The secret identity is one of the most persistent tropes in superhero comics, beginning with the very first appearance of Superman and continuing unabated today. Although the practice has its roots in literature (the double life of Dumas's *The Man in the Iron Mask* [1845] and *The Count of Monte Cristo* [Ten Years Later, or *The Vicomte Bragelonne*, 1847] or the Baroness Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel* series [1905–1940]) and in pulp novels (*The Mark of Zorro* [1919], an explicit precursor to Batman, or Philip Wylie's *The Gladiator* [1930], which Jim Steranko [1970, 37] has argued establishes the primary elements for Superman), fiction seems to have largely abandoned the practice to comics. An ordinary protagonist may be thrown into extraordinary circumstances (causing him or her to inhabit a new identity for the course of the fiction), unlike superhero comics, where the double identity necessarily continues because of the serial nature of its narratives. Spy series foreground the use of masquerade by their protagonists, but here the duplicitous identity is fluid (based on the espionage situation), not consistent as in the classic superhero binary.

Comics scholars have posited a wide range of explanations for this continuing presence of the secret identity. It allows the reader the fantasy of being extraordinary on the inside while continuing to seem ordinary on the outside. Danny Fingeroth voices this combination of power and pitifulness well: "IF ONLY THEY (whoever your 'they' may be) KNEW THE TRUTH (whatever that truth may be) ABOUT ME (whoever you believe yourself to be), THEY'D BE SORRY FOR THE WAY THEY TREAT ME" (2004). Certainly the secret identity acknowledges the schizophrenic splitting of identity into divided subjectivities in modern society. In particular, the secret identity typically allocates the self into a more stereotypically "feminized" (passive, weak, inept) version and a more "masculinized" (active, powerful, capable) side. The superhero/secret identity pairing flatters comics readers, allowing us to feel superior to those dupes who can't see that Clark Kent is indeed Superman, thus forming an insider alliance between us and the superhero (Gordon 2001, 184). The secret identity also embodies the American immigrant experience of assimilation, in which the alien Other must put on a mainstream
costume in order to “pass” within society, a masquerade that is always in jeopardy of being exposed.\(^6\)

No single reason can fully explain such a long-term, widespread phenomenon, and all these explanations seem to have a kernel of truth. In this chapter I wish to add a neglected factor to the set of explanations for the secret identity by pointing out a connecting trend in those alter egos: the importance of the corporate professional. Note the kind of jobs that superheroes tend to have: Clark Kent (Superman) is a journalist; Matt Murdock (Daredevil) is a lawyer; Tony Starks (Iron Man) is an industrialist; Barry Allen (Flash) and Ray Palmer (the Atom) are scientists working in large labs. They are professionals who fit within their corporate, institutional worlds. There are no day laborers and almost no small-business people among the classic secret identities. The rare entrepreneur is also a professional ensconced within a larger institution, such as Matt Murdock’s small law practice. Characters who initially are disinclined to participate in the corporate world (Bruce Wayne’s playboy, for instance) seem to feel the pull toward the corporate self (summoning Batman’s alter ego into Waynecorp and Waynetech).

What we have neglected to notice is the portrait of the Organization Man that is consistently articulated in the superhero secret identity. This article articulates this portrait of the secret identity both as cog in the social machine and as critique\(^7\) of the limits of this role, giving us a popular version of the social assessment given by David Riesman (1953) and William H. Whyte (1956). This chapter first examines the role of the corporation in the “classic” superhero secret-identity configuration, which clearly maintains a public separation of the super persona and the mundane one in the comics’ world. Individual comic stories may encourage us to muse about how Batman’s heartless obsession with justice truly differs from Bruce Wayne’s emotionally limited public self, but there is little doubt raised about the narrative necessity for maintaining both roles. The latter portion of this chapter turns to look at superheroes whose private identities are not so secret, where the distinction between public and private has collapsed not only thematically but also in terms of the actual plot. There is a historical slant to this distinction between the classic and the modern superhero secret identity, although I do not draw a hard line between two periods in time. The classic secret identity has its roots in the comics’ Golden Age characters (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman), though many characters emerging in the Silver Age and later also function similarly in their secret identity construction (the Silver Age Flash, Daredevil). The characters who blur the difference between super and secret identities tend to come from later periods when comics creators are questioning or tinkering with the classic configuration of superhero secret identities, and so they necessarily appear more modern comics, although not all modern comics use public/private identities in this way. The norms established early in comics history continue to have power in later eras, just as earlier attitudes about work and the corporation do not entirely disappear in a period of high capitalism. In examining the rough historical trend from classic to modern superhero
Figure 7.1 As is typical of many superheroes, issue 296 of *Superman* (1976) shows Superman's double, the young professional Clark Kent. © DC Comics.
secret identities, I sketch the evolution of the corporate secret identity in comics, which mirrors changes in the nature of the corporation itself.

