Mutant allegories and modernity's broken promises: Virtue, Exclusion, and Subversion in X-Men '97 through Schopenhauer and Veblen

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Abstract

Employing *X-Men '97* as an aesthetic and theoretical prism to interrogate modernity's moral and racial hierarchies, I critically examine the dialectic of virtue and vice within far-right rhetoric. Framed by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978; 1985) as a Western dispositif, I position the 'Friends of Humanity' as an analogue proxy for global white supremacy, revealing how the mutant allegory refracts real-world systems of exclusion, oppression, resistance and subversion. Synthesising Romantic Nationalism, Euro-Orientalism, and racial triangulation, I critique modernity's moral binaries and the commodification of virtue, unmasking the adaptive persistence of exclusionary ideologies. Through Schopenhauer's metaphysical pessimism and Veblen's institutional critique, this article exposes barbarism as modernity's shadow, lurking beneath its veneer of civility. Simultaneously, it envisions pathways for infrapolitical defiance and solidarity within marginalised spaces, echoing postcolonial and decolonial praxis. By illuminating the paradoxes of reason, progress, and biopolitical control, *X-Men '97* emerges as both a mirror and a map: reflecting modernity's contradictions while charting possibilities for transformative resistance in a purportedly post-ideological era. The series not only interrogates the struggle for recognition in the 21st century but also accentuates the capacity of fiction to unveil enduring structures of domination and the latent potential for emancipatory futures.

Keywords: Orientalism, Global White Supremacy, Far-Right Rhetoric, Racialisation, Subjectivities, Modernity

Virtue, vice, and the mutant allegory: far-right rhetoric in X-Men '97 and the shadows of Orientalism

This article examines the interplay of virtue and vice in far-right rhetoric through *X-Men '97: The Animated Series* (2024). My theoretical analyses is framed by Said's *Orientalism* 1978; 1985) as a Western *dispositif w*hich constructs moral hierarchies and racialised dualities, asserting authority over the 'Orient' as the Exotic Other. Analysing the 'Friends of Humanity' (FOH), a fictional far-right militia, I unpack the role of global white supremacy in perpetuating these hierarchies (Beliso-De Jesús & Jemima, 2020). By weaving concepts such as 'exotic insiders' and 'grey spaces', the mutant allegory illuminates anthropological themes of marginality and resistance. Drawing on *X-Men TAS* (1992–1997) and its 2024 revival, the article reveals how racialised subjectivities (Pierce, 2009, p. 193) are mirrored in fiction (Liaqat, 2024); I thus offer a lens to critique real-world political struggles. Through the X-Men's narrative, the article envisions alternative ways of being and, as a result, carving pathways for solidarity in the margins. Fiction, here, becomes a mirror, reflecting and refracting the fractures of modernity.

The analysis anchors its critique in Said's *Orientalism*, a Western *dispositif* that constructs dualities and hierarchies central to the modern/colonial paradigm. Orientalism was originally conceived as being manifested through depictions of Asian and North African cultures from a Western perspective (Said, 1985). It can be understood as a Western *dispositif* in Foucauldian discourse, deployed to operationalise power by the restructuring of knowledge systems that claim authority over the 'Orient' and its people. The 'Orient and its people' can be understood as a signifier in Laclaunian terms – the archetypal Other – a construct legitimising epistemic and cultural hegemony. As a disciplinary mechanism, it legitimises power through deliberate ignorance and moral binaries by exalting Western virtues. Simply put, it confers the role of generalised evil and moral degeneracy for some while exalting the virtues and civic values of others. Said also critiques Marxism as a type of counter-knowledge, rooted in the same historicist epistemology, for perpetuating binary oppositions (Said, 1985, p. 107, 102) He traces a trajectory of 'Westering', where the Orient cedes its historical pre-eminence and importance to the world spirit moving westwards away from Asia and towards Europe, which frames history through a Eurocentric lens (1978; 1985, p. 101). This synthesis of human history is observed from the vantage point of Europe and the West (*Ibid*.). Interestingly, Said resorts to Hegelian

dialectics while rejecting oppositional counter-struggles to explain the trajectory of Westering. Orientalism then becomes a mirror to modernity's fractures and its enduring structures of domination.

From Herder to *Homo Superior*: Romantic Nationalism, racialised subjectivities, and oppositional consciousness

In this study, I am not to discard but to reenvision resistance through the lens of micro-political frameworks, where oppositional counter-struggles unfold in the interstices of power, echoing Amel's response to Said Amel's (2020). While Said critiques modernity's antagonisms, Amel advocates for their critical revaluation, arguing that resistance to Western *dispositifs* can unveil pathways to transcend these very divides. Here, the antagonisms are global white supremacy and the moral hierarchies of virtue and vice.

