



A DEEP, DEEP SLEEP

Confronting America's Destructive Ambivalence
toward Home-Grown Violence

By Tom Kutsch

At the end of the film *The Dark Knight Rises*, Batman has once again saved Gotham City from ruin, but at the—ostensible—cost of his own life. “I see a beautiful city,” Police Commissioner Jim Gordon notes somberly at the funeral of Bruce Wayne, the superhero’s alter ego. “A brilliant people... rising from this abyss. I see the lives for which I lay down my life... It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.”

The eloquence is not Gordon’s own of course, but rather that of Charles Dickens. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the lines are spoken by the character Sydney Carton—like Wayne, an orphan intent on saving his city from destruction—on the eve of his own execution. It’s a hopeful denouement to Christopher Nolan’s reboot of the Batman franchise, which started in 2005 with *Batman Begins*, continued with *The Dark Knight* in 2008, and concluded this summer with *The Dark Knight Rises*. Yet, Gordon’s eulogy comes tinged with weariness toward violence and the heavy price Gotham has levied to stave off its own destruction.

Nolan’s trilogy injects realism into the superhero narrative; a sense that, even though the rock ‘em, sock ‘em action is quite over the top, many of the film’s scenarios seem plausible. Indeed, *The Dark Knight Rises* is a parable that explores the fear and anxiety abroad in the land, and in turn explores fundamental social questions confronting Americans. Fear is one of America’s most obvious cultural touchstones since September 11: the widespread fear of the country’s decline, reinforced by the spectacle of mass violence. It is a social anxiety that has found most of its oxygen from tragedies (or attempted tragedies) that are related to terrorism, from 9/11 itself to the Fort Hood shooting and the attempted “underwear” bomber plot on Christmas Day, both of which took place in 2009.

◁ A memorial for victims of a mass shooting at a cinema, Aurora, Colorado, July 29, 2012.
Alex Brandon/Associated Press

The Dark Knight Rises brilliantly contrasts the robustness of America's response to terrorist violence with its listless approach to the social neglect and low-intensity violence eroding the modern American city. The movie unmask American priorities, where the haunting specter of terrorist violence is the focus, at the expense of examining the more silent menaces of the nation's violence.

Two Americas

America has so culturally internalized its absolute success and world dominance that it has paid only cursory attention to the festering social indicators that reveal a darker side of the American dream. This breed of exceptionalism, and its corollary that America had, through sheer force of will or providence, created the best of all possible nations, is part of the myth. During a showdown in *The Dark Knight Rises*, the movie's primary antagonist and terrorist, Bane, tells Batman, "victory has defeated you." In essence, too much past success in vanquishing Gotham's threats had led to Batman's subsequent idleness and sown the seeds for his decline. So is the case for the American republic.

The 9/11 attacks, the economic recession that began in 2008, and the devastation wrought on New York City and the eastern seaboard by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, went some way toward revealing the starker picture of American weakness. But, just as America had previously overcome fascism and communism, many believe that it need only now overcome these new isms—in this moment, terrorism and 'debtism'—to rid itself of another temporary sea of troubles.

Despite unrivalled power and the grandeur of its façade, America, much like the Gotham of Christopher Nolan's Batman world, is a society of deep division. The veneer of undaunted confidence, hope, and optimism conceal the social emergencies of neglect and gloom. In *The Dark Knight Rises* these festering social threats to Gotham's order include widespread economic inequality, fading social institutions that are responsible for the caring of society's indigent, and a temporary peacetime that has been purchased at the cost of gutting rule of law.

Nolan's narrative of social exclusion reflects today's America, which is witnessing, among other worrisome trends, mass incarceration, the proliferation of weapons, the increasing conglomeration of wealth and rising economic inequality, and a financial system that finds its use-value relationship to the welfare of the average American increasingly strained.

In the course of the movie, blighted pockets of urban struggle portend a looming threat in the city. As a growing army of young social outcasts gather underground to sign up to Bane's terrorist cause, a character asks, "What kind of work can you find in the sewers?" Detective John Blake replies, "More than up here, I guess."

Wealth inequality and the abuses of Wall Street figure strongly in the film's imagery, and also lead to one of its drollest scenes. After Bane and his goons occupy Gotham's stock exchange during a large-scale robbery, an incredulous day-trader tells Bane, "This is a stock exchange. There's no money for you to steal!" Bane replies: "Really? Then why are you people here?" The line resonates in an America that was badly harmed by the excesses of Wall Street and corporate greed.

If social exclusion and poverty are seen as a problem at all in the Gotham universe, though, it is often through the vantage point of charity and individual kindness (largely by Bruce Wayne himself), not any collective, social response. Batman's social project in *The Dark Knight Rises* is less overarching than that of his foes: he's not trying to refashion much of anything in scope, but merely attempting to keep the crumbling edifice limping along for another day. This sense of duty reads like a pessimistic reformer's vision, but one untethered to unrealistic assumptions about revolutionary change. The American theologian and political thinker Reinhold Niebuhr once noted that the great confounding reality of humanity's social condition is that it can "conceive self-perfection but it cannot attain it." The point being for society that even those reformers who desire to reinvigorate our social compact and legal footing are faced with a behemoth of institutional roadblocks, perverse incentives, and decreasing channels of social and political movement.

