating outside of the legal order (or in the case of the police, sometimes just barely inside it) interact, that new forms of power, hence order, can emerge.

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So what does all this have to do with costumed superheroes? Well, everything. Because this is exactly the space that superheroes, and super-villains, also inhabit. An inherently fascist space, inhabited only by gangsters, would-be dictators, police, and thugs, with endlessly blurring lines between them. Sometimes the cops are legalistic, sometimes they're corrupt. Sometimes the police themselves slip into vigilantism. Sometimes they pursue the superhero, sometimes they look the other way or help. Villains and heroes occasionally team up. The lines of force are always shifting. If anything new were to emerge, it could only be through such shifting forces. There's nothing else, since in the DC and Marvel universes, God, or The People, simply don't exist.

Insofar as there is a potential for constituent power then, it can only come from purveyors of violence. And indeed, the supervillains and evil masterminds, when they are not merely dreaming of committing the perfect crime or indulging in random acts of terror, are always scheming of imposing a New World Order of some kind or another. Surely, if Red Skull, Kang the Conqueror, or Doctor Doom ever did succeed in taking over the planet, there would be lots of new laws created very quickly. They wouldn't be very nice laws. Their creator would doubtless not himself feel bound by them. But one imagines that otherwise, they would be very strictly enforced.

Superheroes resist this logic. They do not wish to conquer the world—if only because they are not monomaniacal or insane. As a result, they remain parasitical off the villains in the same way that police remain parasitical off criminals: without them, they'd have no reason to exist. They remain defenders of a legal and political order which itself seems to have come out of nowhere, and which, however faulty or degraded, *must* be defended, because the only alternative is so much worse.

They aren't fascists. They are just ordinary, decent, super-powerful people who inhabit a world in which fascism is the only political possibility.

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Why, might we ask, would a form of entertainment premised on such a peculiar notion of politics emerge in early to mid-20th century America, at just around the time that actual fascism was on the rise in Europe? Was it some kind of fantasy American equivalent? Not exactly. It's more that both fascism and superheroes were products of a

similar historical predicament: What is the foundation of social order when one has exorcised the very idea of revolution? And above all, what happens to the political imagination?

One might begin here by considering who are the core audience for superhero comics. Mainly, adolescent or pre-adolescent white boys. That is: boys who are at a point in their lives where they are likely to be both maximally imaginative, and at least a little bit rebellious; but who are being groomed to eventually take on positions of authority and power in the world, to be fathers, sheriffs, small business owners, middle management. And what do they learn from these endlessly repeated dramas? Well, first off, that imagination and rebellion lead to violence; second, that, like imagination and rebellion, violence is a lot of fun; thirdly, that ultimately, violence must be directed back against any overflow of imagination and rebellion lest everything go askew. These things must be contained! This is why insofar as superheroes are allowed to be imaginative in any way, it could only be extended to the design of their clothes, their cars, maybe their homes, their various accessories.

It's in this sense that the logic of the superhero plot is profoundly, deeply conservative. Ultimately, the division between Left- and Right-wing sensibilities turns on one's attitude towards the imagination. For the Left, imagination, creativity, by extension production, the power to bring new things and new social arrangements into being, is always to be celebrated. It is the source of all real value in the world. For the Right, it is dangerous; ultimately, evil. The urge to create is also a destructive urge. This kind of sensibility was rife in the popular Freudianism of the day: where the Id was the motor of the psyche, but also amoral; if really unleashed, it would lead to an orgy of destruction. This is also what separates conservatives from fascists. Both agree that the imagination unleashed can only lead to violence and destruction. Conservatives wish to defend us against that possibility. Fascists wish to unleash it anyway. They aspire to be, as Hitler imagined himself, great artists painting with the minds, blood, and sinews of humanity.

