It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's Security as Pacification! Security as Pacification in
*Superman Red Son*

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**Abstract[1]**

Cultural criminology acknowledges that criminology is not only produced by all participants in popular culture.[2] This field asserts the importance of theory in practice and in the cultural imagination.[3] Mark Neocleous and others argue that there continues to be underdeveloped connections between everyday life, insecurities, and socio-cultural theories of power by criminologists and other scholars.[4] Neocleous asserts that scholars are forcing models that do not actually fit or which are based on missed connections, like thinking of crime-fighting and war-fighting as distinct, instead of one in the same.[5] While Neocleous and George Rigakos brought a critical theorization of security as pacification to the table, I have tried to go beyond the edges of security studies and demonstrate key elements of this theorization through a more accessible medium, the comic book *Superman Red Son*.[6]

**Key words:** Superman; Security; Criminology; Culture; Political Economy

*This need to 'secure insecurity' is fundamental to every aspect of capitalism, from the everyday life of the citizen—subjects of capitalist policies through to the global reach of capitalist corporations. On the one hand, it reaches into the minutia of our personal, social, economic and cultural acts, and the security practices through which 'everyday insecurities' are policed [...] On the other hand, it also points to the security practices through which international insecurity is managed: power balances and international treaties, diplomacy and world order, the clash of civilizations and the nomos of the earth.*[7]

## Introduction

Cultural criminology is a growing field of research that acknowledges that criminology is produced not only by scholars but also by all participants in popular culture.[8] This field asserts the importance of theory in practice and in the cultural imagination.[9] Mark Neocleous and others argue that there continues to be underdeveloped connections between everyday life, insecurities, and socio-cultural theories of power by criminologists and other scholars.[10] Neocleous asserts yay!connections, like thinking of crime-fighting and war-fighting as distinct, instead of one in

the same.[11] While Neocleous and Rigakos brought a critical theorization of security as pacification to the table, I have tried to go beyond the edges of security studies and demonstrate key elements of this theorization through a more accessible medium, the comic book *Superman Red Son.*[12][13]

In their book *Criminology Goes to the Movies* Nicole Rafter and Michelle Brown demonstrate how "[a]ttention to these possibilities [between theory and culture] initiates interdisciplinary alliances and promises a more democratic, less exclusionary view than that of academia of what it means to do criminology and be a criminologist."[14] Similarly, Cote et. al. and the contributors to their edited collection *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments Against Neoliberal Globalization,* call for making learning an explicit part of social change. They define utopian pedagogies as "inquiries rooted in an expanded concept of struggle, one that emphasizes the importance of everyday practices and of contest over meaning in the reproduction and transformation of hegemonic power relations."[15] Thus, class struggle must incorporate cultural texts and the struggles over their meaning, as part of both understanding and thinking through theories as well as part of revolutionary praxis. Following from these intellectuals, this article seeks to speak to two audiences: an audience perhaps just beginning their academic journey in undergraduate studies; or to those with some knowledge of Superman via popular culture, and who are interested in the political economies of security but are unsure of where to start.

Cultural texts are places where we can play with ideas and simultaneously engage with the social, the political, and the cultural. Cultural texts open up a space where theories are made more accessible, aid in raising consciousness, and ultimately have the potential for revolutionary praxis. *Superman Red Son*[16] takes the iconic American superhero and explores an alternate reality where Superman had crashed and was raised in the Union of Soviet Social Republics (USSR), instead of his canonic upbringing in rural Kansas. Through this alteration, the comic raises important questions about geopolitical contexts and paternal family issues, ultimately leaving the answers to these questions open to the interpretation of the audience.

My reading of *Red Son* asserts that despite the conversion of Superman from an American-capitalist to Soviet-communist superhero, security remains the dominant mode of pacification used to subdue the regular citizens (non-metahumans) of the DC Universe. Furthermore, while Lex Luthor becomes the American hero—as the continued arch nemesis of Superman—Luthor remains the true supervillain of both the United States and the global population. This article is not just an exercise in applying cultural theory to pacification, but also an endeavor to illustrate how the theoretical insights of Neocleous and Rigakos' pacification theory can directly be seen in *Red Son* and to demonstrate these pervasive theoretical understandings by grounding them in a more accessible cultural medium.

