Transcript – Policy 360 Ep. 145 Politics of the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Spiderman [00:00:03] Ever since I got bit by that spider, I only had one week where my life has felt normal. That was when you found out.

Judith Kelly [00:00:18] And that, of course, is the voice of one of the best-known superheroes of all time, the immortal Spiderman. Spiderman is part of an entire universe of characters, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or MCU. My guest today say that universe is the most widely viewed fictional narrative in the history of cinema. Disney purchased Marvel Entertainment in 2009 for $4 billion, and since then, the movies and TV shows have rolled out. There are just so many characters. Think Captain America, Iron Man, X-Men, Thor, The Hulk. The Fantastic Four. Ant-Man. Wolverine. Black Panther. The Avengers. In recent years, there have been more than 30 movies with storylines that are often intertwined. So why are we talking about this in Policy 360? Well, my next guest edited a book, The Politics of Marvel Cinematic Universe, that includes contributions from more than 25 scholars and they argue that intentionally or not, the Marvel Cinematic Universe sends fans scores of messages about government, public policy, and society. And I have been looking forward to this conversation ever since I heard about the book. I am Judith Kelly, Dean of the Stanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, and Lilly Goren is professor of political science at Carroll University. Welcome, Lily.

Lilly Goren [00:01:41] Thank you for having me today.

Judith Kelly [00:01:43] And Nick Carnes is professor of public policy here at Duke. Welcome, Nick.

Nicholas Carnes [00:01:46] Thank you.

Judith Kelly [00:01:47] Nick, how many of these movies have you seen?

Nicholas Carnes [00:01:50] Every single one. Usually, about three or four times.

Judith Kelly [00:01:53] And you counted that as work?

Nicholas Carnes [00:01:55] No, that was what I was doing on my own time.

Judith Kelly [00:01:57] That was the fun part. Lilly, how many of them have you seen?

Lilly Goren [00:01:59] I think I have seen all the movies that were in phases one through three, and I counted it as work when I went back to watch the films that I hadn't seen already because we were working on this book.

Judith Kelly [00:02:14] And what's your favorite?

Lilly Goren [00:02:15] Oh, Thor Ragnarok.

Judith Kelly [00:02:17] Thor Ragnarok.

Lilly Goren [00:02:19] Yes.

Judith Kelly [00:02:19] So that is actually Scandinavian mythology.

Lilly Goren [00:02:22] It is.

Judith Kelly [00:02:23] Mm hmm. I know that much. Nick, what's your favorite?

Nicholas Carnes [00:02:26] I'll say Guardians of the Galaxy Volume two.

Judith Kelly [00:02:29] Okay. Volume two.

Nicholas Carnes [00:02:31] Volume two, The sequel.

Judith Kelly [00:02:32] Ha, ha. Is it a rare case where the sequel is better than the original?

Nicholas Carnes [00:02:37] It was a tough-It was a tough competition between the two. But I think the sequel is better.

Judith Kelly [00:02:42] Okay. Well, the one thing I have done is put my my child in a Spiderman Halloween costume. So that's about as. That's my closest interaction with this universe. So how did you know, first that you share this interest in Marvel?

Lilly Goren [00:02:57] We found each other through Twitter conversation that happened as Avengers Endgame was coming out and came out. And there was a particular scene where there are a number of female characters who are all arrayed, and it's really sort of problematic in that it's kind of tokenizing these female characters.

Movie Scene - Woman 1 [00:03:21] I don't know how you are going to get through all of that.

Movie Scene - Woman 2 [00:03:22] Don't worry.

Movie Scene - Woman 3 [00:03:27] She's got help.

Lilly Goren [00:03:29] And there was a lot of conversation about that at the same time that the movie made over $1,000,000,000 in five days. That is a lot of money for any intellectual property.

Judith Kelly [00:03:40] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:03:40] And and particularly for something like a superhero movie.

Judith Kelly [00:03:44] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:03:46] And so we have these intertwined Twitter threads that were discussing these two aspects, and they were with political scientists. And people were kind of saying, who wants to write a book about the politics of the Marvel Cinematic Universe? And in I jumped.

Judith Kelly [00:04:02] Yes.

Lilly Goren [00:04:03] And in Nick jumped. And here we are with the politics of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, published in 2022 by University Press of Kansas.

Judith Kelly [00:04:12] Well, thanks. That's a great-that's a great explanation, Lilly. So the political messages and the characters, as you mentioned in this case, are female. Tokenizing in the Marvel Universe are often really overt. So describe that for us a little bit more.

Lilly Goren [00:04:25] The characters in most superhero narratives, be they marvel or otherwise.