To unpack Orientalism's plasticity, I introduce 'Euro-Orientalism', contextualised through Romantic Nationalism. German Romantic Nationalism, epitomised by Herder (Nisbet, 1999), posits that nations, shaped by unique environments and histories, are defined by ethnic essences (Wilson, 1973, pp. 821–822). Herder's ideals, celebrating the 'unspoiled' peasantry and national poets, influenced, for example, Icelandic intellectuals in 1830s Copenhagen (Byock, 1992, p. 49), laying groundwork for the constitutive role of Euro-Orientalism. This framework illuminates how cultural essentialism of Romanticism intertwines with Orientalist hierarchies, offering a lens to critique modernity's moral and racial divides.

Herder's essentialism distinguished Icelanders from Danes, sidelining non-Europeans in his Eurocentric vision of progress (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2014). His Romantic Nationalism, rooted in environmental determinism (Wilson, 1973, p. 821) shaped Icelandic identity through landscape, language, and literature, thriving in Europe's margins (Nisbet, 1999). Yet its influence extended beyond, manifesting in diverse sociopolitical configurations. In Gran Canaria, plaster busts symbolised attempts to claim modernity through racialised narratives (Loftsdóttir, 2024, pp. 30–45). In Brazil, state-driven whitening policies (Smith, 1947; Telles, 2004) aimed to erase Blackness by fostering racial stratification (Skidmore, 1993; Fry, 2005) and ideologies such as 'racial democracy' (Costa, 1985) and 'cordial racism' (Owensby, 2005). Interwar eugenicists, inspired by Herder, framed miscegenation as Brazil's evolutionary pinnacle, whereby European fascism was localised (Trindade, 1974; Silva, 2005), echoing in

parallel, in the context of the present study, Magneto's vision of mutants as *Homo Superior* (Pierce, 2009, p. 183; Davis, 2009), a paradox mirrored in Brazil's Black Front, where fascist integrationism temporarily united with Black activism (Carcará, 2019; Gregoire, 2020). Herder's Romantic Nationalism thus renders itself plastic, permeating even the most unexpected sociopolitical landscapes.

Language remains a contested terrain, shaping symbolic boundaries and power dynamics. In Iceland, fears of linguistic extinction frame Icelandic as besieged by foreign influences and non-native speakers, while immigrant efforts to master the language deepen class divides, creating an Icelandic-speaking elite and an English-speaking underclass (Guðmundsson, 2024). The dominance of the English language carries neo-colonial undertones, as scholars such as Hoenig (2017), Grosfoguel (2013), and Stein (2019) critique for its role in perpetuating Western academic hegemony. Gaffikin and Perry (2009) argue that U.S. research dominance reflects a neoliberal encroachment on global scholarship. This bias is mirrored in higher education rankings, which elevate Anglophone institutions and their students, reinforcing a hierarchy that privileges the Anglosphere (Hammond, 2016, p. 562; Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021). Thus, language becomes both a battleground and a barometer of global inequities.

Euro-Orientalism encapsulates the Western gaze over Europe's peripheries, constructing Otherness within the continent (Adamovsky, 2005). It mirrors Western Orientalism (Baker, 2018; Kuldkepp, 2023), centring Western perspectives while marginalising Eastern Europe, situating it between the Western gaze and Russia's postcolonial shadow (Tlostanova, 2012). Eastern Europeans, as exotic insiders, are racialised subjects within global capitalist hierarchies, and thus, analysed through racial triangulation (Kim, 1999; Chen & Hosam, 2022) and its cognates – namely, the model minority and valorisation (Harpalani, 2021; Indelicato, 2023; Kim, 2022). Transposing Herder's Romantic Nationalism, Euro-Orientalism reveals racialised spaces and ethnic bodies, framing a binary between the idealised 'Homo Westernicus' and the orientalised 'Homo Sovieticus' (Buchowski, 2006; Adamovsky, 2005). Parvulescu (2016) argues that Eastern Europeans in the West endure a 'racialised hierarchy to precarity', anchored in global white supremacy (Beliso-De Jesús & Jemima, 2020). For instance, an Icelandic manager recently praised Ukrainians for maintaining service standards under Russian artillery, reducing their worth to productivity (Sveinsdóttir, 2024, February 1). This exemplifies how Eastern European subjectivities are conditioned into a service class; their value is determined by Western

arbiters, echoing the valorisation and model minority tropes inherent to racial triangulation (Parvulescu, 2015; Harpalani, 2021).