The overt narrative justification for superheroes choosing a professional/corporate career for their secret identities is that the hero needs to be at a hub of information so that they will know immediately about various crises. Thus Clark Kent is a journalist, and Jim Corrigan (the Spectre) is a police detective. Without access to such a nexus, there must be an alternate mechanism for the superhero to receive information (the Batsignal, for instance). But narrative expedience does not fully justify the professional choices of secret identities. There is also an aspect of career aspiration within the youthful fantasy of the work world that superhero comics depict. Because the superhero is so much more glamorous than his or her secret identity, this leads us to forget that the business careers chosen by superheroes are quite prestigious. The young reader dreaming of being superpowered realizes that he or she will undoubtedly grow up to be something significantly lesser, someone more like Clark, but as fallback fantasies go, being a metropolitan journalist is not a bad one. One of the beauties of the corporate secret identity is that it sneakily disguises an upscale career choice as being within the grasp of a hardworking Kansas farm boy. It seems a small step from the Smallville paper to a job on the leading newspaper in Metropolis. Young readers for whom the work sphere is a mysteriously fantastic future world can feel “realistic” about their aspirations (“I know I’ll never be able to fly”) while simultaneously “settling” for what is a dream job (rich industrialist, television news anchor).

The connections between the superhero and the professional secret identity are richer and broader than can be explained through narrative expedience or reader wish fulfillment. This fictional binary occurs within and plays with the real life context of the rising visibility of the corporate man. The most influential portraits of this type emerge in the 1950s in two widely read and discussed social analyses: David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1953) and William H. Whyte’s (1956) *The Organization Man*, although both books note that this figure has its origins in earlier decades. Riesman describes a shift in the “social character” of the American man from an “inner-directed” emphasis to an “other-directed” character. The inner-directed man has his values implanted early in his life, and he holds firm to those values throughout adulthood without needing to be further monitored by rigid external forces (figures of church or state). Exemplars of this type range from Benjamin Franklin to Superman, whose early socialization to Midwestern farm virtues forms the core of his heroic impetus. Riesman argues that the American focus is increasingly on producing the other-directed character, a bureaucratic middle-class figure whose main source of direction comes from closely monitoring signals from the world around him. Whyte calls his closely related type the Organization Man, recognizing that the corporation man is its most visible
instance but also arguing that this figure has a broader ideological reach that extends to virtually all professional work. Whyte argues that a Social Ethic is beginning to supplant the Protestant Ethic as a guiding principle for conduct in work and elsewhere, an ideology that demands that people should subsume their individuality for the good of the whole. The primary need of this figure is "belongingness," and without sublimating their individuality and autonomy to the organization, the individual is without meaning. The Organization Man does not simply work for a corporation, but he belongs to it, recognizing its superior claims on his loyalty and his conduct. Whyte depicts the Organization Man as an ideal, but he traces the importance of this figure through corporate training practices, child rearing, and fiction.9

Note that both of these influential works posit a binary (inner- vs. other-directed, Protestant Ethic vs. Social Ethic) that has strong parallels with the professional secret identity. Both books pit an individual who listens to his own drummer against the more malleable soul who receives pleasure not only by following the dominant beat around him but also by ensuring that the beat goes on uninterrupted. Riesman and Whyte's analyses try to find a balance between the two forces, acknowledging the pull of both belongingness and autonomy but arguing that the dominant force of the Organization Man needs to be counteracted with more emphasis on individuals changing the organization from within. What neither author suggests is an alternation between the two roles, the notion of that one can possess both the pleasures of individuality and conformity in succession. It is this fantasy that the classic superhero secret identity presents.

The classic secret identity is oriented around a series of role switches in time and space. Which persona is better equipped to handle the crisis at a particular moment? Is it the figure of the Organization Man working within the social network, or is it the superheroic individual who bypasses the rules? In fact, the sticking point is often the difficulty of switching from one to the other without getting caught. This dynamic creates numerous opportunities for narrative suspense: will Lois catch Clark changing into Superman (or, perhaps more accurately, how will Clark/Superman evade getting caught between roles once again)? In this alternating manner, the classic superhero secret identity reduplicates the plot device that links doppelgangers in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886, another literary precursor to the comics secret identity) or in werewolf stories/films. It is this switching between selves (one human, one superhuman) that makes the Wolf Man and Jekyll/Hyde monstrous, and the classic secret identity can be seen as an equally inhuman alternation. A figure like Clark/Superman fits the definition of the monster that Noël Carroll (1990) proposes in his articulation of "art-horror": a being that combines inconsistent categories in ways that, according to current scientific beliefs, cannot coexist (living/dead, animal/human, human/alien). Clark/Superman is, by this definition, a "monster," but not a horrifying
monster. Like fantasy creatures such as mermaids, Clark/Superman combines categories in ways that technically make him a “monster” without inspiring the kind of fear/disgust that would make him the centerpiece of horror (except, perhaps, to villains).