Using a textual analysis of the comic book, I outline Neocleous' critical theory of security as pacification[17] and articulate how *Red Son* makes these ideas accessible to a broader

audience, by enshrining them in this alternative origin of the iconic Superman. Starting as a historically inverted version of the classic Superman mythology and of the Cold War, *Superman Red Son* challenges the reader to critically examine their own understandings of the Cold War, contemporary global politics, and heroes and villains. While *Superman Red Son* is not a perfect representation of a Utopic future, that does not restrict it from having an impact on inspiring future visions and realities.

Literacy as a social practice itself involves people using cultural texts and creating meaning from them.[18] While Bruce discusses the importance of revisions to understanding language and thinking critically about their thinking and writing, I assert that this can be expanded to creating and playing with "revisionist texts" which rewrite historical or well-understood texts to see something about them differently.[19] Bruce writes of revision: "At the heart of revision is the act of looking for other possibilities and ways of envisioning […] Revision reframes and reveals alternatives. Revision disarms and dissects. Revision expands our awareness and enlarges our perceptions."[20]

The audience is encouraged by the illustrated nature of comic books as a medium to keep Superman as its protagonist by giving the most page presence and artistic detailing. *Red Son* appeals to the familiarity of Superman as known superhero—at least at the very beginning—as it gives the reader space to think about the issues being presented instead of relying on preconceived values and beliefs. This is significant in the context of the Cold War, as like the "War on Drugs," War on Poverty," and "War on Terror," the Cold War was an ideological battle for the global supremacy of one of two socio-economic systems: capitalism versus communism.[21] The Cold War, either in *Superman Red Son* or in reality, was never simply about ideology or about national security, as Neocleous notes:

> It has long been the case that warfare abroad is linked, politically, ideologically, technologically, and industrially, to the maintenance of order at home; conversely, that order abroad often means warfare at home. This is not, however, some by-product of war but is, rather, a deliberate ploy to ensure that the state can keep its own citizen-subjects pacified in what is, essentially, a full-scale war against its own people.[22]

Thus, the Cold War was just as much about ensuring the pacification of domestic populations as it was about pacifying the 'evil' threat overseas. The discourse of national and global security legitimates the use of state power for security and has become a conceptual weapon in power games between states, wherein "*Security* becomes the overriding interest and the principle above all other principles."[23] The order of capital is an order of social insecurity.[24]

Allegory has frequent occurrences in both the DC and Marvel superhero universes.[25] It is crucial that we continue to revisit, reframe, and repurpose cultural texts and narratives to teach ideas and encourage critical thinking. *Superman Red Son* accomplishes this by having its reader revisit the Cold War and reframe their perspective from the other side so to speak, as their

identification remains with the familiar protagonist, and thus aligns with the communists as opposed to their traditional position as members of capitalist societies. This is the point of departure for engaging the readers' critical thinking skills as their comfortable positions are immediately flipped, and encouraging them to rethink their understanding of the historical contexts and underlying messages of the comic book.

Perhaps the most consistent and interesting stylistic choice of *Red Son* is the seemingly deliberate refusal to engage with the lives of any regular citizens either in the USSR or the US. Their lives are more or less inconsequential to the politics and leaders on both sides of the ideological spectrum, to the events and plot development of the story, and perhaps to the larger world.  This is the beauty of comics as a medium; you can see in greater detail *some* characters (such as Superman and Lex Luthor), whereas others are literally faceless, with backs turned to the audience's perspective, not fully colored in, etc. Similarly, pacification is not so much about *which* groups need to be pacified or *why,* so much as there must be a *sense of insecurity* which is ideologically defensible from a liberal position to justify "security measures." That is, limitations on liberty such as those implemented at the G20 Summit in Toronto,[26] including coercive tactics such as "snatch squads" to target key organizers, "'less-than-lethal' weapons," "no-go zones," "sound cannons," the banning of face covers, and kettling protestors.[27] The insecurity posed to capitalist institutions by the protestors requires harsh security measures to ensure the continued reproduction of capitalism;[28] even at the expense of constitutionally protected freedoms of expression and association, as well as freedom of movement. It is not that the protestors are a threat of bodily harm to others, as much as they pose a symbolic and actual threat to the status quo, and thus must be pacified by whatever means in order to achieve *a sense* of security.