Racial triangulation (Kim, 1999) maps the U.S. racial landscape, transcending the Black/white binary by positioning Asian-Americans in a complex field of valorisation and exclusion. While valorised over Black communities, they face civic ostracism within a white-dominated society (Shih, 2008, p. 1351), revealing obscured relationalities. Harpalani (2021) applies this framework to the model minority stereotype, illustrating how Asian-Americans, like former presidential candidate, Andrew Yang, are simultaneously celebrated as model minorities and marginalised as perpetual foreigners. Similarly, figures such as Barack Obama and Yang are often dismissed as 'white people pleasers' and stripped of autonomy (*Ibid*., pp. 1396, 1403). Racial triangulation thus unveils the layered dynamics of racial positioning, where valorisation and ostracism coexist in a precarious balance.

Maldonado (2006) frames racial triangulation as a globalised practice, stressing its impact on Latino/a workers and advocating cross-racial alliances to dismantle systemic racism. Rahman (2014) reimagines it as 'homo-colonialism', where Western modernity elevates queer rights as exceptional, while Orientalising Muslim populations as backward. This valorises queerness as a model minority, weaponising it against multiculturalism (Mepschen et al., 2010 in Rahman, 2014). Parvulescu (2016), through Haneke's *Code Unknown* (2000), uses triangulation to expose the Eastern Europeans' precarity in the West, urging postcolonial solidarities. Kim (2022) expands its scope, linking it to U.S. (neo)imperialism and global white supremacy, calling for localised critiques. Racial triangulation thus bares the interplay of valorisation, exclusion, and power across borders.

In Marvel's X-Men, mutants embody a model minority, celebrated for heroism yet feared as existential threats. The Morlocks, mutants with visible 'abnormalities', are relegated to society's margins, despised even by 'normal' mutants (Hopkins, 2009). Nightcrawler's refusal to join them and his suggestion that Mystique 'pass as human' mirror real-world dynamics of racial passing (*Ibid*., p. 12). 'Passing as human' in X-Men parallels 'passing as white', and indicative of the tension between visibility, whiteness, and belonging.

White supremacy operates as a *dispositif*, structuring modernity through norms of liberalism, democracy, and rationality (Beliso-De Jesús & Jemima, 2020, p. 67). As a habitus (Meer, 2019, p. 505), it sets the standard by which others are judged and valued, embedding

racial, gender, and class hierarchies into the mechanisms of biopower. This framework governs life through knowledge and control, manifesting differently across contexts. Drawing on Veblen's critique of modernity's 'barbaric tendencies', one sees how progress masks predatory practices, perpetuating exclusion under the guise of civilisation. The X-Men allegory mirrors this tension, as mutants navigate a world that both fears and exploits their difference. Honneth's recognition theory further illuminates their struggles: the mutants' quest for dignity and belonging reflects a broader fight against misrecognition and systemic dehumanisation. Their marginalisation accentuates the interplay of social invisibility and symbolic violence, and instructive of how global white supremacy, neocolonialism, and neo-Orientalism (Tuastad, 2003) shape hierarchies of worth. Through X-Men, we confront modernity's dual face – its promises of progress and its barbaric workings – while envisioning pathways for solidarity and recognition in the margins.

From Genosha to Gaza: *X-Men '97* and the mirror of sociopolitical realities

The *X-Men* and *X-Men '97* series serve as a conceptual framework to explore far-right discourse through Foucault's biopolitics, which governs life via the mutant body in fiction and racialised bodies in reality. This analysis is pedagogical, offering creative engagement with sensitive themes; critical, as it deciphers popular culture's anthropological significance (Said, 1978); and analytically objective, providing distance from emotionally charged subjects.

Debuting in 1963, the X-Men comics depict mutants as outcasts, feared and demonised by the society they protect. Stan Lee framed their narrative as a critique of 'man's inhumanity to man' (Genter, 2007; Strauss, 2000, August 12), addressing intolerance and hierarchy, with mutants like the Morlocks further marginalised. Unlike patriotic figures like Captain America, who embody U.S. moral superiority and national identity (Dittmer, 2005; 2014; Sterba, 2015; White, 2014), the X-Men reflect pluralistic, alternative existences. Similarly, Namor, a Mesoamerican antihero, embodies postcolonial struggles of displacement and liberation (Albarrán-Torres & Burke, 2023, p. 21). Together, these narratives reveal how popular culture mirrors and critiques global power structures, offering a prism to examine biopolitical control, racialised hierarchies, and potentialities for pluriversal futures (Escobar, 2018) of coexistence.