This means that it's not just the mayhem that becomes the reader's guilty pleasure, but the very fact of having a fantasy life at all. And while it might seem odd to think any artistic genre is ultimately a warning about the dangers of the human imagination, it would certainly explain why, in the staid '40s and '50s, everyone did seem to feel there was something vaguely naughty about reading them. It also explains how in the '60s it could all suddenly seem so harmless, allowing the advent of silly, campy TV superheroes like the Adam West Batman series, or Saturday morning Spiderman cartoons. If the message was that rebellious imagination was okay as long as it was kept out of politics, and simply confined to consumer choices (clothes, cars, accessories again), this had become a message that even executive producers could easily get behind.

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We can conclude: the classic comic book is ostensibly political (about madmen trying to take over the world), really psychological and personal (about overcoming the dangers of rebellious adolescence), but ultimately, political after all.

If this is so, then new superhero movies are precisely the reverse. They are ostensibly psychological and personal, really political, but ultimately, psychological and personal after all.

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The humanization of superheroes didn't start in the movies. It actually began in the '80s and '90s, within the comic book genre itself, with Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*—what might be called superhero noire. At that time, superhero movies were still working through the legacy of the '60s camp tradition. One might say the new spirit reached its cinematic peak in *Batman Begins*, the first of the Nolan trilogy. In that movie, Nolan essentially asks, "What if someone like Batman actually did exist, in the real world? What would it actually take to make someone want to dress up as a bat and attack criminals?"

Unsurprisingly, psychedelic drugs play an important role. So do severe mental health issues, and a history of association with bizarre religious cults.

It is curious that commentators on the movie never seem to pick up on the fact that Bruce Wayne, in the Nolan films, is borderline psychotic. As himself he is almost completely dysfunctional, incapable of forming friendships or romantic attachments, uninterested in work unless it somehow reinforces his morbid obsessions. The hero was so obviously crazy, and the movie so obviously about his battle with his own craziness, that it's not a problem that the villains are just a series of ego-appendages: Ra's al Ghul (the bad father), the Crime boss (the successful businessman), the Scarecrow (who drives the businessman insane). There's nothing particularly appealing about any of them. But it doesn't matter, they're all just shards and tesserae of the hero's shattered mind. As a result, we don't have to identify with the villain and then recoil in self-loathing; we can just enjoy watching Bruce do that for us.

There's also no obvious political message.

Or so it seems. But when you create a movie out of characters so dense with myth and history, no director is entirely in control of his material. The filmmaker's role is largely to assemble them. In the movie, Ra's al Ghul first initiates Batman into the League of Shadows in a monastery in Bhutan, and only then reveals his plan to destroy Gotham to rid the world of its corruption. In the original comics, we learn that Ra's al-Ghul (a character introduced, tellingly, in 1971) is in fact a Primitivist and eco-terrorist, determined to restore the balance of nature by reducing the earth's human population by roughly 99%. The main way Nolan changed the story is to make Batman Ra's al Ghul's disciple. But in contemporary terms that, too, makes a sort of sense. After all, what is the media stereotype that immediately comes to mind when one thinks of a trust-fund kid who, moved by some unfathomable sense of injustice, dons black clothing and a mask, and takes to the streets to create violence and mayhem—though always, in a way calculated never to actually kill anyone? Nolan made his hero a Black Bloc Zerzanite who breaks with his former mentor when he realizes what restoring Eden will actually entail.

In fact, none of the villains in any of the three movies want to rule the world. They don't wish to have power over others, or to create new rules of any sort. Even their henchmen are temporary expedients—they always ultimately plan to kill them. Nolan's

villains are always anarchists. But they're also always very peculiar anarchists, of a sort that seem to exist only in the filmmaker's imagination: anarchists who believe that human nature is fundamentally evil and corrupt. The Joker, the real hero of the second movie, makes all of this explicit: he's basically the Id become philosopher. The Joker is nameless, he has no origin other than whatever he, on any particular occasion, whimsically invents; it's not even clear what his powers are or where they came from. Yet he's inexorably powerful. The Joker is a pure force of self-creation, a poem written by himself; and his only purpose in life appears to be an obsessive need to prove to others first, that everything is and can only be poetry—and second, that poetry is evil.

