



CCS 235

Reading & Misreading  
Batman: Neoliberal  
Ideologies in Comics

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# Pre-lecture Question

- Stories convey & normalize important societal narratives—including certain values, ideologies, identities, & social realities.
- What social narrative(s) does Batman's story convey & normalize?
  - What is Batman normalizing as a societal mythos?



# Superheroic Thinking & Neoliberalism

- Who IS Batman? What are his qualities? What are we (as society) meant to admire & be impressed with about his character?
- What do we know about the creation history of the character?
  - What do we know about the story of Zorro, its origins, & colonial politics?
- What does that link to Zorro tell us about the nature of the Batman?



# Neoliberalism

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THREE MINUTE  
THEORY

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# Neoliberalism

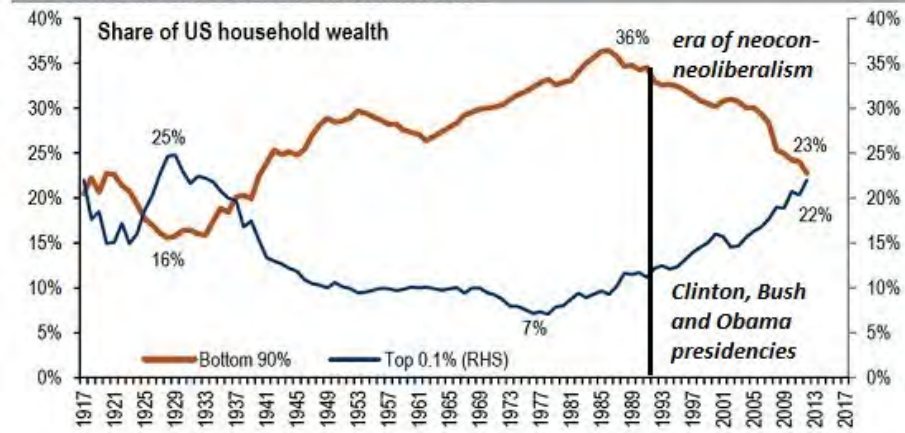


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POLITICAL IDEOLOG  
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LIBERALIZATION  
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PRACTICE

Chart 5: Distribution of wealth in the US since 1917



Source: BofA Merrill Lynch Global Investment Strategy, Emmanuel Saez & Gabriel Zucman - 2015

# What characterizes Neoliberalism?

- Politics and outcomes of Brexit, & autocrat's elections → Capital as both the CAUSE of anxiety/suffering, masquerading as it's savior
- Policies of 'Austerity' across the world; Corporate-Nationalist Political takeovers/domination in Brazil, Turkey, India, Russia, Israel, etc.
- Increasing privatization of social goods
- Increased spending on law enforcement/military
- Dissolution of barriers between corporate power/wealth and political power
- Increasing prominence of money as driving political decision making
- Breakdown of participatory democracy
- Mythologies of social mobility in the absence of tangible evidence of such; Rationalizing harsh economic and social Darwinism
- The notion that there is no viable or realistic alternative to free-market capitalism
- Sometimes called 'Zombie Capitalism' or 'Casino Capitalism', because the network of deregulation and distribution creates a strange phenomenon of no one actually BEING at the top, were you to try to trace out who is at the source of everything...it works like a zombie, without the need for a functioning consciousness. It is all of us, and none of us
- Pervasive across the political spectrum among the ruling elite.
- Intimately linked, & with a vested interest, in coloniality, racism, sexism, etc.

# Neoliberalism 101



## ■ Basic Definition:

*A faith in the unregulated free market to distribute both economic (money, etc.) & social resources (education, safety, freedom, etc.) in the most efficient, just, & fair fashion.*

*The market will determine how access to all things—including the common good—should be distributed.*

# Neoliberalism 101

- Given this definition, that...

*The market will determine how access to all things (including the common good) should be distributed*

We arrive at some de facto, unstated assumptions about this 'take' on the free-market...

- Neoliberalism's Core Assumption(s):

1. Not everyone equally deserves access to freedom, or to the common good
2. Those in power are entitled to buy, sell, use, etc. everything, including the public good, to advance their own wealth & power
3. *If you fail/struggle, it is down to your individual effort. You just didn't work hard enough; the problem is YOU.*

*\*These are COLONIAL assumptions, based in the idea that some people are INTRINSICALLY better, or more entitled to life, freedom, & the pursuit of happiness than others.*

*In practice, they also shake out along racialized lines.*



# Neoliberalism 101

- Neoliberalism is a Logic of Winners & Losers, even in realms where most modern societies have agreed there shouldn't be absolute-losers\*:
  - If everything is a competitive market, you will necessarily have losers in all markets. Should we have losers in the 'market' of early childhood education? Healthcare? Freedom from discrimination? Access to healthy living conditions?
  - If everything can be bought & sold for personal enrichment, who should get to 'buy & sell' public lands? Lands that were stolen through racist histories? Non-renewable resources?
- Just like with economic markets, existing capital (history) & relative position (who is rich & powerful NOW) are hugely determinate in predicting outcomes for the future

\*This distinguishes it from Libertarianism, which still holds that the government should stay out of the economic market, but still protect people from injustice & exploitation.