Judith Kelly [00:04:30] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:04:31] Are often, you know, sort of obviously bigger than life and have these superpowers. Or if they don't have superpowers, they have created technology that gives them capacities that most humans don't have, like Batman flying or Iron Man being able to also fly. And so-

Judith Kelly [00:04:51] Flying altogether is a big thing.

Lilly Goren [00:04:53] It is a big thing. But also being super strong.

Judith Kelly [00:04:55] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:04:56] And training and having capacities in that regard. And so these characters do come out of the comics where they were drawn to have these kinds of powers and look, you know, very buff and strong and have amazing capacity to punch Hitler in the face. You have this sort of translation of those images from the comic books themselves to tell movies and televisions at this point.

Judith Kelly [00:05:21] So in some ways, these political messages are really overt. Right. And they're, as you say, they're larger than life. You know, and and not necessarily subtle. But the book, Nick, argues that more often, the politics of the Marvel universe can be more subtle.

Nicholas Carnes [00:05:40] I think that's right. So sometimes you get a very frank discussion of ... whether government, you know, who governs the superhumans. So you'll have Captain America Civil War, where we're really talking about, you know, something like civil military relations almost. But then you'll have, I think, lots of political messages that are happening in the background that people might not necessarily recognize as political.

Judith Kelly [00:06:05] Give me-give me an example of that.

Nicholas Carnes [00:06:06] So one example is, up to now, there have been almost no LGBTQ characters in 31 films, just a really small number.

Judith Kelly [00:06:14] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:06:15] And that's a political message. That's a, you know, that's a message about belonging and representation. And, you know, you might not watch these films and think there's a statement being made, but that's what we're trying to explore in the book, are not just the times when the characters are talking about politics, but the messages people are getting about society, about politics, about belonging. In the background as they're consuming this, you know, entertainment product, I would say it almost looks like broadcast television in the sense that they're not going for a niche audience. They're not trying to, you know, just, you know, be a small cable channel that serves one particular type of person.

Judith Kelly [00:06:56] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:06:56] They're more like a broadcast channel during the heyday of three networks where they're really trying to create something that will not offend anyone sensibilities and will, you know, sort of avoid any direct political conflict. But as a result, they often end up completely avoiding subjects and avoiding representation. And so I think the MCU to some people does look like it's behind, you know, movies that are trying to reach a smaller audience because when you're trying to make $1,000,000,000 every time, often you're avoiding politically sensitive issues.

Judith Kelly [00:07:29] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:07:29] But that ends up, you know, that those kinds of compromises can sometimes leave everybody unhappy.

Judith Kelly [00:07:34] Okay. So in some ways, you're saying here that things like leaving out certain types of issues or not, portraying certain type of characters is a message in itself and is, I guess, a type of politics. But that leads me to ask, how are you really defining really politics in this book?

Lilly Goren [00:07:57] Well, I would go with an Aristotelian definition of politics, as, you know, sort of encompassing the interactions of humans in society. And so that that is as broad as sort of concept of politics as, you know, you sort of get to. And it's not-it's not, as I always say in my political theory classes, we're not talking about elections and voters. We're talking about sort of these concepts of where is power? How is power used? Who has power? Who doesn't have power? How are humans interacting with one another in kinds, in interpersonal ways, as well as societal ways and cultures? And so I read Marvel cinematic texts, movies, and films the same way I read Shakespeare or Plato or Machiavelli as texts. And what are they teaching us on many levels? I mean, we do have overt discussion of, say, civil military relations or treaty capacities.

Judith Kelly [00:08:58] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:09:00] At the same time that you have so many different messages that are not necessarily altogether coherent with regard to, like, women with power. And so you have superhero heroized women in the MCU who came late to the party.

Judith Kelly [00:09:18] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:09:19] And as I've talked about with Nick, a lot of their origin stories are the fact that they don't know what power they have. Which is, again, a kind of interesting narrative to apply to people who have superpowers.

Judith Kelly [00:09:31] You actually let me answer my next question, which I wanted to ask about, which was the ascendancy of female characters in this universe. Can you give an example and talk a little bit more about how the cinematic universe has changed with regard to gender and roles, gender roles?

Lilly Goren [00:09:49] Yeah, I mean, I think in this regard we also have to think about the MCU as the films and television under Disney, but also at the same time, you had a number of shows that were developed by Marvel with Netflix, where you had very interesting and much more complex, I would say, interactions with female characters like Jessica Jones in particular. Right. But aside from Jessica Jones in the Marvel Netflix, what you did, you had a lot-a long string of sort of these very traditional male superheroes in Iron Man and Captain America. And to some degree, there was a sort of fan pushback by at least some quarters that, you know, where where are the ladies? And what Marvel did was an interesting sort of structural-linear, structural sort of fix was to create Captain Marvel. But in order to create Captain Marvel, to integrate into the Avengers, the time sequence of Captain Marvel had to take place in 1990.