The classic corporate secret identity exposes the seemingly monstrous nature of the Organization Man’s task. One is expected to participate within the corporation for the greater good of all, and yet one recognizes the need to bypass the organization’s structure to exert one’s individual will. The classic secret identity holds out the fantasy that we can switch between the two, like Jekyll and Hyde, potentially making monsters of us all. In its particular use of the identity-switching plot mechanism, however, the classic corporate secret identity points out what Stevenson emphasizes and Riesman and Whyte do not: that there is not such a radical disjunction between the two personas as it might appear on the surface, that Hyde’s animalism and Jekyll’s rationalism are linked, and so are the corporate and individualist realms. The two worlds, so seemingly different, demand similar tasks from their participants. In many instances the lessons made salient by the superhero are exactly the same skills needed by the secret identity to survive in the corporate world.¹⁰ For example, Richard Reynolds has noted that classic superheroes are reactive. They do not instigate the action; instead, they wait for the supervillain to act, and only then do they go to work. They are not reluctant heroes, but they are passive. Without some other person or external crisis to precipitate the drama, the superhero would remain on call indefinitely¹¹ (Reynolds 1992, 50–51). The superhero models for the corporate worker how to wait for the next work assignment and then quickly performs the assigned mission. Unlike the entrepreneur, who seeks out and structures work, the corporate worker accepts the given task (whatever it is) without question and marshals his or her skills to dispatch the problem.

One reason that the superhero is so closely linked to the professional secret identity is that the rhythm of superhero exertion mimics the interruptibility of professional life. Since superheroes respond to unscheduled crises, the secret identity must be put on hold while the fire is put out. The secret identity, therefore, must be a form of labor that is not so directly supervised that the worker cannot escape. It’s hard to respond to the Batsignal if you have a working-class job. If Superman worked on a factory assembly line, how would he punch out his time card to save the world? The advantage of a professional job is the amount of freedom given to well-trained workers who are entrusted to account for their time as they see fit. The flip side of this freedom is the constant interruptions experienced by the corporate executive, who would recognize the panic of a Clark Kent being jerked from one work task to another. The classic superhero/secret identity pair models the handling of interruptions that is at the heart of corporate survival.

The job of the Organization Man is to subsume the individual needs to those of the larger whole. While examining the importance of domination and submission within William Marston’s Wonder Woman narratives, G. C.
Bunn (1997) does not limit his discussion to the imagery of bondage that is obviously a part of the character’s imagery of lassoing and subduing men. Bunn argues that a larger form of submission plays across Wonder Woman’s narratives: that the character must become a servant of the greater good. What Bunn argues is true for Wonder Woman also applies to other classic superheroes: in spite of their extraordinary individuality, superheroes must subsume themselves for the service of the collective. Individual glory is an inevitable by-product of such labor, but it is not the classic superhero’s goal. The work itself is the important thing, not the worker. The superhero and the Organization Man must assert themselves within the circumscribed sphere of their task, but their larger aims are predefined.

Once the superhero has been given a task, the comic book story does not unfold by having the superhero deploy their powers in a routine manner. Part of the challenge of constructing an interesting superhero conflict is that the superhero has so many advantages that it is hard to create an antagonist who could not be easily dispatched with a brief exertion of force. A good supervillain is one who stymies and traps the superhero, in spite of his remarkable powers. As Reynolds points out, instead of thinking of Superman tales as simple power fantasies, one can usefully consider them as stories detailing the experience of powerlessness: “Time and again, Superman’s great physical powers are useless when set against the trickery, deceit, and immorality of his enemies” (1992, 66). For instance, Superman’s powers are helpless against magic, and so his victories over mischievous interdimensional imp Mr. Mxyzptlk depend entirely on his ability to outsmart the supervillain into saying a magic word. Kryptonite in its various forms serves the narratively useful purpose of robbing Superman of his powers, and other stories make use of similar mechanisms. The dramatic tension depends as much on drawing out these instances of inability as it does on depicting the moments of triumph.