# Superheroic Thinking & Neoliberalism: How do comics & Batman fit in?

- What archetypal roles do Batman & the individuals in his universe hold for us?
- What are we meant to think & feel about Bruce Wayne & his mission?



# THE WEALTH INEQUALITY PROBLEM IN ONE CHART

It's clear that America's financial and political systems are broken



## THEN AND NOW: WHAT'S DIFFERENT?

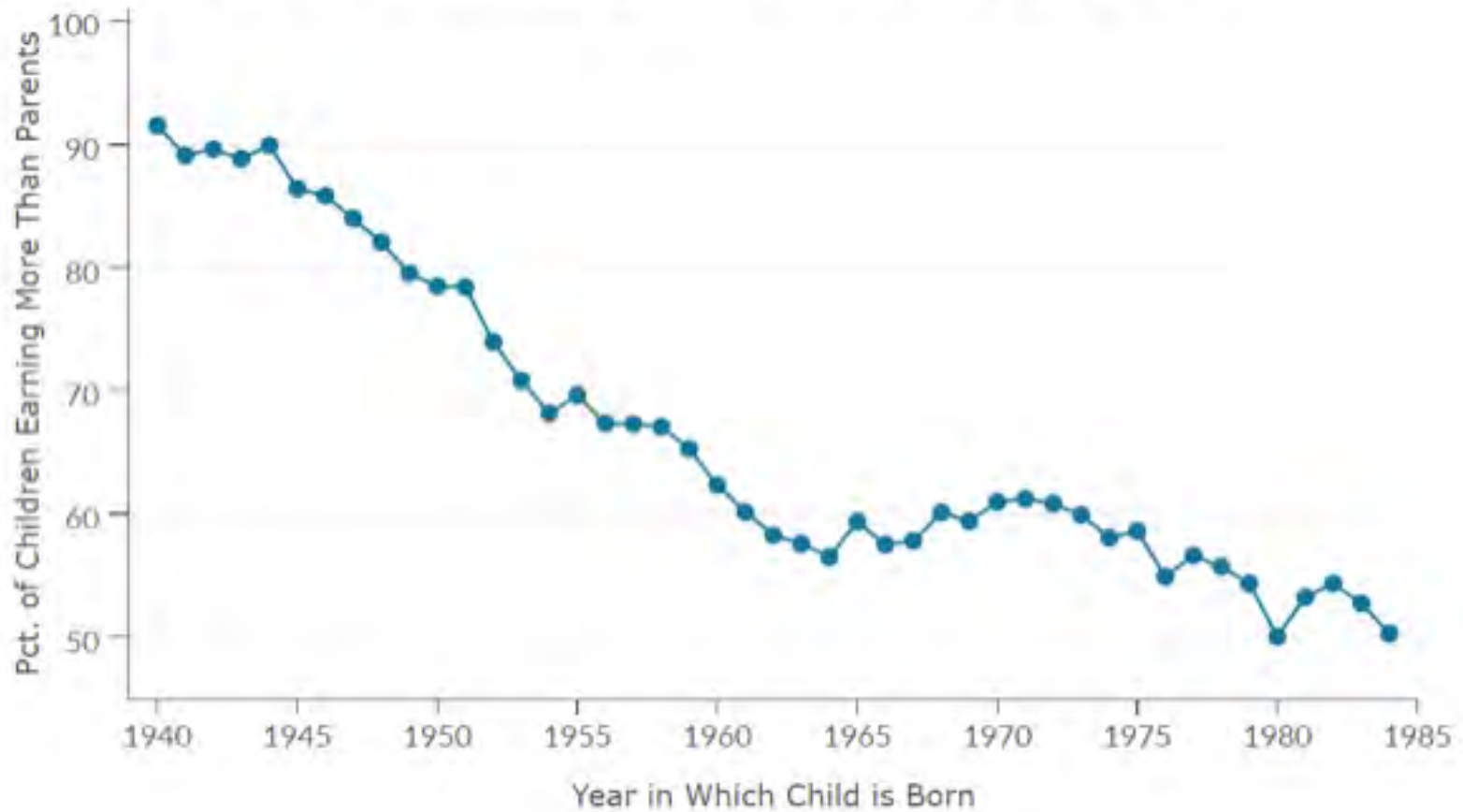
	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE <sup>1</sup>	WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION RATE <sup>1</sup>	INFLATION RATE <sup>1</sup>	FEDERAL FUNDS RATE <sup>2</sup>	NATIONAL DEBT <sup>3</sup>	MONEY SUPPLY (M2) <sup>4</sup>
1998	4.5%	67.1%	1.6%	5.35%	\$5.5T	\$4.2T
Today	4.7%	62.6%	1%	0.37%	\$19.3T	\$12.7T

<sup>1</sup>Data from May 2016. Sources: 1. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2. Federal Reserve, 3. Treasury Direct, 4. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System



