Jelena B. Ćulibrk

In Conversation: Mark Littlewood (Institute of Economic Affairs) on his forthcoming Marvel book project

Jelena Ćulibrk (JĆ): When we met in Oslo last year (October 2022), I remember being fascinated that the Institute of Economic Affairs director would take the time to think about the world and the future of free-market ideas through cinema. Could you tell us more about how the project began? What led you to become interested in the Marvel Cinematic Universe?

Mark Littlewood (ML): I have split my approach to things in life between the things I am culturally interested in and my politics. I am a fanatical football fan, but I never cared whether Southampton Football Club is right-wing or left-wing. On occasions, I have noticed that most Southampton fans who turn up to the games seem to be massively in favor of Brexit, more so than the city's general population. I sometimes ask myself: Do the things I just enjoy in life have nothing to do with my ideological bend, or do they have some connection to my politics? I am a huge fan of *Doctor Who*, but I would say *Doctor Who* is quite left-wing. I'm not so monomaniacal that I only consume libertarian things. However, I adore the Marvel Cinematic Universe; I am a bit of a comic book nerd and especially loved American comic books growing up, which were so exciting but very hard to get.

JĆ: What was so exciting and different about American comics?

ML: They were immensely more colorful! It was almost like British comics were a bit stuck in the 1950s. But Spider-Man or the X-Men or even the DC comics, these things were brilliant and glossy and had, at the time, an ability to bring to the page something that cinema couldn't do—you could show fight scenes and explosions, blow up cities and destroy planets at the flick of a pen. These were telling epic stories that essentially were not financially viable to bring to the screen. And I also liked the kind of culture of it, the idea that you would collect periodicals and get to know the characters. I was raised in America as a kid between the ages of three and five; I had somewhere in the back of my mind, even though, obviously, one's not a collector at that age. But I would have had Spider-Man plastic figures and this kind of stuff; I was aware of the environment.

JĆ: And yet, filmmaking via CGI quickly caught up. Do you remember seeing early iterations of superhero films while growing up?

ML: I remember *Superman* (1978). That movie was one of the first films I would have been taken to as a child; I remember being just gob-smacked about it. "Oh, wow, they've made a movie!" And I was much more excited by the movie than I was about buying *Superman* issue no. 36. But at that time, because of technology, movies were nearly impossible to make for reasons that you will probably know better than I do. I was incredibly disappointed that Marvel never seemed to get to the screen.

JĆ: Until, ironically, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis…

ML: Yes, the absolute breakthrough is *Iron Man* in 2008; the film is just an extraordinary story, really. They hired Robert Downey Jr., who is basically Tony Stark. And this movie goes gangbusters, and they suddenly realize they're onto something. It gets the action great; it gets the characterization great; I just loved it. I didn't think much about it until I became conscious of the arc, which brings together the infinity saga. I am not arguing that *Iron Man* is a strong analogy to George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, but what are the moral principles underpinning *Iron Man*? The more MCU unfolded, the more I found these moral principles to be of my taste—the story that's being told here is essentially libertarian.

JĆ: Do you remember the moment when it all crystallized?

ML: Yeah, *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). Before that film, I thought superheroes were an American phenomenon. Everyone has to have superpowers; there's something a bit Nietzsche-esque about it. This adoration of success. In Britain, our superheroes are all people who happen to be a bit brainy. Whereas American heroes, there is something out of this world. But except for Tony Stark? He's just clever, rich, good-looking, and witty, then builds armor suits around it. He is not a superhero; he is a billionaire, and probably by accident rather than by design, he becomes the key placeholder for the whole story.

JĆ: Could you unpack that for us? What is libertarian in the MCU?

ML: The amazing thing about *Captain America: Civil War* is that it flips the proposition. You would assume that Steve Rogers (Captain America) is your loyal American army guy—if military command says X, I will do X, even if I hesitate about the morality. Stark (Iron Man) is your playboy, misogynistic billionaire who says, "I live by my own rules." And the brilliant part of the narrative is they flip that. Rogers is the one who says, "I will not be regulated in this fashion; this is wholly unacceptable." And Stark becomes a crony capitalist, "It's the only way we can carry on; let's make peace with the authorities." The MCU's narrative, in a way, pits superheroes against the superheroes rather than the superheroes against villains. The story encourages you to support the patriotic man who says, "I can't sign up for this; I should not be regulated." It's almost channeling Patrick McGuinn's TV series *The Prisoner* (1967). Meanwhile, the guys on the Stark side are the kind of pragmatic sell-outs.

JĆ: Whereas Steve Rogers becomes disillusioned with the State?