Movie Scene - Man's voice [00:10:53] Excuse me, miss. You know anything about a lady blowing a hole through the roof of that blockbuster over there? Witness says she was dressed for laser tag.

Movie Scene - Woman's voice [00:11:03] Oh Yeah, I think she went that way.

Lilly Goren [00:11:06] And so Marvel has the capacity because of its multiverse structure and non-linearity that it can play with, in these intellectual properties, to actually sort of retrofit some things. And so they have introduced some of these characters. But I would argue that female characters that have been introduced in phases one through three and into phase four are again not presented in the same way that the male superheroes are, that they do come to their powers, but in fact, somebody else has to teach them things that they don't know about their powers, whereas the male superheroes oftentimes have their foibles.

Judith Kelly [00:11:46] I see.

Lilly Goren [00:11:47] But we see them sort of coming to understand how their powers work. But there aren't whole missing sections in their knowledge about their powers.

Judith Kelly [00:11:56] I see. So you, do you still is-so in your assessment, is the female the set of female characters and superheroes, are they still leaving something missing?

Lilly Goren [00:12:08] Yes. Yeah, I think so.

Judith Kelly [00:12:09] Yeah.

Lilly Goren [00:12:10] In my analysis of, you know, sort of Captain Marvel's Origin story.

Judith Kelly [00:12:14] Right

Lilly Goren [00:12:15] Or She-Hulk origin story, that they actually are sort of operating with one hand tied behind their back with regard to their powers, because there are things that they don't know.

Judith Kelly [00:12:24] RIght.

Lilly Goren [00:12:24] That they sort of learn along the way. Whereas Captain America learned those things as he was getting to know what his powers were.

Judith Kelly [00:12:31] Right. So even in making these gender advances, so to speak, within this universe, there still is some grounds to be gained here.

Lilly Goren [00:12:41] Yeah.

Judith Kelly [00:12:41] And still some subtle messages, Nick maybe, that is being sent by telling different types of origin stories about different gendered heroes.

Nicholas Carnes [00:12:54] I think that's right. In, you know, political science, we tend to often focus on like what are the messages being sent in, you know, explicitly political news.

Judith Kelly [00:13:04] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:13:04] Or explicitly political, you know, even TV shows.

Judith Kelly [00:13:07] Yeah.

Nicholas Carnes [00:13:07] There's not as much research on, at least there's not as much quantitative research on the political content of entertainment fiction.

Judith Kelly [00:13:14] Right. Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:13:16] There have been some really excellent recent articles by people like Eunji Kim, you know, dissecting how watching a certain kind of TV show can that it's not about politics can actually impact your views about, you know, real world political issues.

Judith Kelly [00:13:31] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:13:31] And I think that's very much the sort of motivation for a lot of the work in this, including the chapter I wrote, where I look at depictions of the US government and say, you know, what you see in fiction can leave an important imprint on the way you then go out and think about, you know, the non-fictional political world.

Judith Kelly [00:13:49] Absolutely.

Nicholas Carnes [00:13:49] ...That you inhabit as a citizen.

Judith Kelly [00:13:51] All right. So last time I checked, President Biden could not fly. And, you know, that makes me wonder about these superheroes. Are they designed to solve problems that government can't solve or yeah.

Nicholas Carnes [00:14:12] That's one of the longstanding criticisms of superhero fiction as a genre is it sort of inherently places government in a diminished or even cynical role?

Movie Scene - Man's voice [00:14:23] Mr. Secretary. You've got some nerve. I'll give you that.

Movie Scene - Woman 3 [00:14:33] You could use some of that right now.

Movie Scene - Man's voice [00:14:35] The world's on fire. And you think all is forgiven.

[00:14:41] Earth just lost your best defender, so we're here to fight.

Nicholas Carnes [00:14:46] If the government could solve the problem, we wouldn't really need it.

Judith Kelly [00:14:50] The world is coming to an end. We need a superhero. Right.

Judith Kelly [00:14:52] Right, right.

Judith Kelly [00:14:53] Climate change. Have they made one about climate change and the superhero of saving us? We need that-

Lilly Goren [00:14:59] So some of the Spider-Man work and one of our authors was sort of paying attention to the environmental messages that are coming through Spider-Man movies.

Judith Kelly [00:15:07] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:15:07] But I would-I would say that the global climate change is one of these problems where we kind of keep thinking about, like, what are the superhero ways we can solve.