The *X-Men* embody the 'other within', a term borrowed from the Marranos – Jewish converts in Iberia rejected by both Jews and Christians (Yovel, 2018, p. xii). Created by Eastern

European Jewish writers, the series reflects their heritage. Magneto, a Jewish Holocaust survivor, epitomises this duality: a tragic figure torn between vengeance and justice, his Romani-coded children symbolising further marginalisation. His vision of a mutantkind utopia in Genosha in the ruins of a former mutant slave colony later destroyed in a massacre directly references South Africa's apartheid (Dunn, 2009, p. 84) as a critique of systemic oppression. In *X-Men '97*, Cyclops' lament – 'If Genosha had looked more human, you'd focus on death tolls over polls' – echoes real-world tragedies, from Palestine to the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida (Duncan, 2024). Producer Beau DeMayo, a queer creator, infuses the series with raw, adult realities, bridging fiction and lived experiences. The mutants' plight becomes a mirror, refracting the fractures of a world that fears the 'other within', clinging to homogeny, fearing what lies dormant – i.e. the mutant gene – in humanity itself.

Veblen's work weaves together economic theory, socio-historical critique, psychological and anthropological inquiry, and sharp political commentary, often distilled to his critiques of elite excess and academic apologists of privilege (Camic & Hodgson, 2010, p. 8). He articulated an irreconcilable clash between "business enterprise" and the "common man," pitting the "instinct for workmanship" against "pecuniary instincts," and modernity against barbarism (Meštrović, 2003, p. 2). Advertising, seen as barbaric, elevated "honorific value" over utility, reflecting corporate competition and envy-driven waste (*Ibid*.). His paradoxical view of war condemned its barbarism yet supported U.S. involvement in World War I, critiquing incomplete victories and implicating vested interests and collective narcissism. Patriotism, rooted in "sportsmanship," was deemed predatory, masking destruction under moral pretences, exposing contradictions in war and societal values (*Ibid*., p. 6).

Through Veblen's lens of modernity's 'barbaric tendencies' (Meštrović, 1993, p. 278), the X-Men allegory unveils progress as predation, veiling exclusion and domination beneath the veneer of civilisation. Unlike Hegelian dialectics, which envisions humanity ascending toward heightened consciousness, the mutants' narrative exposes a stunted evolution.

Their plight exposes the paradox of a society that both dreads and commodifies difference, offering a sharp critique modernity's professed democratic ethos. The mutants, as both pariahs and tools, reveal the hypocrisy of a system that preaches inclusion while practicing erasure, or as Foucault noted, 'Visibility is a trap'. Their existence becomes a litmus test for the failures of a society that champions pluralism yet recoils at its radical implications. In this

tension, the mutants crystallise the paradox of progress: a world that idealises peace and unity but thrives on the exploitation of the unassimilable.

The Blue Beast, Storm, Forge, and the politics of love: X-Men's narratives of marginality

X-Men '97 (2024) revives the 1992–1997 series, which wove mutant struggles into real-world sociopolitical contexts. In the 1994 episode 'Beauty and the Beast', Beast, a blue-furred mutant scientist, cures a woman's blindness but faces her anti-mutant father and the far-right FOH. Branded 'filthy mutant' and 'mutant lover', Beast, whose brief romantic entanglement with the woman amplifies the personal stakes, retorts: 'It was intolerant, ignorant, mutant-hating fools like you who took your daughter!' and critiques their misplaced anger:

> Perhaps your self-appointed social engineers don't realise the crucial role mutation plays in species evolution. I'm sorry, gentlemen. Your anger at the inexorable alienation of late-20th-century life is sadly misdirected.

The X-Men expose FOH leader Grayton Creed's mutant lineage, dismantling his authority, and unmasking the hypocrisy of the anti-mutant crusade. This episode mirrors real-world racialised rhetoric, from Clinton's 'superpredators' (1996) to Trump's 'bad hombres' (2016), echoing colonial constructs (Mendoza-Denton, 2017) such as Zimbawbe´s (Johnson, 2002; Pape, 1990) and South Africa's 'Black Peril' (Brown, 1987), the U.S.'s 'Yellow Peril' (Lee, 2007), and the one-drop rule that codified racial purity through exclusion. These tropes persist, as seen in the dehumanisation of Asian students during COVID-19 branded as both 'Yellow Peril' and 'cash cows' (Yao & Mwangi, 2022). The mutants, like these marginalised groups, become scapegoats for societal anxieties driven by Isin's application of Foucault's governmentality as 'governing through neurosis'; their existence embodies the enduring logic of othering, the *dispositif* that sustains power by perpetuating fear of the unsubsumable and nonconforming. The X-Men series thus serves as a lens to critique Orientalist, racialised subjectivities, and global white supremacy, revealing how fiction mirrors enduring systems of oppression and dehumanisation.