## Security as Pacification

Security as pacification is insidious. Beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, political economists and police scientists such as Patrick Colquhoun and Sir William Petty, developed the understanding that in order to control a population and harness them for their productive labour, they needed a system in place.[29] Rigakos describes this process as first involving the elimination of economic alternative by "privatizing communal and titled land and then implementing a system of police to enforce (indeed, inculcate) a wage-labor system. This process was dependent on the use and threat of violence in tandem with 'moral education' for workers."[30]

*Superman Red Son* is an exceptional text for demonstrating all of these necessary components of pacification and how they are involved in changing an entire socio-economic system over time. This is done in seemingly two opposite directions: the USSR is communist under Stalin and later Superman, and secondly the US goes from capitalist to something that can potentially be read as socialist under President Luthor. While Superman's fall as leader of the

USSR simultaneously signals the fall of the Soviet Federation, it would be a mistake to assume that Luthor then transitions America away from capitalism and towards a socialist Utopia.

In the third act of the comic book "Red Son Setting," Luthor inherits an America ravaged by civil war, extreme poverty, and incredible political instability. He then uses his position as both president and CEO to put the entire working population in jobs and their children in recreational activities; he drastically increases the standard of living for everyone and eliminates homelessness; he keeps on the Green Lanterns as a police force (and he manages to change even Wonder Woman's mind about the *good* of communism for the inhabitants of Earth). Luthor deploys pacification to restore order to the revolting population. This pacification not only helps ensure Luthor's continued political popularity and position while maintaining the system of liberal democracy, but also ensures his continued profits as the CEO of LexCorp, which manufactures a whole range of products within the DC Universe, such as weapons and defensive technologies. Even Luthor's continued leadership serves as a reminder of the threat that Superman once posed, and the fact that there are other metahumans in existence which may once again pose a threat to the American capitalist way of life. Neocleous notes that 'securing insecurity' is both an essential component of the process of pacification and the (re)production of capitalism.[31]

### (Consistently) Capitalist Lex Luthor

Pacification must be productive. It must create after it destroys everything from economic development, education, health care, cultural and ideological productions. Then must be built to take the place of the systems destroyed.[32] It is this illusion of stability or a return to stability which helps keep the masses complacent. This is clear in *Red Son* when Luthor becomes president in 2001 and immediately installs protectionist measures: he stops trading with the rest of the world and relies on an internalized market; these policies ensure a decent wage and working conditions; he doubles the standard of living twice in a single year; and he manages to secure 100% employment and ends homelessness in the 34 states that did not succeed during the Civil War. However, our narrator Superman tells us: "[H]e wasn't doing it for **the people**. Lex Luthor couldn't **stand** the people. Like everything else in his miserable life, this was just the first stage in the master plan to finally eliminate me."[33] In rebuilding American infrastructure and seemingly achieving *security* and stability, Luthor achieves the pacification necessary to ensure his ability to continue his war on Superman, continuing his presidency, and presumably his ability to profit as the chief weapons developer of the now economically prosperous United States.

Lex Luthor is the bourgeoisie embodied. He is a rich man and the owner of a corporation, who understands himself as better and more important than all people, while he accumulates his money and power from the labor and deaths of others. And importantly, as Neocleous notes,

"The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society."[34] Thus, Luthor is compelled to continue to ensure the innovation and development of new technologies and instruments of production. The relations of production between his machines/artificial intelligence beings, human workers, and those above human form, elevates himself and Superman to gods among men. Luthor drastically shapes and reshapes domestic and international politics; demonstrating the reciprocity between pacification and accumulation both domestically and in occupied territories.[35]

## Soviet Superman

Superman does not have an alter-ego in *Red Son*. In *Red Son* he is only referred to as Comrade Superman, and later President Superman. There is no communist Clark Kent trying to live a normal human existence, only the alien with superpowers. This poses an interesting dynamic and conflict for Superman and for Soviet politics in the comic, as a fellow comrade describes how Superman's very existence undermines communist ideals: "You're the **opposite** of Marxist doctrine Superman. Living proof that all men **aren't** created equal."[36] Perhaps this is a misunderstanding of both Superman and equality; Superman is not a human and should thus not be taken as proof that not all men are equal. Additionally, being equal does not necessitate being identical in every way. Equality instead should be understood as equal in ability to thrive and to fulfill their potential to the fullest. Utopia is a dream of everyone's personal fulfillment not of a legion of cookie-cutter-people. To clarify, Utopia is not "a place we might reach but […] an ongoing process of becoming."[37] Utopia, both for the purposes of *Superman Rising Son* and this article, is the ongoing process of fulfilling one's potential and working towards better futures.