Superhero narratives are obviously a daydream of effectivity, of having the ability to overcome whatever obstacles lie ahead. Although it is now familiar to discuss these stories as fantasies fed by the frustrations of youth, they may also be productively read from the vantage point of the older Organization Man. His quiet desperation comes from the experience of powerlessness, lost in the minute role one plays within the large coordinated effort. These superhero stories of utter potency must necessarily first create moments of impotence that are recognizable in spirit to anyone dealing with the frustrations of corporate bureaucracy. That even superheroes feel powerless at times is heartening to the mere mortal. If we do not face a Braniac or a Galactus, we at least face unreasonable tirades from our own version of Perry White or J. Jonah Jameson (which would certainly be recognizable by any writer or artist being paid a page rate for their labor in the Marvel or DC bullpen). These superhero stories evoke and depend on the frustrations of powerlessness in the ordinary world, providing a fantasy of having the supernatural capability to overcome those barriers.
And yet the "normal" exertion of superpowers is not enough to triumph in these stories. Rarely is a good punch the solution to a classic superhero's dilemma. To overcome a particular trap, the superhero must put forth what Reynolds calls "extra effort" (1992, 41), a phrase that sounds much like corporate-speak. This extra effort not only provides much needed drama (given the power capabilities of the superhero), but it also demonstrates the superhero's moral superiority of will. The superhero must problem solve in innovative ways to overcome the current menace. Clearly the superheroes here model the ideal professional: they must be able to adapt their skills, using the "extra effort" that distinguishes the professional from the day laborer. For example, in Alan Moore's famous "Must There Be a Superman?" story (Superman Annual 11, 1985), Superman spends much of the narrative immobilized by an alien life-form that presents him with a compelling fantasy of an unexploded Krypton. Superman is released from paralysis when he realizes that the "reality" is merely an illusion. He immediately snaps into action against Mongul, who prepared the hallucinatory trap. When Superman hesitates to kill Mongul, he begins to lose the fist fight, only to be saved by Robin's quick thinking, placing Mongul's own hallucination-generating life-form on the supervillain, ensnaring him in his own dreams. Here we see the superhero/Organization Man epitomizing the trends I have mentioned thus far: reacting to an unexpected crisis in spite of one's prolonged feeling of powerlessness, putting forth the extra effort to solve the dilemma with quick improvisational thinking.

After the superhero dispenses with the crisis of the moment, the classic superhero universe returns to status quo with little mention of the impact of the superhero's recent effort. As Umberto Eco notes, the combination of Superman's mythological status (his godlike invulnerability) and the commercial structure of regular serial publication necessitates this narrative structure. In the individual comic book, the classic superhero overcomes the obstacle, adding to the accomplishments, but to acknowledge that the hero has changed in the aftermath of such action would violate his inviolably steadfast nature. The classic Superman story takes place in what Eco calls an "immobile present" where the seemingly powerful superhero can only make "infinitesimal modifications of the immediately visible" (2004, 156, 164). Superman can only stop bank robbers or prevent alien invasions; he cannot make wholesale changes in his world. In making connections between the comic's narrative structure and its mythic underpinnings, Eco comes close to discussing the portrait of the corporate man within the Superman narrative, arguing that "[i]n an industrial society . . . where man becomes a number in the realm of the organization which has usurped his decision-making role" (2004, 146), the lesson to be learned from the narrative time scheme of superhero narratives is one of immobility. Planning and action by individuals are insignificant since even superhuman efforts result in no lasting change in the world around you. The Organization Man would recognize the corporate celebration of achieving one's momentary
goal, only to return to the sense of Sisyphean futility of having to confront a remarkably similar obstacle the next day.

After engaging in a series of such ineffectual endeavors, the professional runs the danger of evacuating his or her private identity in service of the corporate aims. The danger is in becoming the Organization Man, in being reduced to his function within the system. The health of the functionary's other life is of little concern if the job is well done. The reward of professional effectiveness can be indifference to the soul of the worker. Why should anyone care about the person trapped inside either a metal suit or a gray flannel suit, each one of which is built by a corporate industrial complex to serve its own purposes, as long as either the corporate professional or the superhero risks his or her humanity to bring peace of mind to their world? Classic superhero comics require us to acknowledge the complex linkages among the restricted corporate self, the fantasy image of effectiveness, and the private soul that can be found somewhere in between.

The superhero and the professional secret identity, then, are not simply depictions of binary opposites of power. Superheroes and professional secret identities are different modes of heroism requiring similar kinds of effort (subsuming individual needs for the corporate good, handling assigned tasks, confronting powerlessness) in very different realms. Film theorist Robert Ray has defined these two separate forms of heroism, arguing that these two basic heroic forms structure the classic American cinema. Ray says that Hollywood over and over offers audiences the "official hero" and/or the "outlaw hero." The official hero works entirely within the system. Although the official hero has conflicts, he or she has confidence that these may be settled by working within the parameters laid down by the existing institutions. Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is an official hero, as are the protagonists of *C.S.I.* and *Law and Order*. The outlaw heroes may overtly work for the institution, but they have lost their faith in the institutional order, working outside the system according to their own individual set of rules. Dirty Harry is an outlaw hero, and so is Andy Sipowicz of *NYPD Blue*. Although most Hollywood films center around one or the other, some films depict both. Ray's classic example is *Casablanca*: Ilsa must choose between official hero Victor, the hope of the free French, and outlaw hero Rick, a mercenary turned disaffected saloonkeeper. Although Ilsa chooses the official hero, the movie makes certain that our sympathies lie with the outlaw, which the American cinema tends to favor.

