

Stephen Jay Gould, the esteemed American paleontologist once declared, “Nothing is more dangerous than a dogmatic worldview - nothing more constraining, more blinding to innovation, more destructive of openness to novelty.” While Gould was referring to the apparent narrowness of some of his colleagues, the concern and ramifications of an insular view of the world transcends disciplines. Battles rage within many academic fields including the debate in economics over the abandonment of alternative thought for a restricted study of only neoclassical theory. As Gould attests, this stifling is incredibly detrimental.

Sadly, this narrowness is not relegated just to academia. American politics has witnessed a rise in devotion to strict and uncompromising ideology. Within each of the two dominating parties, interest groups, politicians, and citizens, based in the supposed ideology, craft a platform of issues that all of their supporters must strictly adhere. In America, the issues are split down the center of the political aisle. However, this strict dividing of views suppresses debate and solutions. With no common ground for discourse, politics has drifted away from true debate over policy. The media reflects this change. In this realm of horse race journalism, polling data, public perception, and a focus on the details of a candidate’s personal life have replaced true discussions over policy and more substantial concerns. While the direction of the next administration remains to be seen, the past has illustrated that compromise and collaboration have all often been sidelined as competitive ideologues have commanded the American political stage.

Not only does labeling stifle debate, but it restricts solutions. It is the thought of many that the destruction of our society will not be a singular issue like international terrorism, financial ruin, or environmental destruction. Rather, the downfall will be precipitated by the intolerance and narrow-mindedness of its citizens and leaders. Today, the United States is met with a variety of problems. Yet, the solutions presented are much of the same. Within the political spectrum, there

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has been a pendulum between the neoliberal and state interventionist views. Different crises have simply been combated with the customary call for less or more government intervention. There is no conception of solutions outside this spectrum. Yet, outside alternatives may be the solutions that are necessary to solve these problems. These are only possible with creative and critical thinking, which has been largely absent from the American political arena.

Films and books among other forms of art do not escape the pervasive and narrow labeling. They are often branded with a specific political bend. Usually, this tag is permissible because many do contain political undertones. However, as of late, many groups have also commandeered different works as the flagship film or book of the cause, even though the politics of the work may not be completely explicit. One such film was Disney Pixar's *The Incredibles*. This children's movie was continually praised by conservative groups, voicing their excitement that "liberal" Hollywood would create a movie with such traditional values.

It cannot be denied that the movie contains many commentaries that can fit into the label of conservatism. However, after closer analysis, it appears that this movie is another victim of narrow ideology labeling. It does not appear that this film was created as a didactic tool for the conservative movement. Rather, the film contains a critique of the current society and employs a variety of views including conservative outlook to grapple with the various societal ills. The true didactic power is that *The Incredibles* allows these different paradigms to interact and concludes with a solution that is outside the current labeled world.

*The Incredibles* chronicles the story of a family of American superheroes. The film begins fifteen years earlier in the height of the superhero age. With rampant crime and corruption, the vigilant Supers including the extremely strong Mr. Incredible and flexible Elastigirl are able to protect the weak and self-interested citizens from the forces of evil. The Supers garner popularity

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and admiration from the citizens including one crazed fan named Buddy, who although lacking super powers, still tries with no avail to become Mr. Incredible's sidekick.

However, one night, Mr. Incredible saves a man from an apparent suicide attempt and the man slaps Mr. Incredible with a lawsuit, claiming he did not wish to be saved. This action triggers the onslaught of countless other lawsuits against the Supers. Because of mounting anger and costs, the government enacts the Superhero Relocation Act, forcing all of the Supers to retire from hero work and live a normal and underground life as regular citizens.

Fifteen years later, Mr. Incredible is living under the name Bob Parr as a disgruntled insurance agent. His wife, Helen (formerly Elastigirl), stays in their suburban home and cares for their three super children: Dash, Violet, and Jack. Living the normal life is difficult for the family and many problems ensue. Bob is fired at work, but fortunately he does not have to tell his family about his job termination. He is immediately and suspiciously contacted by a supposed government weapons developer and asked to do some free-lance hero work. Mr. Incredible jumps at the chance to play his superhero role again. In his new job, he is continually brought back to an island lair to fight and improve a super robot that is being developed.