# The Fading American Dream

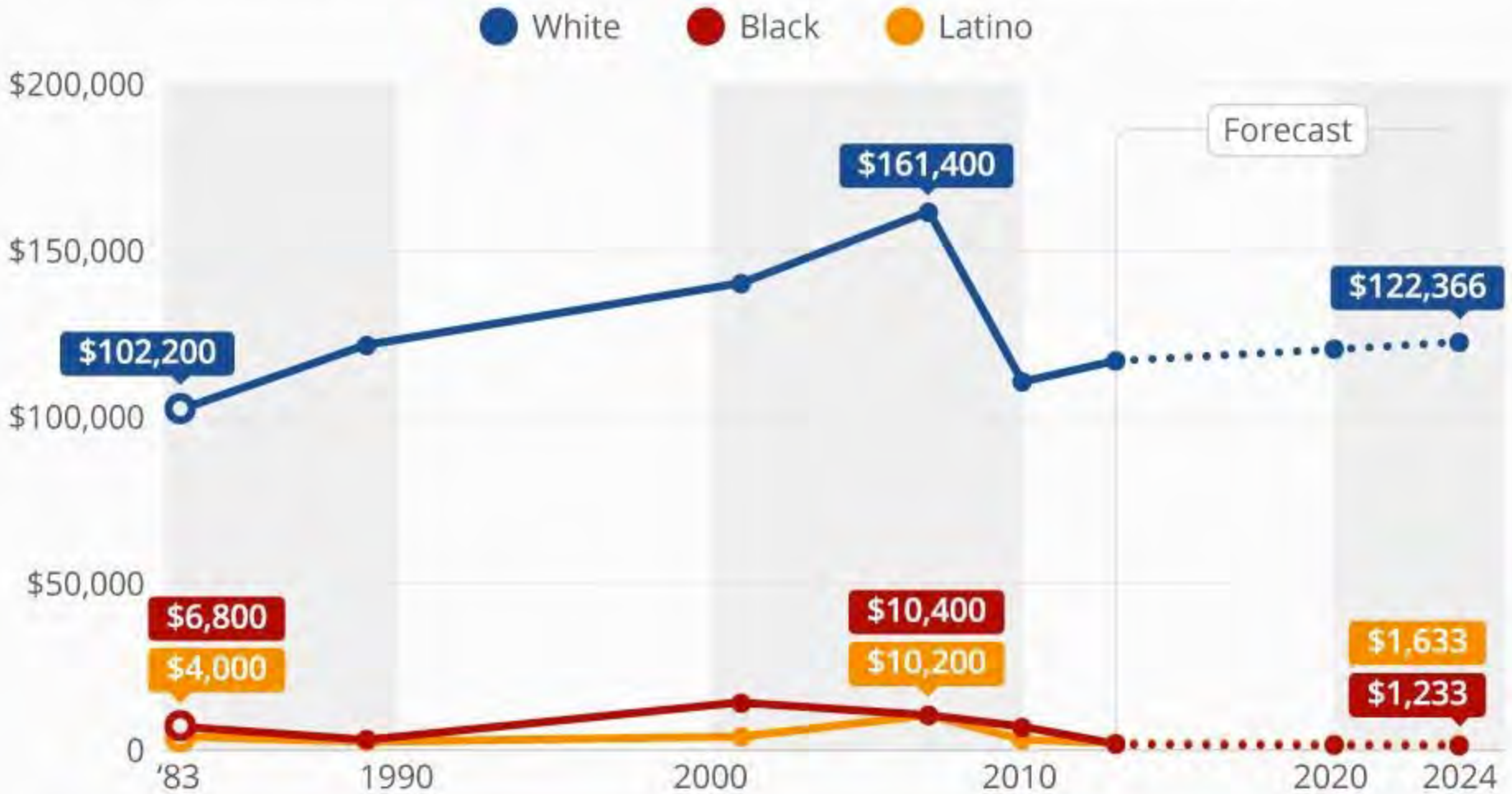
Percent of Children Earning More than their Parents, by Year of Birth





# Racial Wealth Inequality Is Rampant In The U.S.

Median household wealth by race/ethnicity in the United States (1983-2024)