One of the primary distinctions of the conventions of superheroism developed in comics is that superhero comics combine the official hero and the outlaw hero into a single entity. Superheroes are not paid police officers who must follow legal procedures; they are by definition vigilantes (even those who are deeply complicit with institutional power, such as many moments in Superman's history). The classic corporate secret identity works within the system of law, industry, science, or the press, all standard occupations of the official hero. Although the comic book's sympathies (like
those of the American cinema in general) are with the outlaw/superhero, we do not have to choose between the two, as we must do in *Casablanca*; they are the same person.15 They are not irreconcilable options; they coexist (at times complementarily, at other times, uneasy) as irreversibly linked aspects of the same pursuit. Matt Murdock may put on the Daredevil costume because he has encountered a limit to what he can do as a lawyer, but that does not prevent him from continuing his efforts on the legal front. It is not, as Thomas Andrae argues, that the secret identity is solely a "sham" that "exposes the powerlessness of the individual in modern society and simultaneously effaces it by affirming an escape into a realm of fantastic adventure beyond the repressions of daily life." Yes, the classic secret identity voices the frustration of the individual trying to live up to the ideal of the Organization Man, but it also points out the continuities between that figure and the outlaw hero. Both are subject to moments of powerlessness, of losing their own selves for the collective good. Both are creatures who react more than they act, who improvise deftly in the face of unpredictable circumstances. Their combination is not necessarily a monstrous amalgamation or a simple fantasy split or an irreconcilable difference between two orientations: instead, the classic secret identity acknowledges the interconnection between two necessary modes of heroism.

The radical fantasy aspect of combining the classic superhero with institutional secret identity is that one is an extension of the other. It is not simply that one turns into the other over time, in the way that we watch a good cop go bad as he or she becomes frustrated with the impossibility of justice within the justice system. Instead, this figure is placed within a serial narrative and so transforms over and over from official to outlaw and back again. This interrelationship acknowledges the limitations of each mode of heroism and the necessity of both. As the 60s bring about a widespread questioning of an unproblematic faith in the wisdom of institutions and an open rebellion against the strictures of the corporate mind, it becomes more difficult to maintain the more straightforward, classic linkage between the professional secret identity and the superhero. As certain superhero comics tinker with this relationship, they provide a vantage point that allows us to see the unproblematized assumptions of their predecessors. In particular, certain Marvel comics of the 60s and 70s bring to the forefront the economics kept hidden by the professional occupations we have just discussed.

Slowly the "secret" part of the secret identity began to slip away, becoming more a dual identity with less need for concealment. Minor characters such as the Wasp (a superhero who frequently changed costume) seemed not so far away from their professional identities (Janet Van Dyne, a professional clothing designer). Major characters such as Reed Richards began their superhero careers already having a measure of celebrity (as an astronaut), and having all the major characters in the Fantastic Four's "family unit" being superpowered meant that there was little need to protect Mr. Fantastic's alter ego so that his loved ones could be safeguarded.
But the major change in the institutional dual identity came with a new acknowledgment of economic pressures in the superhero universe. Although the Marvel revolution of the 60s is frequently seen as a turn toward more complexly “alienated” and internally troubled characters (Jones and Jacobs 1997), I want to emphasize their foregrounding of the external monetary troubles associated being a superhero. Peter Parker spends a great deal of time worrying about money; after all, the chemicals to make web fluid are expensive. Here we get a superhero who worries about where the money will come from to pay the mortgage. Although Parker initially tries to market his newfound powers for profit, Spider-Man’s origin story emphasizes that this is not a viable option for the hero. In fact, Spider-Man’s origin story is a double story: one about Parker gaining superpowers (through a radioactive spider bite) and a second, more economically based story about his assuming the role of hero. Having failed in his attempt to parlay Spider-Man’s powers into financial gain, he eschews financial gain, learning that the role of the hero is to accept responsibility without expecting monetary consideration. By classical superhero standards, heroism and financial hardship do not mix.

These barriers (of economics and secrecy) are broken down further with the logical emergence of a superhero who works for money: Luke Cage, hero for hire. It is significant that when we have a hero who cannot afford the luxury of selfless labor, we also have a hero who makes no attempt to split his superhero identity from his professional one. After it becomes clear that Cage will be more popular than most other attempts at intermingling blaxploitation and superheroes, he is given a more “superheroey” moniker (Power Man), but still he does not duplicate the well-established dynamics of identity concealment. Of course, it is obviously important that when such a figure emerges in comics, he is a black character, but here I wish to emphasize class over race (though obviously they are not separate). Luke Cage helps us better see the class assumptions that underlie the professional secret identity of the classic superhero. There is no discussion of bill paying in Clark Kent’s or Tony Stark’s world, and thus the importance of their secret identities as professionals. Journalists and industrialists are professions who assume a certain basic standard of living above the economic fray. In order for the economically selfless understanding of superheroism to function, it needs the invisible support provided by the professional secret identity. The classic superhero cannot accept money for his or her labor both because it sullies the nobility of their heroism and because a paycheck would place the superhero more squarely within the world of the official hero. Luke Cage, lacking both a secret identity and the economic class associated with such identities, must do what previous superheroes avoided: selling their labor on the open market.