Eventually, Mr. Incredible discovers the plot of his secretive employer, Syndrome. Syndrome is the former crazed fan from fifteen years earlier. He has been bringing former Supers to the island to fight the robot in order to improve it. Eventually, Syndrome plans to bring the powerful weapon to the United States to attack. Because Syndrome can control the robot, he will be able to save the world from total destruction and lauded as the hero he always wanted to be.

Yet, when the robot attacks the United States, Syndrome is knocked out of the action and the world is left to fend for itself. Luckily, the Incredible family combats the weapon. With teamwork

and belief in one another, the robot is destroyed and the Incredibles save the day. The Incredibles are welcomed back into society and are allowed to resume hero work together as a family.

With just a superficial investigation and analysis, the film appears to contain a multitude of references to American conservative tradition of social values and views of government. While there is not one clear definition of the conservative movement, it is probably best and most generally encapsulated by the mission of the Heritage Foundation, considered the leader in conservative think tanks. The mission states, "To formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense."

Primarily, the portrayal of the family unit in *The Incredibles* reflects the conservative, traditionalist beliefs. While all Supers, the Parr family is forced to live the suburban lifestyle. Conflict naturally arises, but love and respect for each other never dissipates. In the end of the movie, when the rest of the world is falling apart, it is the family unit that is able to combat the evil robot and save the world. This demonstrates that nothing is more powerful than the family, which can defeat even the most evil aspects of society. This family unit is the building block of society and its preservation and importance commands a leading role in this film.

Within the family, Bob and Helen's marriage is also a focus. Throughout the film, there is a visible strain on their relationship. Helen has adjusted far better to the new retired hero lifestyle than Bob, leading to many spats and arguments. However, whenever an argument ensues, the parents explain to the children that they are not angry with each other, but just having a normal adult discussion. In one such instance after conceding that the argument was excessively noisy, Bob comments, "That's okay, because the important thing is that your mother and I are a team, united."

When Bob begins to engage in freelance hero work, he keeps this secret from his disapproving wife. However, when Helen discovers that Bob no longer works at his previous insurance job, Helen fears for the worse: Bob is being unfaithful. When Bob does not return home from a supposed “business trip,” Helen is concerned that he is in trouble or is causing trouble and goes after him. Violet comments, “Mom and Dad's lives could be in jeopardy, or worse... their marriage.” Clearly, the concept of marriage is sacred. The characters, although super, experience many of the same problems when leading their alter ego lives. There is an understood normalcy in the flawed individuals. However, as the movie suggests, these flaws do not translate into the conviction that the concept of the family or marriage is obsolete. Clearly, this obvious focus on the importance of the family and a strong marriage, despite the difficulties, would resonate with the social conservative movement.

In this pattern of conservative values, there is also a focus on the value of life. All of the Supers value each and every life. They crash through burning buildings and put their lives in danger for the protection of others. After Mr. Incredible is captured, he has the opportunity to kill one of his captors, Mirage, who is Syndrome’s assistant. Although being taunted by Syndrome, Mr. Incredible resists. When discussing the event later, Mirage comments, “He's not weak, you know. Valuing life is not weakness. And disregarding it is not strength.” The word “life” has become synonymous with the conservative story largely because of the abortion debate. While some of the other policies endorsed by the conservative movement come in conflict with the preservation of life, the sanctity of life is often held central in the conservative belief system.

Finally, conservative pundits would praise the attack on trial lawyers, decrying their power and presence in contemporary society. It is trial lawyers that take down the Supers through ridiculous lawsuits. The beginning of the movie includes clips of one such trial lawyer arguing that his

suicidal client “didn't asked to be saved and didn't want to be saved.” More importantly, this example also reflects the conservative view of the past and resistance to change. This argument against trial law also harkens back to a supposed better time. There is nostalgia for the past when the Supers were allowed to work freely. The beginning of the movie even has a 1950s look and feel. These glory days are ended by frivolous lawsuits and misguided individuals.