Judith Kelly [00:15:16] Right

Lilly Goren [00:15:16] ..this problem? That's not based in necessarily reality.

Judith Kelly [00:15:19] Right. Right. Yeah.

Nicholas Carnes [00:15:21] And this gets to something I've been thinking a lot about recently, which is that, you know, superhero fiction has this limitation. It's hard to imagine a superhero fixing climate change.

Judith Kelly [00:15:30] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:15:31] And it's not doesn't sound to me like we would really want that. We wouldn't want people to just sit around and wait for a superhero to come solve a big structural problem.

Judith Kelly [00:15:41] Right

Nicholas Carnes [00:15:41] Like climate change. One thing that I'm hoping to pay attention to in the future, though, is whether superhero fiction can if it doesn't give people a roadmap for civic engagement, at least

give people inspiring narratives that they can draw on when they do go out and try to tackle insurmountable problems. So superhero fiction might not give you a good model of government.

Judith Kelly [00:16:00] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:16:00] Or you know how to organize collectively, but it might inspire people facing big, you know, terrifying, seemingly impossible odds by giving them narratives that they can draw on of, you know, individuals who face something big and seemingly impossible.

Judith Kelly [00:16:17] I see. Yeah. How are the superheroes sort of different from vigilantes?

Lilly Goren [00:16:22] They're not. No, they're not. I don't think so.

Nicholas Carnes [00:16:27] It's-it's, you know, it's hard to see a precise difference. You know, we could say, well, superheroes have a code. Superheroes interact with government. But, you know, I mean, I, I think that's an I mean, that's an ongoing conversation within superhero fiction about superhero fiction and a potentially, you know, it's a potentially troubling implication of superhero fiction. And, you know, do people watch these and take away, oh, I should go take the law into my own hands? You know, One would hope not.

Judith Kelly [00:16:57] How big is this? I get the sense that there's, like this cult community that sits out there and thinks about politics and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. How big is this community?

Lilly Goren [00:17:06] I don't know how big the community is that thinks about politics in the MCU. But I do think that that people do think about where so much superhero narrative has come into our vocabulary and our thinking. And we see this reference by politicians too.

Judith Kelly [00:17:25] Can you give an example?

Lilly Goren [00:17:26] Well, you have, you know, you have politicians periodically calling on somebody like Jack Bauer to solve the problems because Jack Bauer on 24 seemingly always got the terrorists. And so there is an integration of.

Judith Kelly [00:17:40] I see.

Lilly Goren [00:17:40] These kind of capacities that we see, you know, in big relief.

Judith Kelly [00:17:45] Right

Lilly Goren [00:17:46] And either, you know, superhero movies or some fantasy movies that that is often like, okay, well, that's the kind of thing that we need. We need Spider-Man to save the day.

Judith Kelly [00:17:59] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:18:00] And and so that, again, goes to your earlier question about, like, how does the populace in a democratic republic think about how to solve problems? If you can think about, you know, calling on somebody extraordinary, then also you look to the people who you want to be leading you as they have to be extraordinary.

Judith Kelly [00:18:22] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:18:23] So then we end up, you know, sort of thinking about, like all the capacities as somebody who studies the presidency, all the capacities that the president is supposed to have.

Judith Kelly [00:18:31] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:18:31] And do. And this role becomes one that is super heroic and impossible to do.

Judith Kelly [00:18:35] And unattainable. Right. Yeah. Yeah. All right. I want to talk a little bit about your individual chapters. So, Nick, let me turn first to you. So your chapter is about how the U.S. government is portrayed in the Marvel Universe. So what did you what did you research and what did you find?

Nicholas Carnes [00:18:52] So I was interested in this old critique that says superhero fiction always has, you know, a very cynical take on government because it's too weak to solve the problem. Or it may be government is the problem, it's corrupt. And so my question was, is that happening in these extremely popular movies, the MCU? And so I worked with three research assistants, and I had them actually record in the first 23 films, every single scene where there was a depiction of the U.S. government on the screen.

Judith Kelly [00:19:21] And how did you define U.S. government was like, would that include the post office?

Nicholas Carnes [00:19:24] So I would include any government official or bureaucrat, but it wouldn't count the protagonist. So we don't count every time Captain America is on the screen, because then it would be the entire movie Captain America. So, you know, assuming the audience experiences the film from the protagonist point of view.

Judith Kelly [00:19:38] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:19:38] They're seeing government around them. What are they seeing? Something weak and incompetent.