Racialised male subjectivities, portrayed as brutes devoid of complex emotions, such as Beast, exemplify biopolitics (Schuller, 2018) – a Western *dispositif* that constructs white spaces as 'safe zones'. Colonialism, as Phipps (2021) argues, fuels a cycle of white women's tears and

white men's rage, often triggered by rape allegations and reinforcing hegemonic masculinity through fantasies of violence and self-defence (Stroud, 2012, p. 234). This falters in contexts such as the U.S. Black press, where African Americans reject discriminatory policies despite internalising some racialised stereotypes (Deckard et al., 2020, p. 599). Similarly, Vinson (2012) examines the transatlantic exchange of civil rights ideas, while Ómarsdóttir (2013) examines Iceland's 'Ástandið', where interactions between local women and foreign troops were framed as a social crisis (Johnson, 1971, November 17), and Black U.S. servicemen prohibited to leave the base in Keflavík.

The *X-Men* series, through its mutant allegory brings out these biopolitical tensions, exposes how power governs life through racialised, gendered, and classed bodies. By critically engaging with the comics, we uncover sociocultural and political fissures, illustrating how Foucault's biopower resonates with the mutants' struggles. For instance, the 1984 *X-Men* story arc 'Lifedeath: A Love Story' (Claremont & Windsor-Smith, 1984), adapted in *X-Men '97* episodes 4 and 5, depicts the nuanced romance between Storm, an African goddess of nomadic identity grappling with lost powers, and Forge, a Native American inventor with cybernetic limbs, living beyond state-sanctioned norms and structures (Kistner, 2004). Their relationship, rooted in marginalised identities, explores themes of community, violence, folklore, and empowerment, is a groundbreaking narrative that remains relevant to this day.

Having established the *X-Men* as a prism for contemporary sociopolitical critique, I turn to episodes 1 and 2 of *X-Men '97* to examine the workings of global white supremacy in modernity. Through an analysis of grey spaces, the dialectics of virtue and vice – such as claims to moral superiority – and the far-right's ideological underpinnings as depicted in the series, I conclude by situating these themes within real-world far-right rhetoric. This exploration culminates in an intervention on modernity's 'barbaric tendencies', drawing on Veblen and Schopenhauer to unravel the paradoxes of progress.

Hate in Plain Sight: the duality of spaces from hate parties to safe havens in the X-Men '97

In *X-Men '97* (2024), the far-right militia FOH embodies global white supremacy's duality – valorising virtue while demonising the 'other' (Meer, 2019). Comprising politicians, military leaders, and urban vigilantes, the FOH incites violence against mutants through anti-mutant propaganda. In episode one, 'To Me, My X-Men', FOH members kidnap a young mutant,

repurposing a building labelled ‘Hip Skate Party’ with a few missing letters that reads ‘Hate Party’. This contrasts with the building’s previous use, as seen earlier in the episode, an underground dance venue, a space of safety and affirmation for mutants like Jubilee and Roberto da Costa, where boundaries of legality blur. These grey spaces, both sites of potentiality and repression, reflect how biopolitical power operates in the shadows, shaping exclusion and resistance.

Freetown Christiania in Denmark, a counter-hegemonic enclave, navigates neoliberalism’s commodification and state repression (Amouroux, 2009). Genosha in *X-Men ‘97* (2024) mirrors this, balancing mutant utopia with human relations. Like Christiania’s Dismaland aesthetics, these spaces expose modernity’s fractures and dissent’s containment. Similar to the Bosnian Xoraxané Xomá Romani’s rhizomatic tactics – mobility and rootedness evading EU biopolitics (Solimene, 2018, pp. 7, 12) – the X-Men, as exotic insiders, embody tactical resistance: harnessing powers and forging alliances. Their existence, marked by infrapolitical subversion (Scott, 1990), critiques biopolitical regimes and reimagines alternative ways of being.

Autonomous reclaimed spaces such as Christiania and X-Men´s Hip Skate Party or X-Mansion are spaces of affirmation. Yet, grey spaces are often co-opted by state governmentality, where exceptions become rules. Frontex, Europe’s border agency, operates similarly, exploiting grey spaces to enforce militarised global apartheid (Besteman, 2020) through human rights violations and private security ties (Giglioli, 2017, p. 421). It embodies the moral economy of biopolitics – oscillating between repression and compassion (Fassin, 2005), in the dialectics of virtue and vices as I may to present.