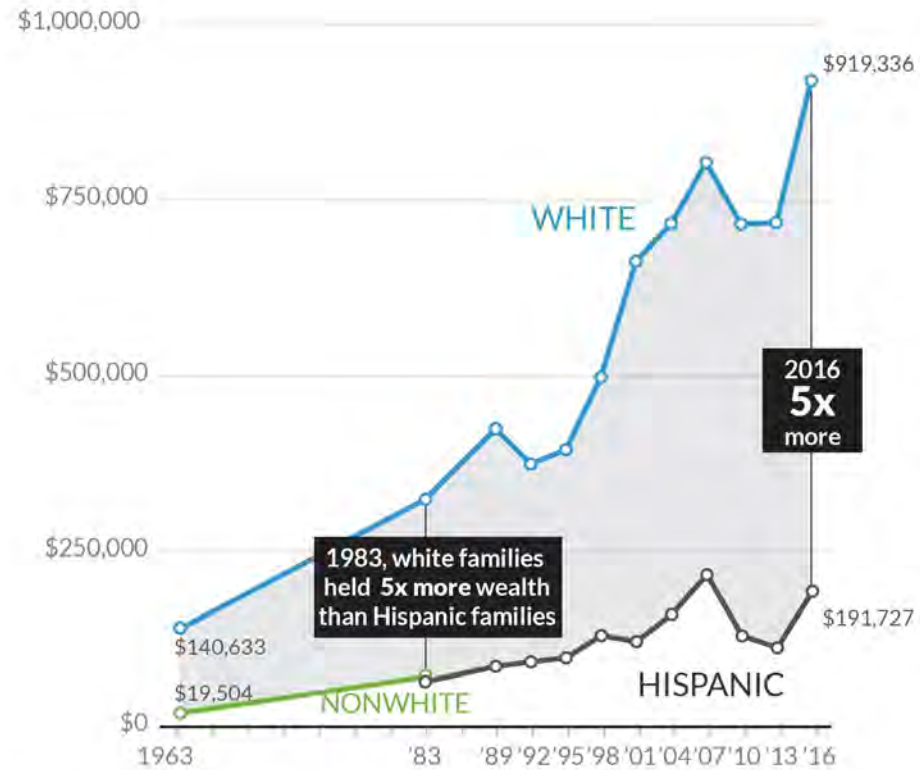
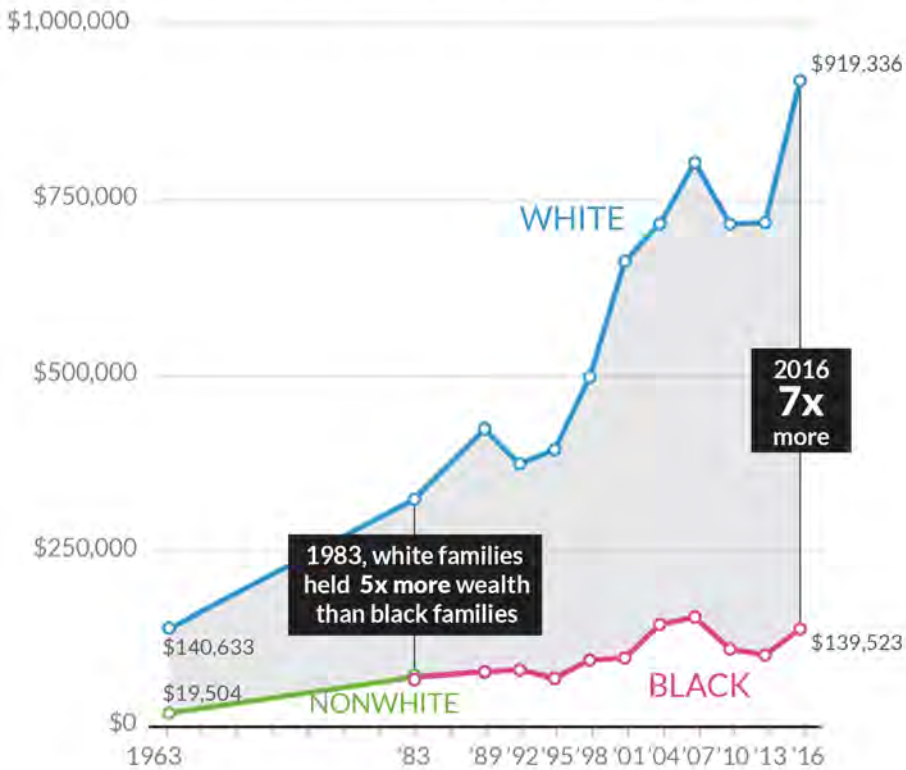
@StatistaCharts