In addition to the conservative social tradition that underscores the film, there are also allusions to conservative economic thought, which could also be seen as consistent with libertarian policy of restricted government intervention and a focus on personal liberty. Again, as the Heritage Foundation asserts in its mission, conservatives are concerned with “free enterprise, limited government, and individual freedom.”

Primarily, in *The Incredibles*, the government is seen as a dominating, constricting, and negative force. In the days when Supers were allowed to roam freely, the government and police worked in conjunction with the Supers to thwart crime and create a peaceful and safe world. The government as a character is not even present in the opening scenes of the film.

However, after the lawsuits, the government takes power away from others and increases intervention. In a vivid scene from the film, the color fades to black and white and an antiquated newsreel recounts the end of the superhero era. The government is given a voice and declares, “It is time for their secret identity to become their *only* identity. Time for them [the Supers] to join us, or go away.” Images of protests, propaganda, and scared individuals pepper the screen.

With the increase in state intervention, freedom is on the decline. Not only can the Supers not help or save people, they are also told where they can live and work. Although the Supers are not criminals, their actions are monitored to avoid any infractions. In conservative and libertarian thought, freedom is paramount. From a Smithean perspective, the pursuit of self-interest by citizens

can be beneficial for society. Smith asserts that self-interest can lead to a better situation and the wealth of nations. In the pre-big government world, the Supers were able to act freely and pursue their own self-interest, which ironically was saving others. By stifling this opportunity, not only are the Supers harmed, but also society as a whole because some of the citizens are not being allowed to be as productive.

Coupled with this critique of a growing government is a commentary on egalitarian society. After the Supers are banished, the society reverts to an obsessive focus on equality. Helen refuses to let Dash participate in sports because with his amazing speed, Dash would be able to outrun any other competitor and bring attention to the family's abilities. Helen explains to Dash, "Right now, honey, the world just wants us to fit in, and to fit in, we gotta be like everyone else. But remember, everyone's special, Dash." Dash refuses to agree and mutters back, "Which is another way of saying no one is."

Although the Supers have been endowed with great powers, they are unable to use them and forced into dissatisfied lives of mediocrity. The rise in the focus on equality is also coupled with a rise in political correctness. Bob refuses to go to Dash's fourth grade graduation because "They keep creating new ways to celebrate mediocrity, but if someone is genuinely exceptional, they are not allowed to be." All children are constantly reminded they are special and all honor rolls and other merits are removed. Even the villain's worst threat involves egalitarianism. Syndrome warns, "And when I'm old and I've had my fun, I'll sell my inventions so that everyone can have powers. Everyone can be super! And when everyone's super—no one will be." This negative view of this supposed egalitarianism demonstrates again the underlying conservative critique.

Finally, there is also an analysis of power. The government only begins to pursue the actions against the Supers because of the discontent of the citizens. However, the citizens are portrayed as

weak, self-interested, and short-sided. These shortcomings of the citizens are not problematic as individuals yielding little power. However, when individuals compose an ever growing government, the self-interest of the people is crippling. Deirdre McCloskey worries about this increase in government involvement, claiming that the economic system of capitalism contains the virtues. McCloskey agrees that the government is a detrimental force when it is viewed as a consolidation of power and self-interest. In the golden age of heroes, the government was a protector of freedom. With the onslaught of the post-hero egalitarian society, government has instead become the robber of freedom.

Many conservative groups and libertarian thinkers lauded *The Incredibles* as one of the greatest films of the decade. American conservative newspapers touted the film as a direct affront to the liberal media. Articles in *the National Review* and popularity on right-wing blogs championed support for the film. However, these writers and thinkers seem to have missed or conveniently omitted some major parts and themes of the film.