ML: Yes, *Civil War* is when I actually thought that there's something here that is not just about smash-up superhero movies with great special effects; there's an underlying story that you might argue is peculiarly American. Nevertheless, if you're trying to tease out the underlying part of it, the state is represented as a mixture of incompetence, corruption, and haplessness, with the possible exception of Sergeant Nick Fury. Steve Rogers encapsulates American conservatism. In *The Avengers* movie, Thor lands on the plane and comes and says, "I am Thor, I am God, and Steve Rogers replies, "There is only one God, and he doesn't dress like that." That is quite a nod, I would think, to American conservatism. You wouldn't do that in a British movie—we don't do gods and guns like America did. In the case of Steve Rogers, you are looking at a brilliant man who is trying to do his best as an individual citizen.

JĆ: Before our chat, I read your recent interview in which you argued that MCU's villain Thanos is an archetypal figure for certain contemporary political activists (e.g., Greta Thunberg).[1] I was surprised by that provocation and wondered if you could say more about the comparison.

ML: Thanos is a fascinating character. One of the things that the Marvel Universe has suffered from, fans would say, is they're not very good at villains; the DC Universe is better at villains. For example, the Joker is one of the best villains because he's very complex.

JĆ: Apart from Thanos, right?

ML: Apart from Thanos; he's almost, you could argue, not really a villain. He sincerely believes that resources are limited and life needs to be reduced. It's not to protect himself or his family; he's willing to sacrifice. Random 50% of us need to die. No privilege for the rich. No excuse. You can't buy a lottery ticket out of it. It's not racist. That's where I compare him to Greta Thunberg rather than Adolf Hitler. He would be a boring character if he said, "Big purple people of this alien race deserve to live, and you humans need to be crushed." Thanos is a character of incredible sincerity. Having successfully achieved this, he wishes to retire to some pastoral idyll, which he does. He's just living on a farm with beautiful fields in front of him and sitting in his shed, living the pastoral, green, socialist, self-sufficient life he yearns for. Amazingly, our heroes then just burst into his property. I am on the side of free market capitalism, not green socialism. But that's how the contest is set up. Not between, you know, heroes who just believe in truth, justice, and the American way and the alien invasion force who just want to kill all puny humans, extract the uranium, and enslave all to work. It's a much cleverer conflict. But the setup is a free market, somewhat American patriotic libertarians, against Greta Thunberg.

JĆ: I am still not buying the argument on Thanos and Greta Thunberg as an allegory of free market liberalism versus green socialism; I would need to read your upcoming chapter. But I agree that Thanos is a very complex character.

ML: He believes in population control, "the Limits to Growth" debate, on the side that says resources are limited. Thanos believes the pie is fixed, and the question is how we divide it. Meanwhile, our heroes believe the pie is not fixed and even growing. I mean, this is absolutely the argument between libertarian free marketers and green socialists. There are, I mean, too many people or too many sentient life forms in the universe, but it's the same thing. Thanos is a Malthusian; it's a push against the Industrial Revolution. Whereas our heroes don't believe there are too many people. They believe that life can flourish. I am amazed you say you can't see that Thanos is Greta Thunberg. Thanos genuinely wants the best for the universe, as does Greta Thunberg; I am not trying to besmirch either Thanos or Greta Thunberg by making the comparison.

JĆ: What's the stage of the book right now?

ML: We're in about 30 or 40,000 words. I can't work out how to put them together. I'm hoping to finish it by the start of next year. I haven't yet got a publisher; I've never written a book in my life, and I hope I succeed in writing this one. I'll probably publish it in some kind of, you know, if I can find a publisher, it will be some nerdy publisher who publishes books about *Marvel* and *Doctor Who* books. My initial intention was just to buy the books that either endorsed my analysis or not. And I found there was just nothing there. Although this is the sort of thing you'd expect to be deeply written about.

JĆ: Are you also hoping to inspire people to accept free market ideas? In other words, given your directorship of the Institute of Economic Affairs, is there a clear political aspect to your work?

ML: I think patience is really important here. And often, underlying cultural phenomena are hard to measure in impact and take a very long time. I was not in any way expecting that after seeing *Captain America: Civil War*, people would leave the cinema, and the first thing on their lips would be, "We must get rid of red tape." It doesn't work that way. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell did not bring down communism within two years of its writing. But it became a parable for what was going wrong. I am a patient man. I am in my early 50s now. I would like to see things swing in our direction before I die. And as you can see, I smoke and drink, so I am probably only going to make it to 80 rather than 90. And suppose you say that these films are very kind of free market positive, and they're very popular. In that case, it's paradoxical that these ideas are becoming less popular, especially with Gen Z and the younger generations. But it's because the dots haven't been linked.

JĆ: Perhaps it also matters that the Global Financial Crisis and its aftermath, or the period when there's a swing in the public's acceptance of neoliberalism, coincided with the MCU.