The dialectics of virtue: ideological branding and co-optation of moral superiority

In contrast to autonomous zones of liberation, Frontex represents negation. This mirrors the FOH in *X-Men ‘97*, a public–private militia weaponising fear and exclusion. In episode one, the X-Men confront Henry Gyrich, a U.S. official hostile to mutants, accused of killing their leader, Charles Xavier. Both Frontex and the FOH reveal how grey spaces as potential sites of resistance and subversion can be appropriated into tools of domination. Gyrich remarks gesture towards themes of performative activism, ephemeral alliances, and conditional recognition of struggles:

> Gyrich: '[scoffs] Did you honestly think we'd roll over and let mutants take over the planet? That we wouldn't fight back?'
> Storm: 'Yet your cruelty has only made humanity more sympathetic to our cause'.
> Gyrich: 'Oh, did it? No, you're in vogue, Storm. A fad. ´Look at my mutant friend.´ But under all that fashionable sympathy, normal people know the more room we make for your kind, the less we leave for ours. So, we might wear tolerance on our sleeves, but we know the naked truth: Tolerance is extinction'.

This exchange reveals the fragility of solidarity where support is often transactional and contingent on aligning with invested interests and dominant power structures, perpetuating a cycle of surface-level advocacy and systemic erasure of marginalised voices. In *X-Men '97*, the FOH militia member's taunt – 'You freak shows thought we wouldn't find a way to evolve too?' – ties to today's far-right rhetoric within progressive neoliberalism (Brenner & Fraser, 2017). Themes like homo-nationalism, racial triangulation, and virtue-signalling emerge, reflecting the intertwining of political discourse, Otherness, and violence. Gyrich and the FOH recycle anti-mutant ideology, mirroring real-world far-right tactics: 'off-stage' aggression by vigilantes and 'on-stage' moral hierarchies (Salih, 2014), akin to the hidden transcripts (Massoumi & Morgan, 2024; Scott, 1990) in Clinton's 'superpredators' and Trump's 'bad hombres' the subtext is a calculated othering – a dual strategy of public condemnation, and covert violence that sustains power. The FOH's movement serves as an allegory for far-right othering and global white supremacy's workings, revealing how exclusionary ideologies persist and adapt.

Israel is often portrayed as a Judeo-Christian bastion of Western civilisation besieged by 'barbaric' Arab Others (Tuastad, 2003). Post-2024 Israeli offensives, Europe's far-right, historically anti-Semitic, rebranded as Zionist allies, framed Israel as defenders of European values against the Orientalised Other. Women's tears, post-October 7, fuelled white rage against racialised men, echoing recurring far-right tropes. Israeli vigilantes claim Palestinians 'rape the Holy Land' (Bjørgo & Mareš, 2019, p. 20), paralleling accusations against Croatian novelist Slavenka Drakulić, exiled for 'raping the nation' post-Yugoslav wars. This ironic symmetry exposes how nationalist rhetoric instrumentalises gendered and racialised violence through construed myths of purity. These narratives assign moral degeneracy to some while exalting others' virtues, perpetuating exclusionary ideologies through shifting signifiers.

The *X-Men '97* series, through the FOH, critiques global white supremacy's duality. This mirrors real-world performances of virtue, where corporate and national branding commodify morality. Max Weber's notion of virtue as moral accumulation (Tholen, 2020) aligns with neoliberal practices, where corporations such as Lockheed Martin sponsor the Pride parade while profiting from illiberal regimes, exemplifying performative activism and pinkwashing (Klein, 2000). Similarly, nation-branding campaigns, such as 'Progressive Sweden' (Jezierska & Towns, 2018), juxtapose gender equality against the 'backwardness' of immigrants, reinforcing Orientalist hierarchies. These performances of virtue, whether in corporate public relations or far-right rhetoric, serve as tools for exclusion and mask systemic inequalities under the guise of moral superiority. The FOH's anti-mutant ideology, like Lockheed Martin's branding, reveals how virtue is co-opted to legitimise domination and push forward oppressive and exclusionary agendas.