Source: Prosperity Now & Institute For Policy Studies





# Average Family Wealth by Race/Ethnicity, 1963-2016

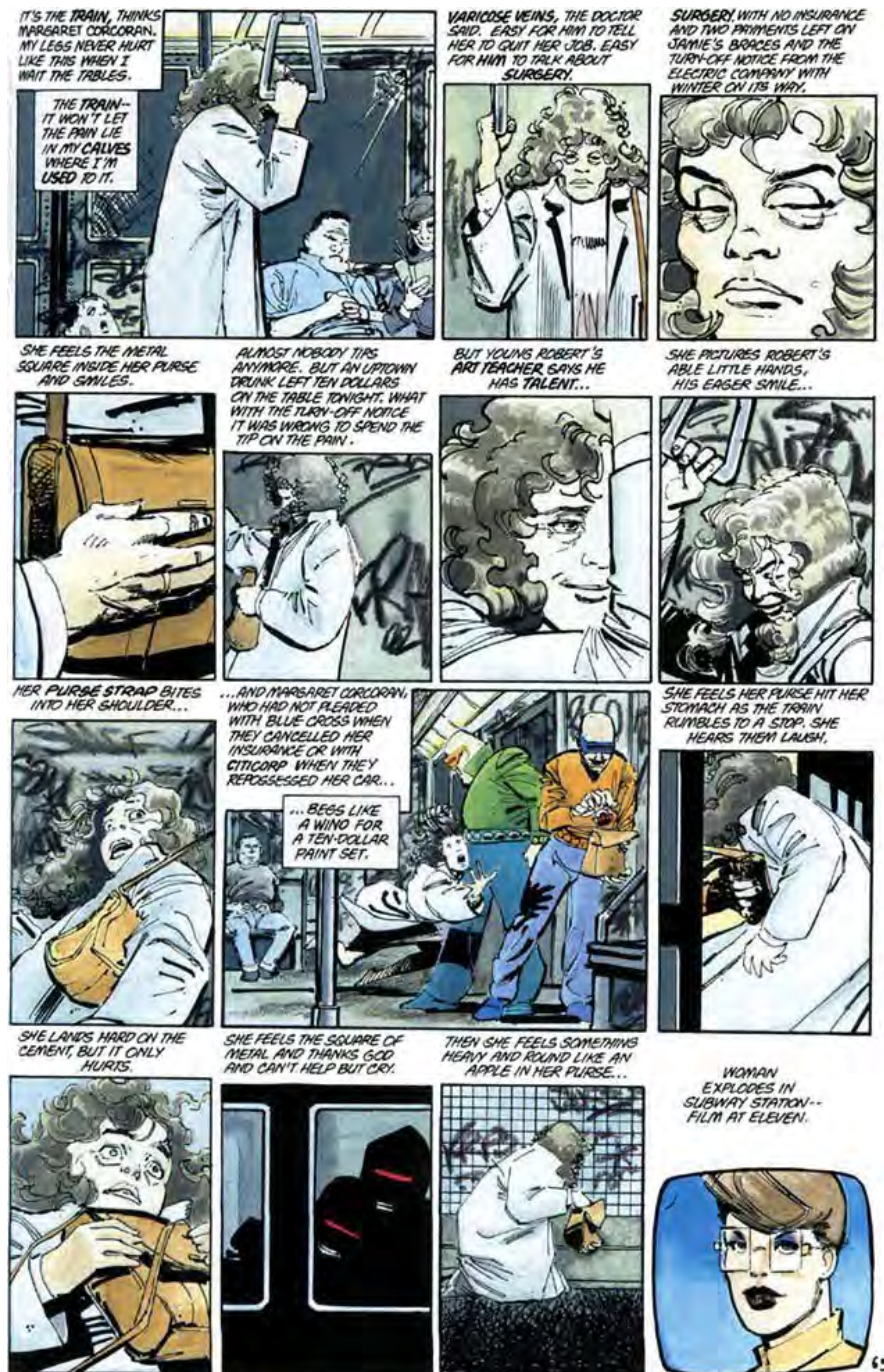


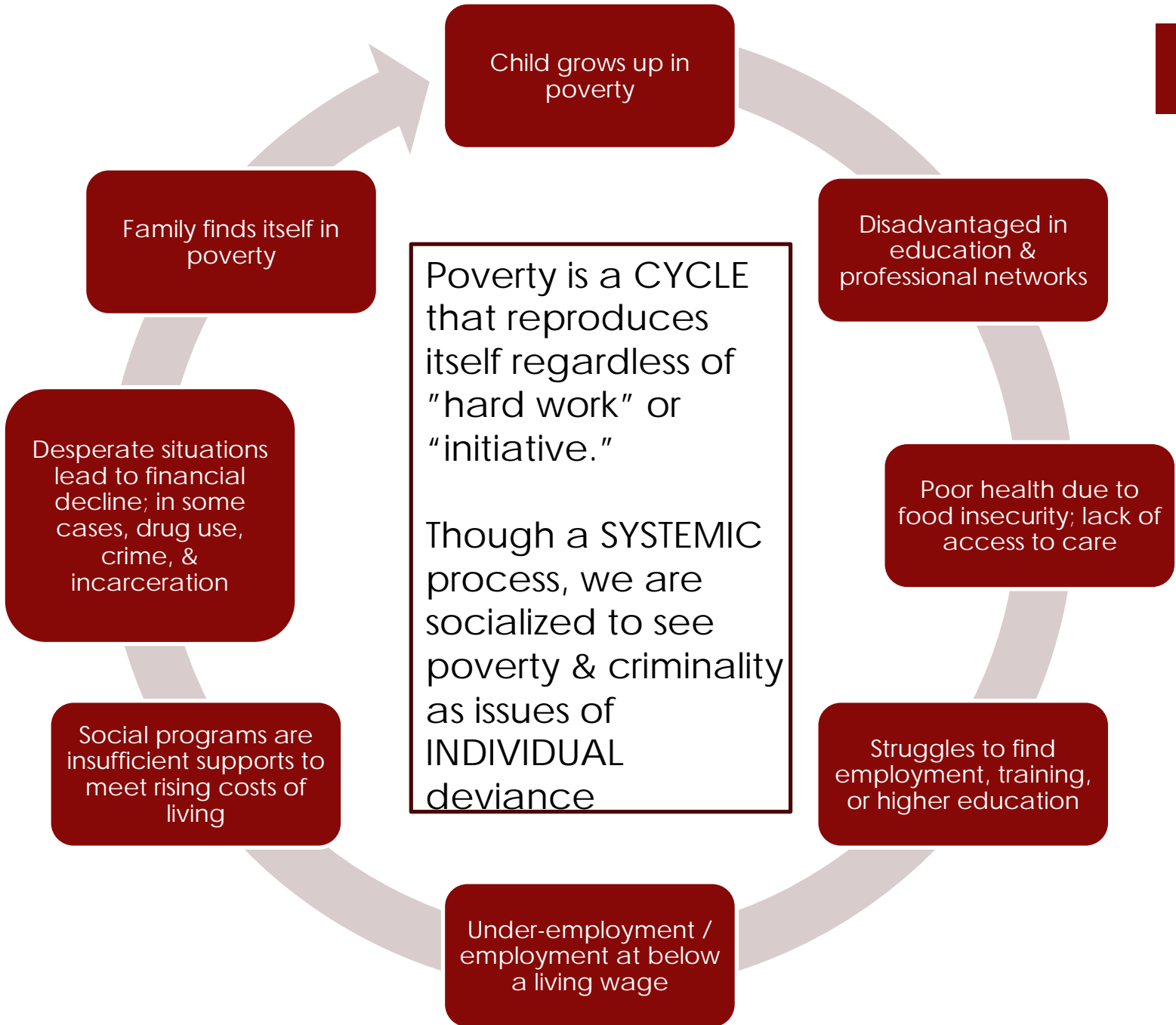
Source: Urban Institute calculations from Survey of Financial Characteristics of Consumers 1962 (December 31), Survey of Changes in Family Finances 1963, and Survey of Consumer Finances 1983-2016.