ML: I think that's right. You can always argue things would be even worse if it's not been put together. But no, I don't buy this view that everything's going fine. It's not. From a free market, classical liberal perspective (I consider myself a classical liberal, not a neoliberal), I think things look pretty grim. But compared to 20 years ago, the automatic default is to reach for the levers of the state to solve every social problem. I think the free market is a problem because our basic prescription is a meta-analysis rather than an immediate solution. For example, we would say, "Deregulate health care, it will be better." Whereas the left will say, "Spend more on this cancer center, and then the cancer treatment will be better." I think we classical liberals, free marketeers, have a tougher road to hoe because many of our arguments are counterintuitive and not based on a zero-sum game. But yeah, I'm not optimistic in the short term. The West has shifted towards social democracy and away from a classical liberal perspective; the world's worse now than it was when I started at the IEA in 2009. I'm not going to take sole responsibility for that. But, in my view, it would be absolutely absurd to suggest that our free market side of the ledger is winning; it just isn't.

JĆ: How would you define neoliberalism? Is there such a thing, or has it always been "a dirty word" for classical liberalism?

ML: I hate the word neo. It doesn't really mean neo; it means new. I don't think Friedrich Hayek reinvented liberalism. You could argue that monetarism was a new idea. Fine. But we'll call people monetarists. I don't think the underlying ideology has changed. That's why I call

myself a classical liberal. Except for monetarism, it's just classical liberalism. And the term neoliberal is used to try and make you sound as if you're on the right. I don't consider my politics to be on the right. But within the context we're in now, that's exactly how you're positioned. The media never asked me what my views are on pacifism, the war on drugs, and immigration. If they did, I'd be considered a mad lefty. I just find the term "neoliberalism" unhelpful. I am a John Stuart Mill liberal, and I don't actually think that the playbooks changed. It's always fashionable to suddenly invent new creeds; Keir Starmer in the UK is trying to do this with his "brand of social democracy."[2] There's nothing interesting to say, but they'll try to brand it as new and different. And it's not; it's just social democracy. Let's call it what it is.

JĆ: Following your logic, would you say there was no such thing as "the neoliberal revolution" in the early 1980s?

ML: Yes, there was no revolution. I find it unhelpful and inaccurate to assume that the success of liberalism in that period was a right-wing phenomenon. It was just a rediscovery of the application of these ideas that have been with us since Adam Smith. I do find Hayek really interesting but too desperately pessimistic. He explains what's happening, but it doesn't obviously give you a halfway out. So yeah, that's why I call myself a classical liberal. I'd probably call myself a libertarian, but that term became somewhat associated with weirdness, not that I mind being weird. After 45 minutes that you just heard, I'm quite weird. But I consider myself an old-style liberal.

JĆ: At the MPS Meeting in Oslo, we heard several talks that underscored the need to re-think and re-invent classical liberalism for our contemporary moment. Would you say that the intellectual side of the project is not the most urgent?

ML: I am not trying to smudge the research documents, but the Gospels have been written; the job now, in my view, is to proselytize the Gospels in libertarian terms, not to try and write the fifth Gospel or believe that there's some cracking new idea. There are differences between Austrian and Chicago schools, but a body of work speaks to a liberal view of the world to which, boringly, I don't think I have anything to add. I am skeptical of people who think they do. The network effects are useful. And it's important to have a community that's linked together about these ideas, rather than just, you know, each of us blogging alone or tweeting alone. But I don't think the MPS now has the same urgency as when Hayek established it in 1947. And I don't think it asked itself some of the questions about how ideas should be bred, invented, and spread.

JĆ: Your view reminds me of Deirdre McCloskey's tactic when responding to critics—"The answer to those attacks is preach, preach, and preach!"[3]

ML: Our ability to spread ideas is far beyond what Friedrich Hayek thought. Compelling stories is the way to go; I think we need grand narratives. And again, the left, I think, is better.

JĆ: Why do you think so?

ML: Because you would be the expert here, not me, so cut me off, but the elements of a story are you need a victim, a baddie, why the rules are rigged, and salvation at the end of it. And because classical free market liberalism is a meta-analysis, that's much harder to tell than a story of the evil boss in the factory and the oppressed workers who eventually rise against it. That's a much more straightforward narrative. Our stories are harder. But I am encouraged! This will sound like a conservative point rather than a classical liberal point, but I am encouraged by the collapse of the Disney Corporation and the rise of films like *The Sound of Freedom* (2023), which has been a smash hit movie crowdfunded by Christian Evangelists as it happened.[4] Therefore, I think we just have to be more cunning.

Notes

1 Rachel Cunliffe, "Mark Littlewood: The climate has shifted against us," *The New Statesman*, October 2, 2023. https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics-interview/2023/10/mark-littlewood-interview-free-maket-economics

2 Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Labour Party since 2020.

3 Sebastian Edwards, *The Chile Project* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 277.

4 Littlewood's book examines the first 23 MCU films; he is critical of more recent films and TV series, believing that Disney became too concerned with representational politics at the expense of the arc.