So here we are back to the central theme of the early superhero universes: a prolonged reflection on the dangers of the human imagination; how the reader's own desire to immerse oneself in a world driven by artistic imperatives is living proof of why the imagination must always be carefully contained.

The result is a thrilling movie, with a villain both likeable—he's just so obviously having fun with it—and genuinely frightening. *Batman Begins* was merely full of people talking about fear. *The Dark Knight* actually produced some. But even that movie began to fall flat the moment it touched on popular politics. The People make one lame attempt to intervene in the beginning when copycat Batmen appear all over the city, inspired by the Dark Knight's example. Of course they all die horribly and that's the end of that. From then on, they're put back in their place, as Audience, who like the mob in the Roman amphitheater exist only to judge the protagonists' performance: thumbs up for Batman, thumbs down for Batman, thumbs up for the crusading DA... The end, when Bruce and Commissioner Gordon settle on the plan to scapegoat Batman and create a false myth around the martyrdom of Harvey Dent, is nothing short of a confession that politics is identical to the art of fiction. The Joker was right. To a degree. As always, redemption lies only in the fact that the violence, the deception, can be turned back upon itself.

They would have done well leave it at that.

The problem with this vision of politics is that it simply isn't true. Politics is not just the art of manipulating images, backed up by violence. It's not really a duel between impresarios before an audience that will believe most anything if presented artfully enough. No doubt it must seem that way to extraordinarily wealthy Hollywood film directors. But between the shooting of the first and second movies, history intervened quite decisively to point out just how wrong this vision is. The economy collapsed. Not because of the manipulations of some secret society of warrior monks, but because a bunch of financial managers who, living in Nolan's bubble world, shared his assumptions about the endlessness of popular manipulability, turned out to be wrong. There was a mass popular response. It did not take the form of a frenetic search for messianic saviors, mixed with outbreaks of nihilist violence,[1] increasingly, it took the form of a series of real popular movements, even revolutionary movements, toppling regimes in the Middle East and occupying squares everywhere from Cleveland to Karachi, trying to create new forms of democracy.

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[1] Unless you want to count the case of one individual who had clearly seen far too many Batman movies.

Constituent power had reappeared, and in an imaginative, radical, and remarkably non-violent form. This is precisely the kind of situation a superhero universe cannot address. In Nolan's world, something like Occupy could only have been the product of some tiny group of ingenious manipulators (you know, people like me) who are really pursuing some secret agenda.

The Batman series really should have left such topics alone, but apparently, Nolan couldn't help himself. The result is almost completely incoherent. It is, basically, yet another psychological drama masquerading as a political one. The plot is convoluted and barely worth recounting. Bruce Wayne, dysfunctional again without his alter ego, has turned into a recluse. A rival businessman hires Catwoman to steal his fingerprints so he can use them to steal all his money; but really he is being manipulated by a gasmask-wearing supervillain mercenary named Bane. Bane is stronger than Batman but he's basically a miserable sort of person, pining with unrequited love for Ra's al-Ghul's daughter Talia, crippled by mistreatment in his youth in a dungeon-like prison where he was cast unjustly, his face invisible behind a mask he must wear continually so as not to collapse in agonizing pain. Insofar as the audience identifies with a villain like that, it can only be out of sympathy. No one in their right mind would want to *be* Bane. But presumably that's the point: a warning against the dangers of undue sympathy for the unfortunate. Because Bane is also a charismatic revolutionary, who after disposing of Batman, reveals the myth of Harvey Dent to be a lie, frees the denizens of Gotham's prisons, and releases its ever-impressionable populace to sack and burn the mansions of the 1%, dragging their denizens before revolutionary tribunals. (The Scarecrow, amusingly, reappears as Robespierre.) But really he's ultimately intending to kill them all with a nuclear bomb converted from some kind of green energy project. Why? It's completely unclear. Perhaps he too is some kind of Primitivist eco-terrorist like Ra's al Ghul. He seems to have inherited the headship of the same organization. Or perhaps he's trying to impress Talia by finishing her father's work. Or maybe evil people just act like that.