Notes: 2016 dollars. No comparable data are available between 1963 and 1983. Black/Hispanic distinction within nonwhite population available only in 1983 and later.

# Superheroic Thinking & Neoliberalism

- What is the nature of Batman's world to an everyday citizen?
- Who is Batman's ire & violence most regularly directed at?





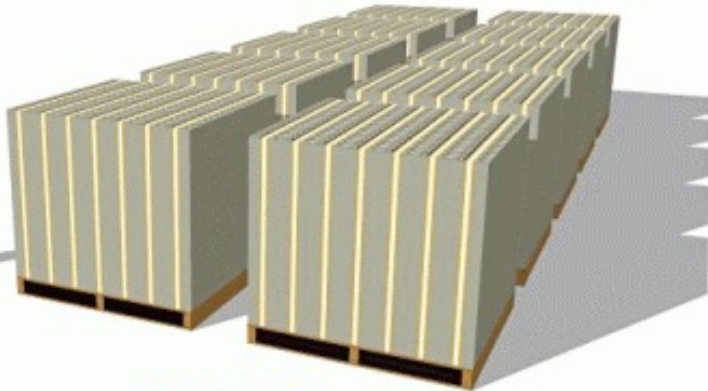
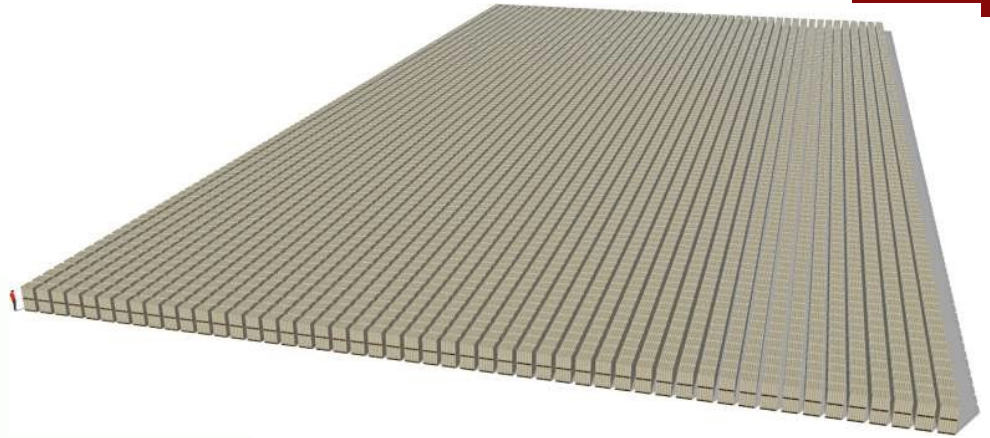




**10,000 \$**



**1 million \$**



**1 billion \$**

[#ExplainAFilmPlotBadly](#) A billionaire devotes his fortune to cosplay and beating up the mentally ill.





