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X-Men and Social Diversity

Tim Ravadio

The world we live in is one of great diversity. With 6.8 billion people walking the earth it comes as no great surprise that not every man woman and child share the same beliefs, and the countless number of differing cultures, religions, and races make for a very uneven existence. The concept of segregation and social diversity is so well-known it has been employed in countless books and films as a dramatic storytelling device for the purpose of getting the audience's attention with a socially relevant theme. Well known among these stories is that of The X-Men, who's thinly veiled plot greatly echoes the real life issues of world-wide prejudice. While admittedly exaggerated, The X-Men Universe greatly parallels our own in regards to segregation and prejudice. But when dealing with something as serious as racism and prejudice, one must ask "Does the story of The X-Men justly and accurately portray the concept of diversity and segregation?" While many of the topics of debate such as racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, gay rights, and religion are easily recognizable in a plot, the X-Men universe offers a unique and interesting way of paralleling these issues and is able to very clearly show us where this kind of thinking has gotten us and how much worse it can get. Like Cable says to the first mutant child born since the disaster that was House of M, "Suns comin up kid, we made it. Now comes the hard part (Brubaker)."

Characters within the X-Men mythos hail from a wide variety of nationalities. Just like us, these characters are living in a very diverse world, but, unlike us, their problems come from more than just different skin color or language. To sum up the X-Men all one would need to know is that this is a story of society's overreaction to things that don't follow a certain cultural norm; but that may be putting it too simply. These characters also reflect religious, ethnic and sexual minorities. Examples of Jewish characters include Shadowcat, Sabra and Magneto, whilst Dust is a devout Muslim, Nightcrawler a devout Catholic, and Thunderbird is a follower of the Hindu faith. Aside from differing faiths and races the X-Men Universe also delves into the issues of multi-culture characters. Storm (Ororo Munroe) represents two aspects of the African culture as her father was African American and her mother was Kenyan. Karma was portrayed as a devout Catholic from Vietnam, who regularly attended Mass and confession when she was introduced as a founding member of the New Mutants. This team also included Wolfsbane (a devout Scots Presbyterian), Danielle Moonstar (a Cheyenne Native American) and Cannonball, and was later joined by Magma (a devout Greco-Roman classical religionist). Also notable in the story is the fact that mutants from all over the planet are able to come together as a whole and defend their equal rights despite being a group compiled of largely varied cultures and homelands. Different nationalities included Wolverine as a Canadian, Colossus from Russia, Banshee from Ireland, Gambit who is a Cajun, Psylocke from the U.K., Armor from Japan, Nightcrawler from Germany. With this, we can begin to see how well the X-Men mirror our own times.

Rather than trying to include the many factors that create diversity, or choosing only one, the X-Men use the plot device of the "x-gene"; a gene that is held by mutants and the cause of their unique abilities. It is this gene that is the focal point and main cause for social unrest in the X-Men Universe. It is also this gene that opens the story up to any number of possibilities, including social commentaries. Explicitly referenced in several issues is the comparison between anti-mutant sentiment and anti-Semitism. Magneto, a Holocaust survivor, sees the situation of mutants as similar to those of Jews in Nazi Germany. At one point he even utters the words "never again" in a 1992 episode of the *X-Men* animated series. The mutant slave labor camps on the island of Genosha, in which numbers were burned into mutant's foreheads; show much in common with Nazi concentration camps, as do the internment camps in the classic "Days of Future Past" storyline. Another notable reference is in the third X-Men film, when asked by Callisto: "If you're so proud of being a mutant, then where's your mark?" Magneto shows his concentration camp tattoo, while mentioning that he will never let another needle touch his skin. Matthew Sanders said it best in the song Danger Line, "Suffering a man should never know, I'm leaving my fear on the danger line."

Another metaphor that has been applied to the X-Men is that of Gay Rights. Comparisons have been made between the mutants' situation, including concealment of their powers and the age they realize these powers, and homosexuality. Several scenes in the X-Men films illustrate this theme. The second film, *X-Men United*, featured a scene in which Bobby Drake (Iceman) "comes out" as a mutant to his parents. In response, Bobby's mother condescendingly asks him, "Have you tried not being a mutant?" referencing the belief that homosexuality is not inherent but rather a lifestyle choice. Also in *X2*, Nightcrawler has a conversation with Mystique in which he asks her why she doesn't use her shape shifting ability to blend in among non-mutant humans all the time (an option Nightcrawler evidently wishes he had). Mystique replies simply, "Because we shouldn't have to." Delving deeper into the sexuality issues we can see that transgender issues have also been explored in a mutants' ability to "pass" as

non-mutants - in the origin of Angel, he binds his wings. Shape-changers like Mystique can change gender at will. The comic books delved into the AIDS epidemic during the early 1990s with a long-running plot line about the Legacy Virus, a seemingly incurable disease similarly thought at first to attack only mutants. Ironically, while the X-Men had the Legacy Virus, they are incapable of getting AIDS due to their genetic mutation being able to combat the disease.

In some cases, the mutants of the X-Men universe sought to create a subculture of the typical mutant society. The X-Men comics did this by introducing a band of mutants called the Morlocks. This group, though mutants like any other, sought to hide away from society within the tunnels of New York. These Morlock tunnels served as the backdrop for several X-Men stories, most notably *The Mutant Massacre* story arch. This band of mutants illustrates another dimension to the comic, that of a group that further needs to isolate itself because society won't accept it. The quote "We're all miserable together. It's the opposite of a victimless crime (Palahniuk)" comes to mind. In Grant Morrison's stories of the early 2000s, mutants are portrayed as a distinct subculture with "mutant bands" and a popular mutant fashion designer who created outfits tailored to mutant physiology. The series *District X* takes place in an area of New York City called "Mutant Town." These instances can also serve as analogies for the way that minority groups establish specific subcultures and neighborhoods of their own that distinguish them from the broader general culture. The mutant condition that is often kept secret from the world is very similar to feelings of difference and fear usually developed in everyone during adolescence.

Religion is also an integral part of several X-Men storylines. It is presented as both a positive and negative force, sometimes in the same story. The comics most notable explore religious fundamentalism through the person of William Stryker and his Purifiers, an anti-mutant group that emerged in the 1982 graphic novel *God Loves, Man Kills*. The Purifiers believe that mutants are not human beings but children of the devil, and have attempted to exterminate them several times. By contrast, religion is also central to the lives of several X-Men, such as Nightcrawler, a devout Catholic, and Dust, a devout Muslim. This acts as a kind of parallel to the religious roots of social activists like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, as well as their opponents such as the Ku Klux Klan or Nathuram Godse (the Hindu radical who assassinated Gandhi.)

So, does the story of the X-Men justly and accurately portray the concepts of segregation and diversity? With the basic knowledge we all have on the subject, along with a little bit of reading between the lines, it is quite clear to see that the X-Men Universe greatly parallels our own in regards to segregation and prejudice. The unwillingness of some to accept what is different and the desire for those different to be willingly accepted is the perfect metaphor for our imperfect times. "A hero cannot be a hero unless in a heroic world (Hawthorne)." Whether we be black, white, Asian, Hispanic, or (in some cases) dark blue and covered in fur, we must all learn to stand together before we fall apart. A lesson learned from a book is no rare occasion, but one learned from a comic book is almost unheard of, and we should be so willing as to take any wisdom we can from anyplace that offers it.

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