Like in the regular DC universe, Superman's guiding principal is "doing what is right" and not allowing himself to be used as a living weapon. Despite being on the opposite end of the political spectrum from his normal position as capitalist America's hero, in *Red Son*, Superman remains committed to this position. Simply being raised on and internalizing communist ideologies does not change Superman's internal morality—he adamantly refuses to commit violence or be used as a tool of the state.[38] His guiding principle is to prevent harm, which is tested by Lex Luthor by purposefully having a satellite crash into Metropolis and almost killing *his own wife*—Lois Lane Luthor. Luckily, Superman flies in to save her (and everyone else).

Superman's commitment to ensuring the safety of Earth's citizens unfortunately also falls into the trap of trying to ensure their *security* as well. This is a dark turn for Superman during the middle portion of the comic wherein he feels he must rely on increasingly fascist governing policies to ensure security in the communist states. Superman's reliance on liberal ideals is predictive of this downfall:

> While [the] loss of liberty 'for security reasons' is quite minor compared to, say, what takes place in a fascist regime, the practices involved, the wider state of emergency to which it gives rise, and the intensification of the security obsession, have a disquieting tendency to push contemporary politics further and further towards entrenched authoritarian measures. Liberalism is not only unable to save us from this possibility, but actually had a major role in its creation and continuation.[39]

Thus, in *Superman Red Son,* Superman's determination to "do the right thing" by the standards of morality tightly entwined with liberalism leads him to attempt to balance *security threats* and instability against the installation of authoritarian measures. Not even Superman can achieve this theoretical balance and ends up going so far as to surgically implant thought-reprogramming devices into the brains of detractors to create his own race of pacified cyborgs—pacification and security technology literally embodied. This myth of an achievable balance between security and liberty makes possible the acceptance of all sorts of authoritarian measures by the populous because they are justified on liberal grounds.[40]

During the Cold War, Luthor-laboratory monsters like Superman II and civil unrest are presented as legitimate security threats to both citizens and the state. The comic demonstrates how things determined to be a threat to the state are never value-neutral. Throughout a majority of the comic, Superman is thought of as the primary threat to the United States and much of the world from the perspective of the both Americans and their government. Neocleous reminds us that by calling anything a security issue "plays into the hands of the state, and the only way the state knows how to deal with threats to security is to tighten its grip on civil society and ratchet-up its restrictions on human freedoms."[41] Thus, consciousness raising about the hegemonic use of "security" and of the ideological falsity of liberty versus security is essential in the fight against violent authoritarian practices by the state.

In the end, Superman is pushed to suicide (although does not actually die due to his superpowers) by a note from Luthor, which tells him that perhaps he could just put the world in a glass bottle—implying that this would be the most efficient method of ensuring the Earth's security, but entirely removing people's liberty. This defining moment in the comic book demonstrates to the reader that the dichotomy of liberty versus security is false; there is no balance to be struck because liberty is not dependent on security—liberty is dependent on one's ability to fulfill their potential and help to fulfill the potential of a society. *Security* is clearly demonstrated as an attack on social well-being in order to secure power and profit for the oligarchy.

**Conclusion**

Whether Superman is an American capitalist or Soviet communist he presents a security threat and thus becomes the justification for American development of weapons of mass destruction, as

well as the subtler forms of violence of pacification. Neocleous describes the reciprocal condition of the state, insecurity, and violence as such:

> These are wars in which the battleground is the security of everyday life; wars in which 'the gloomy old' everyday practices of some lives must be destroyed and replaced with 'brighter and nicer new lives'; wars against suspect communities defined as such by the state itself and said to be making the territory insecure; wars in the form of acts of security in which the state assets its being *as a state* by insisting on itself as *the* political mechanism for the fabrication of social order.[42]

Perhaps Superman was correct in faking his own death and leaving earth to its own devices; it is clear that it is the state that is the real supervillain to be vanquished and a new social order to be built by the proletariat from the ground up.[43] Not even benevolent Superman can create Utopia from a position of authority within a hierarchical system. Superman's Soviet Union was somewhere between a religious system and fascism, and not conducive to the ideals of justice or equality which he espouses. If Utopia is really always on the horizon, a process of working towards both conditions for justice and reaching human potential as individuals and as society, then Superman had to leave when he realized he could not create a perfect society. Because a perfect society is a process of constant revision—not just a singular revolutionary moment. When Superman realized that he was reliant on pacification as security he can be understood as having realized that security versus liberty is not a balance to be achieved, but a cog in reproducing capitalist relations of exploitation; a form of perpetuating violence for more violence and onward for infinity.