The Superhero in the Age of Terror

In *The Dark Knight Rises*, the pendulum swing from life as usual to unmitigated social chaos occurs at a packed football game. A stadium full of Americans enjoys one of the most enduring and sacred social covenants remaining in today's society: paying respect to the flag and country during the national anthem at a sporting event. That communal scene quickly turns to nightmare, however, as Bane and his conspirators blow up the field and announce their doomsday scenario for Gotham to a packed house of thoroughly terrified citizens. The scene plays on American social fears of terrorism effectively, but it is more useful as an analogy of the perpetual back-against-the wall fear that animates much of the country's elite decision-making in the Age of Terror. What finally stirs the city out of its stupor to recognize the threat to its existence is the theatrical violence that sees Gotham being held hostage by Bane's chaos-driven schemes.

This pervasive sense of fear facilitates police chief Jim Gordon's bending of the rules. The previous *Dark Knight* film, which took place eight years earlier, concluded with Batman intentionally taking the fall for a number of crimes actually perpetrated by the former district attorney of Gotham City, Harvey Dent, and in the process earning widespread social opprobrium. Gordon utilized that lie in order to enable

the Dent Act, the uncompromising legislation granting Gotham the extraordinary powers to sweep criminals off the streets en masse. When pressed in the course of the movie about that duplicity, Gordon churns:

There's a point, far out there when the structures fail you, and the rules aren't weapons anymore, they're... shackles letting the bad guy get ahead. One day... you may face such a moment of crisis. And in that moment, I hope you have a friend like I did, to plunge their hands into the filth so that you can keep yours clean!

It's an extraordinarily telling about American policy choices post-9/11. This is the same Gordon who justifies his extralegal crime-fighting by asserting, "Gotham needed a hero." It made for good theatrics in the movie; in reality, it makes for dangerous precedent.

This echoes another scene from *The Dark Knight*, when Bruce Wayne's chief weapons guru, Lucius Fox, empowers him with the technological know-how to essentially spy on all Gothamites at all times. Of course, this is not just a work of fiction. The notion that every social threat in the guise of terror is a ticking time bomb has enabled in America not only the comparatively innocuous Patriot Act in the 2000s, but also a vast precedence whereby the Executive Branch of the American government has established virtual carte blanche authority to undertake any policy measure it wishes so long as it is broadly construed to protect society under the duties of a commander-in-chief. This has reached the point of even allowing the assassination of American citizens without judicial approval if they are deemed accessories to terror in the global battlefield. Needless to say, such developments have severely called into question America's institutional fealty toward its own constitutional heritage and obligations.

"Deep, Deep Sleep"

Upon being asked about the status of a young American democracy, Benjamin Franklin apocryphally noted that it was "a republic—if you can keep it." A society—if it can be kept—seems to be the animating motivation for Bruce Wayne's social crusade and his *raison d'être* for putting on the mask in Gotham City, which seems to predictably suffer from collective threat amnesia. (Honestly, how many times does a terrorist have to attack Gotham before its denizens realize there might be some endemic institutional shortcomings in town?). Likewise America has yet to be shocked out of its own slumber.

The American social compact protects fewer and fewer citizens and legal norms and values have been sacrificed for the sake of security against terror. It would be difficult to better illustrate this than in the ways America allocates resources. In the fiscal

year 2013 budget, a whopping 57 percent of America's discretionary spending is slated to go for military and defense, while a paltry 6 percent will go to education and 5 percent to housing and community. One could be forgiven if cynicism is the response to such a skewed distribution, and wonder if there's even a point of attempting reform in failing institutions. Indeed, between the explosions and street violence bleeding throughout *The Dark Knight Rises*, there remains the inescapable feeling that destruction holds the power to purify society of its sins.

Does America need a hero? Batman can counter Bane with his own brand of vigilante justice, but such punishment will not keep society's destructive and antidemocratic impulses in check. America needs effective institutions that are accountable.

It is perhaps a not overly compelling vision that the best a society can do is to proceed with positive social progress only after unmasking the extent of its own destructive impulses. But for America it would nonetheless be an important start to take a necessary cold, hard look into the mirror and see how distorting our process of dealing with social violence has become. In a rousing crescendo ending to *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell noted the "deep, deep sleep" of his native England with regard to the imminent spread of international fascism. "I sometimes fear that we shall never wake," he warned, "till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs." The circumstances and threats for America in 2012 are diverse, but the sentiment is particularly instructive for what a society can do on its own terms to forestall not only exogenous threats but also the myriad internal challenges to the social order.

And still, violence in America seems undeterred; efforts to more effectively control access to weapons, for example, remain unsuccessful. In the last two years alone, America has witnessed the attempted assassination of U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords in Arizona, a hate crime massacre committed at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, and what will forever haunt the release of *The Dark Knight Rises* itself, the mass shooting in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, during the film's premiere in July. On one level, American society has to take some of this with a grain of stoic acceptance—it is simply impossible to prevent all threats to society. But on another level, when American institutional failings are directly implicated in acts of social violence—and they often are—the vigilance of Americans must be unwavering. "Sow the same seed of rapacious license and oppression over again," warned Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*, and "it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind." It's a warning that no society can ever heed with perfection. But it will at least be a start when America ends its state of denial about the causes and consequences of its home-grown violence.