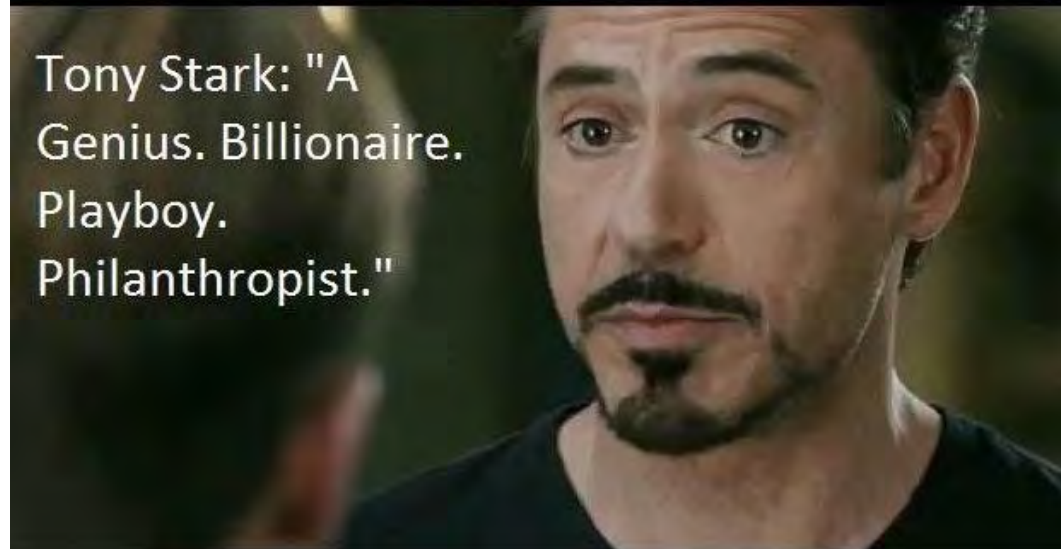
# Superheroic Thinking & Neoliberalism

Batman isn't alone—Many Superheroes (Ironman, Green Arrow, Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic, etc.) fall into the same archetypal category.

- What does that tell us about the world-view, ideology, & nature of superheroic thinking?
- What are the implicit assumptions about the rich that are normalized here? How do those stack up with reality?
- How do their various alliances/ friendships/ relationships to 'everyman' superheroes relate to our social narratives?



Captain America: "Big man in a suit of armor, take that away and what are you?"



Tony Stark: "A  
Genius. Billionaire.  
Playboy.  
Philanthropist."

# American billionaires have gotten half a trillion richer during the pandemic, but the country's racial wealth gap has grown, too

Taylor Nicole Rogers Jun 4, 2020, 10:08 AM



- American billionaires are now nearly 20% richer — by \$565 billion, to be exact — than they were at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, according to a new report by [the Institute for Policy Studies](#).
- The coronavirus crisis has been an economic disaster for the rest of America, as an unprecedented [42.6 million](#) Americans filed for unemployment benefits in the past 11 weeks.
- The job losses have [disproportionately affected black Americans](#), and the country's [racial wealth gap](#) has just kept on growing. The Washington Post reports the gap is in many ways unimproved — and in other ways worse — [since 1968, when a host of historic civil rights legislation was passed](#).



# The Walton family's outrageous fortune

The American dynasty tops Bloomberg's 2019 list of the world's wealthiest families

The Walton fortune:

# \$191 BILLION

They earn:

## \$70,000

Per minute

## \$4 MILLION

Per hour

## \$100 MILLION

Per day

**Forbes** Billionaires Innovation Leadership Money Business Small Business Lifestyle

Aug 15, 2014, 03:38pm EDT

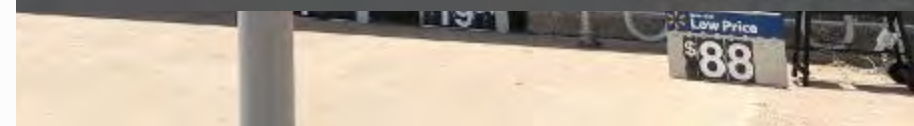
## Report: Walmart Workers Cost Taxpayers \$6.2 Billion In Public Assistance