The logic of security is anti-political,[44] and the logic of cultural texts is the liberty of expressing new and exciting ideas. Comic books may be commodified works of art that are mass produced by mega-corporations to sell action figures and movie tickets, but that does not limit their potential to help us think differently about how we understand the world around us and imagine the new world we want to build. By using a textual cultural analysis of the comic book *Superman Red Son*, I have demonstrated Neocleous' theories of security as pacification in a way that is more accessible to the public outside of academia.

## *Notes*

[2] Nicole Rafter and Michelle Brown, *Criminology Goes to the Movies: Crime Theory and Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), ix.
[3] Ibid., x-1.

[4] Mark Neocleous, "'A Brighter and Nicer New Life:' Security as Pacification," *Social & Legal Studies* 20, no. 2 (2011): 192.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Mark Millar, Dave Johnson, and Killian Plunkett, "Superman Red Son," *Red Son* 1-3, Revised edition, DC Comics (April 2014).

[7] Neocleous, "Security as Pacification," 192.Emphasis in original text.

[8] Rafter and Brown, *Criminology,* ix.

[9] Ibid., x-1.

[10] Neocleous, "Security as Pacification," 192.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Millar, Johnson, and Plunkett, "Superman Red Son."

[13] *Superman Red Son* was originally published as a three-issue mini-series by DC Comics in 2003. However, my analysis is of the revised text published as a single comic in 2014.

[14] Rafter and Brown, *Criminology*, 4.

[15] Mark Coté, Richard J. F. Day, and Greig de Peuter, eds., *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments Against Neoliberal Globalization* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 5.

[16] Millar, Johnson, and Plunkett, "Superman Red Son."

[17] Mark Neocleous, "Security, Liberty and the Myth of Balance: Towards a Critique of Security Politics," *Contemporary Political Theory* 6, no. 1 (2007): 131-49.

[18] Mark Neocleous and George Rigakos, eds., *Anti-Security* (Ottawa: Red Quill Books, 2011), 32.

[19] Heather E. Bruce, "Subversive Acts of Revision: Writing and Justice," *The English Journal* 102, no. 6 (2013): 31-9.

[20] Ibid., 33.

[21] A. V. Fedorov, "The Application of Hermeneutical Analysis to Research on the Cold War in Soviet Animation Media Texts from the Second Half of the 1940s," *Russian Social Science Review* 57, no. 3, (2016): 194-204.

[22] Neocleous, "Security as Pacification," 201.

[23] Neocleous, "Myth of Balance," 137.

[24] Neocleous, "Security as Pacification," 192.

[25] Kevin J. Wanner, "In a World of Super-Violence, Can Pacifism Pack a Punch?: Nonviolent Superheroes and Their Implications," *The Journal of American Culture* 39, no. 2, (2016): 178.

[26] See Alessandra Renzi and Greg Elmer, "The Biopolitics of Sacrifice: Securing Infrastructure at the G20 Summit," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no.5 (2013): 45-69.

[27] Jeff Monaghan and Kevin Walby, "'They attacked the city:' Security Intelligence, the Sociology of Protest Policing and the Anarchist Threat at the 2010 Toronto G20 Summit," *Current Sociology* 60, no.5, (2012): 657.

[28] For more on the fetishization of security commodities in particular, see S. Spitzer, "Security and Control in Capitalist Societies: The Fetishism of Security and the Secret Thereof," in John Lowman, Robert J. Menzies, and T. S. Palys, eds., *Transcarceration: Essays in the Sociology of Social Control* (Aldershot: Gower 1987), 43-58.

[29] George Rigakos, John L. McMullan, Joshua Johnson, and Gülden Özcan, eds., *A General Police System* (Ottawa: Red Quill Books, 2009).

[30] George Rigakos, *Security/Capital: A General Theory of Pacification* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 3.

[31] Neocleous, "Security as Pacification," 194.

[32] Ibid., 195-7.

[33] Millar, Johnson, and Plunkett, "Superman Red Son." Emphasis in original text.

[34] Neocleous, "Security as pacification," 191.

[35] Ibid., 200; 202.

[36] Millar, Johnson, and Plunkett, "Superman Red Son." Emphasis in original text.

[37] Coté, Day, and de Peuter, *Utopian Pedagogy*, 13.

[38]  Wanner, "Nonviolent Superheroes," 177-92.

[39]  Neocleous, "Myth of Balance," 144.

[40] Ibid., 33.

[41] Ibid., 146.

[42] Neocleous, "Security as Pacification," 203.

[43] Paul Blackledge, "Marxism, Nihilism, and the Problem of Ethical Politics Today," *Socialism and Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2010): 104.

[44] Neocleous, "Myth of Balance," 146.