The assumption of a certain measure of economic class is built into the very origins of the secret-identity trope. It is important that Sir Percy in the Scarlet Pimpernel novels is a flighty fop because the seeming distance between the secret identity and the hero identity keeps people from suspecting Sir Percy of heroism (just as Bruce Wayne’s playboy image helps preserve
his secret identity as Batman). But in our emphasis on how weak Sir Percy is, we forget to notice how important it is that he is an aristocrat. His good breeding (like that of The Man in the Iron Mask and The Count of Monte Crisco) gives rise to his derring-do and to his ability to maneuver among various worlds, and his deep pockets underwrite the expense of his masquerade and his large underground organization (just as the unlimited Wayne fortune makes it possible for Batman to afford all those wonderful toys).

Luke Cage, then, exposes the unacknowledged class bias built into the secret-identity concept. He also makes clear one of the economic ramifications of superhero labor: that superheroism is a crappy business model. There ain't no margin in saving the world. It is ignoble to stop and ask a person dangling from a skyscraper ledge if he or she is willing to pay for rescue, and neither can one ask for payment after the services have already been delivered. Crisis, the basic dramatic structure of the superhero narrative, is a poor basis for business; it is too intermittent and too unpredictable. To put superheroes on salary is either to make them overtly answerable to a particular political institution or to position them more as "ordinary heroes" such as firemen.17

Superhero parodies are useful to point out the inconsistent economic assumptions of our classic mode of superheroism. Bob Rozakis's and Stephen DeStephano's Hero Hotline (1989) posits a bureau of heroes whose services are only a phone call away. Hero Hotline depicts a superhero team operating not from a centralized seemingly nonprofit and rent-free headquarters (like the Avengers mansion or the Legion of Super Heroes' clubhouse) but within a corporate call center, complete with a mechanized dispatcher and a corrupt manager. Rather than answering summons to avert major global crises, the heroes must deal with stereotypical problems that face ordinary beat cops and firemen. On the Hero Hotline team, heroes are called to break up domestic disputes, and the seemingly ever-present stretchable hero (for instance, Plastic Man, Elongated Man, Mr. Fantastic) bemoans his fate of being dispensed to deal with an unending series of cats stuck in trees. Robert Kirkman's Capes (2003) explicitly foregrounds the discord that comes from placing superhero labor within modern labor practices. Teams of superheroes operate in shifts (only dealing with emergencies when they are on call); they get overtime pay and have disability insurance (much needed in the superhero business).

The intermingling of various understandings of labor that we see in overt superhero parodies has now become part of more mainstream superhero narratives. The introduction of certain real-world economic concerns in Spider-Man and Luke Cage gave rise to the imbedding of superhero narratives within the everyday fictional world of Marvels. This person-on-the-street perspective on superhero action seems to have opened up myriad possibilities for comic writers and artists to consider worlds where superheroism and ordinary work commingle (such as Kurt Busiek's Astro City [1995-], Moore's Top 10 [1999-2006], Brian Michael Bendis's Powers [2001-]).18 Geoff Klock has examined how such modern "revisionist" comics have dealt in various ways with the "anxiety of influence" caused by having to function within the confines of a
superhero universe. Situating the fantasy element of the superhero within a variety of more "realistic" contexts, Klock argues, has become a dominant mode of re-enlivening the superhero narrative in the 1980s and beyond. By placing the superhero within work paradigms other than the Organization Man context of the classic professional secret identity, the modern revisionist comics not only encourage us to interrogate our assumptions about superheroes but also foreground the changing nature of work in high capitalism.

In current comics we see the breaking down of classic lines separating secret identities, corporate/institutional roles, official and outlaw heroes. We have characters who have abandoned their superhero identity to occupy full-time roles as what would once have been their professional secret identity: Jessica Jones as the detective/reporter of Alias (2001–2004) and The Pulse (2004–2006), Detective Walker in Powers. The recent reincarnation of She-Hulk (2004–) centers on the conflict seemingly caused by a lawyer trying to determine if she has been hired because of her not-so-secret super identity or for her own all-too-human legal abilities. The question in these series is which set of labor skills is salable in which particular environments, and the answer in each case is that both superhero and ordinary talents become equally useful in resolving the narrative quandary.