Their rhetoric, echoing far-right tropes, frames mutants as existential threats ('Tolerance is extinction') while positioning themselves as defenders of 'humanity'. Corporations and nation states commodify morality to legitimise power, whether through Lockheed Martin's rainbow-branded militarism or Sweden's 'progressive' image juxtaposed against the 'barbarism' of the Other (Sardar & and Davies, 2010). The FOH's performative virtues, such as neoliberal branding, reveal how moral superiority is co-opted to sustain hierarchies through the dialectics of virtue and vice. Thus, the FOH allegory exposes the far right's rebranding tactics in which virtue becomes a tool of oppression under the guise of righteousness and moral authority. I now turn to one of today´s far-right-perceived threats.

The Far-right's cultural war and the myth of cultural Marxism

The far-right portrays 1968 as a rupture, claiming the left swapped Marxist economic struggles for cultural wars, sparking a 'silent revolution' that fractured the West. Labelled 'cultural Marxism, this alleged elite-driven ideology as a cancer, and a blight to tradition, polarising societies into defenders of Western civilisation and its supposed saboteurs. It thrives on demonisation through conspiratorial fabrication. The term gained traction in the 1990s with paleoconservatives such as Buchanan and Lind, who scapegoated the Frankfurt School. The 2011 terror attack by the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik thrust the term into wider circulation. Breivik's manifesto framed his violence as a 'marketing campaign' for his

ideology. Platforms, such as Breitbart News, further propagated this narrative. Often, importing American cultural conflicts wholesales and erases local complexities.

The far-right's 'cultural Marxism' myth parallels the X-Men's clash with the FOH, where mutants are cast as existential threats to societal order. Both narratives weaponise fear, portraying marginalised groups, mutants, and leftist intellectuals as saboteurs of tradition. The FOH's rhetoric, like that of the far-right, thrives on polarisation, cleaving society into a moral binary: the dialectics of virtue and vices. This allegory reveals how exclusionary practices co-opt morality to legitimise domination through the spectre of the other.

Paradoxically, the mutants' struggle for dignity and recognition resonates with broader political struggles against oppression and systemic dehumanisation, aligning with Honneth's theory of recognition. The series reveals how barbarism seeps through the cracks of modernity, a critique of progress that masks predation. X-Men's narrative not only exposes fractures and inconsistencies, but also envisions pathways for solidarity in the margins against the commodification of virtue.

Barbarism beneath the will: Schopenhauer, Veblen, and the cracks of modernity

In The World as Will and Representation (1818/2010), Schopenhauer redefines Kant's noumenon as an irrational, universal "will," countering Hegel's historical dialectics. This will, manifest in phenomena, liberates subjects from Hegelian teleology but subjects them to its deterministic logic, replacing Kant's balance of reason and faith with a near-fatalistic view of agency. Schopenhauer bridges Kant's dualism and Hegel's idealism, presenting existence as representation constrained by an inescapable will. Similarly, Veblen critiques modernity's barbarism, exposing predatory instincts beneath societal progress. Schopenhauer's will parallels Veblen's "instinct for workmanship," which clashes with archaic habits and the "habits of the fight," revealing barbaric forces at work: Schopenhauer through the will's determinism and Veblen through the leisure class's conspicuous consumption and pursuit of status, perpetuating inequality. Both thinkers uncover the tension between civilization's façade and its primal underpinnings.

The conspicuous displays of wealth and virtue, alongside habits of fight, permeate societal norms, fostering cycles of rivalry and war. Like Schopenhauer, these dynamics reveal barbarism not as a relic but as modernity's undercurrent, perpetuating and intensifying

domination. This aligns with Max Weber's cultural-political (Farris, 2010) Protestant ethic, which intertwines material wealth with moral authority. Veblen's fin de siècle America, emblematic of a "latter-day barbarism," mirrors contemporary Western societies, where distinctions between virtue and vice—such as the ideal citizen versus the undeserving migrant—intensify beneath modernity's interplay of truth and appearances, echoing Nietzsche (1886/2002, p. 32) through a Schopenhauerian lens. This duality unfolds beneath the veneer of civility. In the X-Men narrative, this dynamic manifests as fearmongering over human extinction, with non-human "mutakind" portrayed as the ultimate existential threat.

Schopenhauer conceives the state as a "mere protective institution" (Kisner, 2021, p. 141), rooted in his view of human nature as inherently selfish and unjust. Unlike Kant, Fichte, or Hegel, and grounded in empirical realism, his legal theory—described as a modern variant of natural law (Wolf, 2014)—emphasizes humanity's sensual suffering over divine ordination. Schopenhauer critiques state overreach, framing its role as mitigating suffering rather than fostering happiness, aligning with a secularized *Civitas Dei* that resists capitalist and collective nihilism (Kast, 2021, pp. 37–39). By linking the negation of the will to social equity (Kerkmann, 2021), his thought offers a pragmatic framework for ethical governance, resonating with contemporary critiques of systemic oppression.