Why does Bane wish to lead the people in a social revolution, if he's just going to nuke them all in a few weeks anyway? Again, it's anyone's guess. He says that before you destroy someone, first you must give them hope. So is the message that utopian dreams can only lead to nihilistic violence? Presumably something like that, but it's singularly unconvincing, since the plan to kill everyone came first. The revolution was a decorative afterthought.

In fact, what happens to the city can only possibly make sense as a material echo of what's always been most important: what's happening in Bruce Wayne's tortured brain. After Batman is crippled by Bane halfway through the movie, he is placed in the same fetid dungeon where Bane himself was once imprisoned. The prison sits at the bottom of a well, so sunlight is always taunting its inhabitants—but the well is impossible to climb. Bane ensures Bruce is nursed back to health just so he can try and fail to scale it, and thus know that it's his failure that allowed his beloved Gotham to be destroyed. Only then will Bane be merciful enough to kill him. This is contrived, but psychologically, at least, it does make some kind of sense. Translated onto the level of a city, it makes no sense at all: why would anyone want to give a population hope and then unexpectedly vaporize them? The first is cruel. The second is just random. And not only that, the filmmakers compound the metaphor by having Bane play the same trick on the

Gotham police department, who—in a plot contrivance so idiotic it violates even the standards of plausibility expected from a comic book—are almost all lured beneath the city and then trapped there by well-placed bombs, except then for some reason allowed to receive food and water, presumably, so they too can be tortured by hope.

Other things happen, but they're all similar projections. This time Catwoman gets to play the role usually assigned to the audience, first identifying with Bane's revolutionary project, then, for no clearly articulated reason, changing her mind and blowing him away. Batman and the NYPD both rise from their respective dungeons and join forces to battle the evil Occupiers outside the Stock Exchange. In the end, Batman fakes his own death disposing of the bomb and Bruce ends up with Catwoman in Florence. A new phony martyr legend is born and the people of Gotham are pacified. In case of further trouble, we are assured there is also a potential heir to Batman, a disillusioned police officer named Robin. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief because the movie finally ends.

Is there supposed to be a message we can all take home from this? I guess. It would seem to be something along the lines of: 'true, the system is corrupt, but it's all we have, and anyway, figures of authority can be trusted if they have first been chastened and endured terrible suffering. (Normal police let children die on bridges. Police who've been buried alive for a few weeks can employ violence legitimately.) True, there is injustice and its victims deserve our sympathy, but keep it within reasonable limits. Charity is much better than addressing structural problems. That way lies madness. Because any attempt to address structural problems, even through non-violent civil disobedience, really *is* a form of violence; because that's all it could possibly be. Imaginative politics are inherently violent, and therefore, there's nothing inappropriate if police respond by smashing protestors' heads repeatedly against the concrete.'

As a response to Occupy, this is nothing short of pathetic. When the Dark Knight came out in 2008, there was much discussion over whether the whole thing was really a vast metaphor for the war on terror: how far is it okay for the good guys (that's us) to go to adapt the bad guy's methods? Probably the filmmakers were indeed thinking of such issues, and still managed to produce a good movie. But then, the war on terror actually was a battle of secret networks and manipulative spectacles. It began with a bomb and ended with an assassination. One can almost think of it as an attempt, on both sides, to actually enact a comic book version of the universe. Once real constituent power appeared on the scene, that universe shriveled into incoherence—even, came to seem ridiculous. Revolutions were sweeping the Middle East and the US is still spending hundreds of billions of dollars fighting a ragtag bunch of seminary students in Afghanistan. Unfortunately for Nolan, for all his manipulative powers, the same thing happened to his world when even the hint of real popular power arrived in New York.