For the postmodern corporation, image creation is as much a part of the business as manufacturing is. The actual product cannot be separated from its place in the marketplace of ideas, and so the process of image construction of the commodity is foregrounded in public discourse. Superheroes from their early days have been real-world commodities (as Ian Gordon [2001] details), but in early superhero stories the forces of commodification existed as villains. For instance, in a 1941 story in Action Comics that gave voice to Siegel and Schuster's anger over the trademarking of their character Superman, the villain is an unscrupulous businessman who sells the commercial rights to Superman's name, marketing his image on everything from cereal to comic strips. By contrast, in Jonathan and Joshua Luna's Ultra (2004–2005) the superheroes work for a corporation that both serves as a central dispatch to send superheroes to crises (as in Hero Hotline) and as a public relations agency that fields offers for the heroes to do product endorsements. The superheroes' agent concerns himself with how the heroes' actions will affect the marketability of their image, and so he monitors both their battles against supervillains and against the paparazzi looking for tabloid fodder about the superheroes' love lives. In a playful story entitled "Sweeps Week!" Noble Causes creator Jay Faerber presents the reader with the reflexive possibility that the comic that they are reading (a parody of soap-opera form using superheroes) may be an actual soap opera, a fictionalized version of the "actual" super Noble family's life created under the supervision of matriarch and spin doctor Gaia (Noble Causes Extended Family 2). In Noble Causes (2003–) Gaia chastises her
Figure 7.2 One cover from one of Peter Milligan’s and Mike Allred’s X-Force series (2001–2004) where the heroes have not so secret secret identities and engage reflexively on their place within a corporate world. © Marvel Entertainment.
children when their actions hurt the family’s public image, thus interfering with the commodification of their celebrity.

Perhaps the most distinctive reconfiguration of these elements is Peter Milligan’s and Mike Allred’s X-Force/X-Statix (2001–2004, Figure 7.2). The comic combines the shifting composition of a frontline military unit undergoing frequent casualties, the overt marketing of boy bands, the public relations manipulation of celebrity tabloid journalism, and the instant popular polling of reality television, all within the familiar structure of the bickering comic superhero team. If there is no profit margin in saving the world, there certainly is profit in merchandising, and the heroes of X-Statix muse aloud about how their actions will affect their Q-ratings and the prospective sales of their action figures. In X-Statix the cross-marketing of merchandise is the payoff that drives the superhero enterprise, making the characters consider the bottom line before choosing which missions to accept. Here we see the superhero fully within the postmodern corporation: one that is actually more concerned with royalties gained from marketing its image than gaining money as a direct result of its actions. Far from being the villainous opposite of heroic action, image marketing in this world is the accepted practice of the postmodern corporation and therefore can be the guiding concern of a contemporary superhero.

Members of X-Statix (like those in Ultra) have dual identities, but they are not secret ones. In fact, their open dual identities become part of their public personas, part of what is being sold to the public. In Noble Causes there is no dual identity; the public knows the characters by their given names (Gaia, Race, Rusty Noble). The fact that their proper names also describe their superpowers (Gaia commands the natural elements; Race is superfast; Rusty’s consciousness is placed in a robot) shows that there is no longer a need for secret identities in this universe. What becomes marketed in this case is the balance between public and private that constitutes the celebrity industry. The superhero is the corporate product, and the hero participates in his or her own packaging.

With X-Statix, Ultra, and Noble Causes, we come to the current state-of-the-art integration of the corporate identity and the superhero. In its initial configuration in classic superhero imagery, the secret identity depended on an unacknowledged assumption of economic class and professionalism. Instead of considering the superhero and the secret identity as opposites, I find it more useful to examine the continuities in their activities, how the superhero models the appropriate behavior for the corporate worker. As the nature of the corporation changed, so did the relationship between the corporate identity and the superhero. From the professional Organization Man to the worker for hire to the postmodern, image-conscious public relations officer, the superhero’s handling of a dual identity provides a fantasy vista for evoking and critiquing the place of the individual within the corporate institution.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES


2. For more on the prehistory of Superman, see Andrae (1980).

3. See also Reynolds: “Individual stories explore this contrast between costume as a source of power and costume as a means of hiding identity” (1992).
4. “Superhero comics clearly split masculinity into two distinct camps, stressing the superhero side as the ideal to be aspired to; but unlike the fascist ideology of phallic masculinity as mutually exclusive of the softer, feminized other, comic book masculinity is ultimately premised on the inclusion of the devalued side. Even if Clark Kent and Peter Parker exist primarily to reinforce the reader’s fantasy of self-transformation and to emphasize the masculine ideal of Superman and Spider-Man, they are still portrayed as a part of the character that is essential to their identities as a whole” (Brown 2001, 175).

5. For example, Gary Engle argues: “Though a disguise, Kent is necessary for the myth to work. This uniquely American hero has two identities, one based on where he comes from in life’s journey, one on where he’s going. One is real, one an illusion, and both are necessary for the myth of balance in the assimilation process to be complete. Superman’s powers make the hero capable of saving humanity; Kent’s total immersion in the American heartland makes him want to do it. The result is an improvement on the Western: an optimistic myth of assimilation but with an urban, technocratic setting” (1987, 85).

6. “Identity is the obsessional center of superhero comics, as revealed by endless processes of self-transformation and the problematic perceptions of others—Batman hunted by police, Lois hunting for Superman’s secret identity” (Bukatman, 54).