Clare O'Connor  
Entrepreneurs



Source: Bloomberg



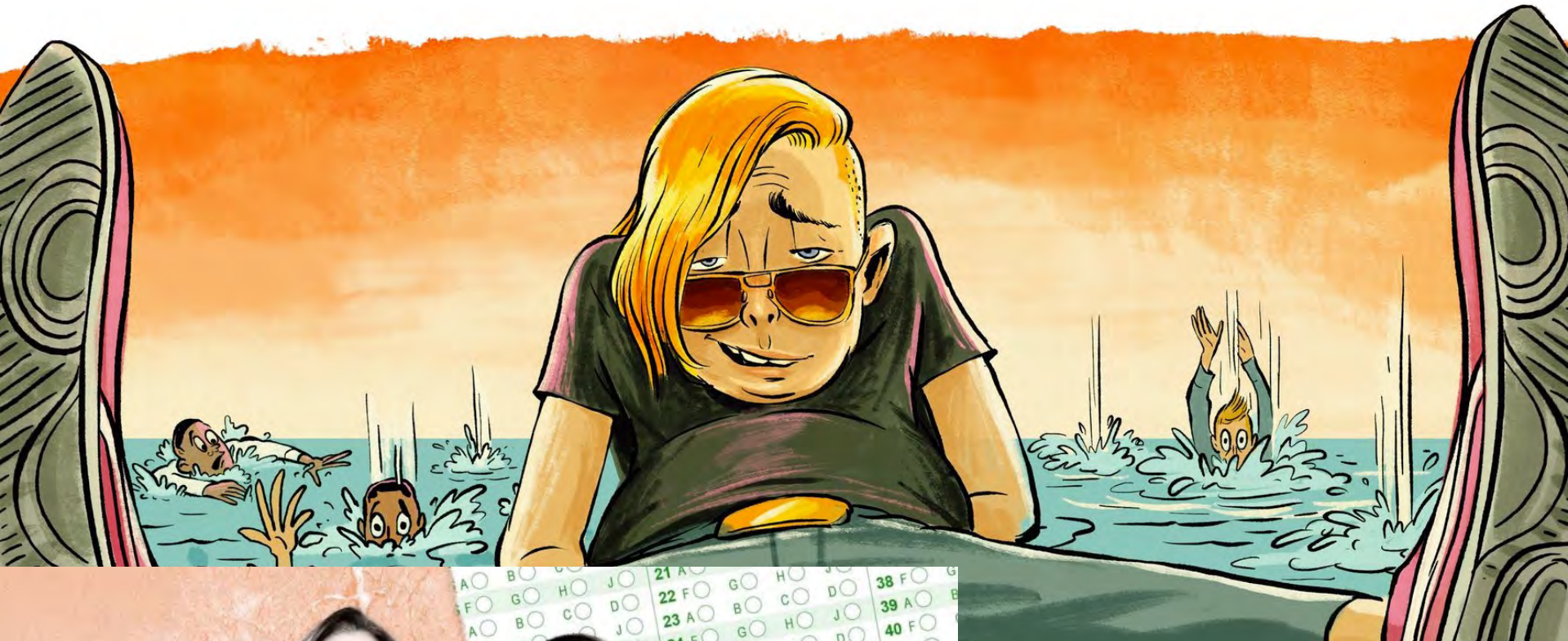
## Educational Reality -



## The Myth of Meritocracy -









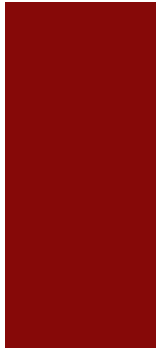
# Superheroic Thinking & Neoliberalism

- Comic universes also give us wealthy villains—what are the differences we are supposed to see between Bruce Wayne/Batman, & Lex Luthor?
- Are those differences substantive? (i.e. are Luthor & Bruce Wayne really all that different?)



# Superheroic Thinking & Neoliberalism

- Who are our “real life” corollaries to Batman, Lex Luthor, Ironman, etc.?
- What does the persistence of superheroic thinking & ‘Batman’ narratives do for their political power & prosperity?
  - What does it do to us?
- Do we want to live in Bruce Wayne/Lex Luthor’s world?



# So.....?

- At its core, Neoliberalism is the ideology of free-market capitalism applied universally (i.e. to democracy, government, the social state, community & interpersonal interactions, etc.).
- At its most fundamental level, this reduces everything and everyone to a commodity, each with our varying levels of marketability, utility, & disposability.
- If you aren't the 1%, you are a disposable body/commodity owed nothing that you cannot yourself claim through your own independent means (e.g. education for you and your family, access to health care & housing, access to public lands & resources)

What do our societal aspirations to be/be like Batman, our Batman idolatry, tell us about our neoliberal reality & ourselves?



# Neoliberalism 101



- Put in *VERY* simple terms, Neoliberalism is a **TOXIC REWRITING** of the **SOCIAL CONTRACT** (the unspoken agreement of those in shared society that allow them to coexist) to **JUSTIFY INEQUALITY** and **PRESERVE THE STATUS** of those *already* experiencing privilege and power.



# Superheroic Thinking & Neoliberalism



- As Giroux notes....

*"For over 30 years, the American public has been reared on a neoliberal dystopian vision that legitimates itself through the largely unchallenged claim that there are no alternatives to a market-driven society, that economic growth should not be constrained by considerations of social costs or moral responsibility, and that democracy and capitalism are virtually synonymous. At the heart of this corporate driven market rationality is an egocentric philosophy and culture of cruelty that sell off public goods and services to the corporate and private sectors while simultaneously dismantling those public spheres, social protections, and institutions serving the public good." – Giroux*

- If we are meant to rely on/submit to the 'merit' of Batman/Luthor/Stark & their genius & wealth, what does that say about our own democratic agency?
- For further reading, see: N. Klein, H. Giroux, N. Chomsky, etc.

# Reflection Questions

- Revisit: What social narrative(s) does Batman's story convey & normalize?
  - What is Batman normalizing as a societal mythos?
- In our real lives, are there any Batman/Ironman figures, or just Lex Luthors?
  - Does the distinction matter?
- Where have comics subverted this neoliberal idolatry?