Schopenhauer's influence on Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse centers on societal progress and individual autonomy. He envisioned reduced labor enabling intellectual growth and peace but avoided detailing a utopia. Horkheimer, however, saw his ideas as crucial for critiquing the modern "administered world," where technology intensifies control and diminishes freedom rather than alleviating burdens. Embracing Schopenhauer's pessimistic liberalism, Horkheimer defended individual autonomy against instrumental rationality and bureaucratic systems (Jepsen, 2021, pp. 173–187). The analysis of the state's role in curbing human egoism and violence through legal and institutional frameworks aligns with Veblen's "habits of the fight" and Arnold Gehlen's institutional theory, which posits that institutions, including the state, provide stability and mitigate humanity's darker impulses (Neuhäuser, 2021, pp. 189–212).

This synthesis reveals a shared skepticism about modernity's promises in both Schopenhauer and Veblen. Their ideas offer a lens for understanding contemporary tensions as questions of will and agency, evident in the far-right or corporate America's co-optation of virtue, demonstrating how barbarism persists as an inherent feature of Western civilization.

Schopenhauer´s ecology of knowledge, inspired by Hindu and Buddhist thought, posits compassion and mutual recognition as a gateway to transcending conflict and unveiling a shared essence with all existence. He contends that it is to harm oneself to harm others, as all phenomena stem from the same will. For Schopenhauer, violence and compassion are dual expressions of will, with the latter offering a counterforce against unchecked desires. This erodes the divide between modern and non-modern societies, asserting that human bonds are rooted in the will to live, not reason or technological progress – a view Frankfurt School thinkers like Marcuse (1964/2002) would endorse.

This, in turn, constitutes a mediation between Orientalism and Western perspectives (Amel, 2020; Said, 1985), interrogates modernity's normative structuring through racialised hierarchies of worth, the oppression of the unassimilable and nonconforming, and the commodification of virtue – themes I have explored through an analysis of *X-Men: The Animated Series* (2024).

Conclusion: virtue, the mutant mirror, and the struggle for recognition in modernity

The X-Men franchise, a global cultural phenomenon rooted in U.S. superhero cinema, serves as an allegory for systemic oppression, marginalization, and otherness. Its narrative critiques modernity, far-right ideologies, and border militarization, reflecting colonial, postcolonial, and neoliberal inequities. Through characters like Magneto (Holocaust survivor turned militant) and Storm (diasporic identity, ecological resistance), it explores exclusion and solidarity, mirroring modernity's contradictions—colonialism, neoliberalism, and emancipation. The series addresses past anxieties and present crises, from authoritarianism to migrant dehumanization, offering a lens to examine liberation, justice, and power structures. It challenges and reproduces modernity's dynamics, becoming a site for imagining alternative futures.

In conclusion, through this article, I examined the interplay of virtue and vice in far-right rhetoric through the lens of X-Men '97 as an analogue proxy framed by Said's *Orientalism*, as a Western *dispositif* that constructs moral and racial hierarchies. By analysing the FOH as a fictional proxy for global white supremacy, this study reveals how a mutant allegory mirrors real-world systems of exclusion but also subversion. Drawing on Romantic Nationalism, Euro-Orientalism, and racial triangulation, this article critiques modernity's moral binaries and the commodification of virtue, exposing how exclusionary ideologies adapt and persist. X-Men's narrative, as both a

reflection and refraction of modernity's fractures, offers a prism for examining biopolitical control, racialised hierarchies, and the paradox of reason and progress.

Through Schopenhauer's pessimistic anthropology and political philosophy (Kast, 2021) but also his and Veblen's social critique and anthropological inquiry (Camic & Hodgson, 2010, Meštrović, 1993; 2003), this article unveils barbarism as an inherent aspect of modernity beneath the veneer of civility, while recontextualizing these authors to address today´s pressing challenges, and envisioning pathways for solidarity in the margins. Ultimately, *X-Men '97* serves as a mirror to modernity's contradictions, revealing how fiction can illuminate the enduring structures of domination, but also the potential for transformative resistance through pathways for *infrapolitical* resistance and alternative ways of being – akin to post-colonial and decolonial endeavours of pluriversality (Escobar, 2018). Through its mutant allegory, the series provides insights into the workings of political ideologies in a purportedly post-ideological era, and puts forward pertinent questions on the struggle for recognition in the 21st century.

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