7. Jules Feiffer considers the secret identity as a social critique of a broader sort than I do here. Feiffer inverts the normal assumption that Superman is Clark Kent’s secret identity, asserting that Superman is the “true identity” and Clark Kent merely a “put-on . . . He is Superman’s opinion of the rest of us, a pointed caricature of what we, the noncriminal element, were really like” (1965, 18–19). This argument was made more popular when restated by Bill (David Carradine) in a climactic scene in Kill Bill, Part 2.

8. For example, Thomas Andrae (1980) situates a Depression-era shift from comics’ early socially progressive narrative tendencies toward a more corporate stance that fits better with the New Deal’s emphasis on the collective.

9. Leo Braudy also notes that the twentieth-century corporate world no longer needs the qualities required to pioneer America. In fact, those qualities of innovation and self-reliance actually destabilize the lower levels of the corporate enterprise, and so Braudy argues that these values are more relegated to fiction (513–14).

10. This article is eerily anticipated by a self-help book entitled (unsurprisingly) Office Superman That Peppily Encourages People to Follow the Example of the Man of Steel in Becoming the “Perfect Employee”: “The Office Superman transforms himself into a compulsively useful being, like the Superman of Siegel and Shuster, a savior, even. He makes sure that everyone sees him at the go-to guy in just about any situation that matters, any situation that calls for strength, intelligence, integrity, and character” (Axelrod, 11).

11. This tendency fits awkwardly when superhero comics are translated into the conventions of Hollywood film, where the superhero is neither an active pursuer of a single-minded goal nor an ordinary person responding to unusual circumstances.

12. In Eco’s words, Superman cannot “consume himself.” His mythic static status does not allow events in his present to impinge on his future because to do so would acknowledge that the godlike superhero “has taken a step toward death” (2004, 150). Eco is writing about the classic superhero narrative structure, where each individual comic book issues almost always present a complete story with a beginning, middle, and end. Arranging those
comics in a particular order (designated by issue numbers) creates comic book “continuity” (the overarching serial narrative unfolding in a particular comic book universe), but in classic superhero storytelling the serial nature of this larger story rarely impinges on the narrative demands of the individual tale. In more recent times, superhero narratives have participated in more strongly serial storytelling.

13. Although Ray’s discussion centers on a particular medium (film) in a particular era (America from 1930 to 1980), I extend his concept here to other popular media (comics, television) in a broader time frame. I do so because his argument is based largely on the ideological underpinnings of the outlaw/official hero dichotomy. If Ray’s argument holds true that popular film reveals these deep undercurrents in American mythology, those same currents are likely to continue to appeal in other mainstream media.

14. Other descendants of the classic superhero (one not discussed in this paper) are the antiheroes who emerge later in comic book history. Some of these maintain the classic relationship between the secret identity and the superhero (Selina Kyle/Catwoman, for instance). Others are so alienated from society that they have no narrative justification for a secret identity. The Punisher (Frank Castle) takes up his antiheroic, murderous quest after his family was killed, and so he has no loved ones who might be jeopardized by a villain seeking revenge on him (unlike Batman, who maintains familial relations with Alfred, Robin, or other key figures in his life). These figures (cat burglars and killers) pose a different challenge to the norms of the classic superhero than the ones I present later in this chapter.

15. This convention provides another structural difficulty for a mainstream film trying to adapt a superhero comic. Classical Hollywood films tend to present a dual plotline in which the protagonist (either an official or outlaw hero) pursues both an action-oriented and a romance-oriented goal. The classic superhero comic is organized as a different split between the official and outlaw hero combined into one figure. Hollywood has not developed narrative patterns for telling such stories, and thus the tendency to begin superhero films with the character’s origin story, which emphasizes that the hero began as a person without the dual identity, thus making the identity split, is a result of a cataclysmic event that happens to a unified character. This is a story that Hollywood is much more equipped to tell, instead of a story about a character that begins divided. Mainstream filmmaking often compounds the difficulty by emphasizing the romance plotlines in superhero films, which makes sense given its narrative norms but which can complicate the storytelling of a superhero adaptation even more.

16. Also it is significant that the first major superhero character to relinquish her secret identity is a woman (Wonder Woman), and she does so at the moment when she explicitly puts herself in an institutional context. The revamping of the Wonder Woman character in 1987 placed Diana Prince as ambassador from Amazonia to the United Nations in a role that acknowledged her identities.

17. In the wake of the events of September 11, several comics explicitly pointed to the different models of heroism represented by superheroes and by firemen. See, for example, DC Comics’ 9–11: The World’s Finest Comic Book Artists and Writers Tell Stories to Remember (2002).

18. “Like Marvels, Astro City attempts to avoid anxiety [of influence] by shifting perspective. It often acts as a negative of traditional superhero stories, reversing big and little moments, showing in one panel something that traditionally would take a whole issue, like major battles, and spending time on small moments, like waking up and putting on a costume one leg at a time” (Klock 2002, 88).