Primarily, the capitalist economy is attacked as a broken and unfair system. However, belief in this structure is central to the conservative story. The economic system presented is distinctly capitalistic with the only moral concerns involving the protection of the stockholders. Bob's argumentative boss, Gilbert Huph constantly yells at Bob about how to keep the company in business. "We're supposed to help our people! Starting with our stockholders, Bob!" Most of the arguments are precipitated because Bob knows how to help people and does. Bob has a keen knowledge of the configuration and loopholes of the insurance company with which he works. He utilizes this knowledge to help his customers secure the claims that they are due, but is yelled at by Gilbert who declares, "I don't care about their coverage, Bob! Don't tell me about their coverage! Tell me how you're keeping Insuricare in the black! Tell me how that's possible with you writing



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checks to every Harry Hardluck and Sally Sobstory that gives you a phone call!” In this example, laborers are treated like commodities, just like the customers are. Marxian theory argues that anything can be turned into a commodity, including a life.

Whenever perturbed by Bob’s ridiculous actions, Mr. Huph recounts his favorite simile: “A business is like an enormous clock. It only works if all the little cogs mesh together. A clock must be clean, well lubricated, and wound tight.” This image of the clock with all of the small and intricate pieces elicits images of Charlie Chaplin in *Hard Times*. Similarly, both workers are employed in mindless labor that impacts not only the hours spent on the job, but also the time outside of work. Because of his trying job, Bob has the inability to concentrate at home and pushes his family away. The ramifications of this work are far-reaching into his personal life.

Another important contradiction to the conservative story is that the villain in the movie is a self-made man. In the conservative tradition, the self-made man is hailed as a hero because this individual has been able to seize its abilities, opportunities, and freedom and innovate and succeed. Syndrome, the villain, has incredible intelligence, which he uses and exploits to his advantage. While possessing no explicit superpowers, Syndrome has designed great machines and weapons. In the film’s beginning, he explains to Mr. Incredible when he is trying to join forces that, “Well, not every superhero has powers, you know. You can be super without them. I invented these [flying shoes].”

However, this self-made man is not the hero of the story, but rather he is plotting world domination. Syndrome details his plans by saying “the robot will emerge dramatically, do some damage, throw some screaming people, and just when all hope is lost, Syndrome will save the day! I’ll be a bigger hero than you ever were!” It is interesting that the conservative supporters that rallied around this film would fail to recognize that the villain that the Incredibles must fight against

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is actually one of the heroes of their story. Also, this self-made man has clearly amassed too much power. When the robot attacks, the government can do nothing. If it was not for the Incredibles, there would be no one who could stop the force.

Finally, the very concept of the Supers does not fit nicely into the conservative story. They are a force that resembles a government. They ensure that peace and prosperity are possible for the society in which they live. They protect the weak, oppressed, and pariahs of society. However, is this a conservative superhero? Conservatives are largely concerned with freedom and self-interest and not just supplying hand-outs. However, the Supers are involved interventionists. They stop people from killing themselves and even save family pets. Conversely, they are also not self-interested or looking for their own gain. Bob cannot stop himself from helping someone else. While he misses the fame of being a superhero, it is innate in him to help others regardless of the results. As Bob explains to his lawyer, “someone was in trouble. I had to do something.”

In one sense, the Supers present a different conception of the state, a conception that is outside the realm of labels of conservative and liberal. Vladimir Lenin tackled this concept of defining a new state, where a state that is not a state would come to exist. The concept and definition of a state has largely been dominated by our current conception, much like other terms including democracy. However, Lenin encourages his followers to look outside the poorly constructed definitions of these terms and think about a different world. The Supers are able to spur this thought. They are their own conception of a state. They present a form of government that is altruistic, caring, and freedom loving. The Supers are not conservative or liberal. They are outside the realm of branding.

*The Incredibles* is not the rallying cry for the floundering conservative movement, nor is it a recruitment tool. Rather it uses both liberal and conservative critiques of today’s social ills to cause

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the audience to envision a different type of world, with a different type of organization, with a different type of state. The conclusions of the film cause us to examine the world around us and look for where change can be made for the betterment of all. And that is truly super.