Judith Kelly [00:19:42] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:19:42] Something corrupt and evil. And is it promoting this kind of cynical view of government? And what I actually found is that more often the depictions were positive. So there were some instances where, you know, the government is trying to develop an unethical super soldier serum by chasing down poor Bruce Banner. But more often, government is sometimes a misguided but capable adversary.

Judith Kelly [00:20:06] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:20:07] So, you know, government misunderstands the hero's intentions and initially gets in their way, but is quite capable. And other times, government is a capable ally to the protagonists. And so you often see situations where government officials are working alongside superpowered individuals to save the day.

Judith Kelly [00:20:22] So it's like good guys working with good guys.

Nicholas Carnes [00:20:24] It's good guys working with good guys. It's not monolithic. It's not government propaganda. It's not, you know, government every time. But neither is it sort of reductionist and simplistic and cynical. And so I walked away saying this is a pretty nuanced and pretty complicated depiction of U.S. government and sort of avoids a lot of the big pitfalls that we might be worried about when we say, okay, this is being viewed by untold millions of people, not just in the U.S., but all around the world, we wouldn't want a really reductionist or really propaganda style depiction. And we don't get those. We get a bunch of different directors and writers telling stories, and on balance, you know, more often positive than negative when governments on the screen. So I conclude by saying government's not always the good guy, not always the bad guy, but it's more often on the side of the heroes.

Judith Kelly [00:21:12] Do you have a US government scene that you just like, love to, just tickles you. You're like, Oh my God, this is like, this is the best.

Nicholas Carnes [00:21:21] Well, you know, I mean, the one I often point to is Phil Coulson, who's a character. He works for this government agency. At first, he thinks Thor is a bad guy and he is working against thwarting Thor. But he realizes belatedly, oh, I was wrong. And then he later is instrumental in helping The Avengers save New York City, even going so far as to on screen, we think, lay down his life to save the heroes.

Movie Scene - Man's voice [00:21:44] Move away, please. You like this? We started working on the prototype after you sent a destroyer. Even I don't know what it does. Want to find out (screams).

Nicholas Carnes [00:22:08] And so I say that's actually a pretty good model. That's a good summary for how the MCU treats the government. Sometimes it's in the way, but it's doing-it's behaving virtuously.

Judith Kelly [00:22:17] Yeah.

Nicholas Carnes [00:22:17] Other times, it's helping heroes, even self-sacrificing. It's not necessarily like a fun or happy scene, but I think it's one that serves as a useful encapsulation of the larger trends that I was trying to measure when I sent my research assistants out to document every single scene and timestamp and character and positive or negative depiction.

Judith Kelly [00:22:38] I could just I could just see, you know. So, Peter, what are you doing for your summer research internship? I am, oh, I'm watching a marvel movies. Well, shouldn't you be getting back to working on your interest? No, no, this is my internship.

Nicholas Carnes [00:22:54] The students who did this work, I will say, you know, it sounds like a lot of fun, but when I was checking their coding, you have to pause, you know, collect the data, fill in all the categories. Unpause, pause again. It stops being really fun and it starts actually looking more like traditional content analysis, which is something that's useful to understand. So I will say to anyone who's concerned that we had too much fun on this, it was actually deeply tedious.

[00:23:18] Okay. I'm greatly relieved to hear that. Lily, you focused on nostalgia. So how does nostalgia connect to politics? And I'm just-help me understand what your chapter was about and what your site was driving it.

Lilly Goren [00:23:31] My chapter was sort of interweaving this sort of understanding of the role of nostalgia in politics and also nationalism, because nationalism is often tied into nostalgic yearning for a previous time. And so the superhero story tends to be fundamentally nostalgic in that some big baddie has shown up on the scene and made things bad.

Judith Kelly [00:23:57] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:23:57] And the superhero then has to get called in to essentially return to the status quo before the bad person arrived and messed everything up.

Movie Scene - Woman 3 [00:24:07] I'm Odin's firstborn, the rightful heir, the savior of Asgard. And you're nothing.

Lilly Goren [00:24:16] So that the narrative arc of many superhero films are fundamentally structured as a nostalgic arc to take the people back to the time before it got all messed up. But at the same time, oftentimes those arcs leave, leave the people or leave the place, be it Asgard or the United States or Segovia in someplace that is not solved a problem.

Judith Kelly [00:24:40] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:24:40] That maybe the big baddie was actually trying to solve in a corrupt way, or was became clear once the bad person arrived on the scene. So there isn't necessarily progress that transpires, but it's sort of just a return to the status quo. Right. And so in both those cases, you have a kind of yearning for a, you know, a sort of time before that usually your society, or your place, and your citizenry want back. And so there is this sort of nostalgic component, and there's this nationalistic component which makes a lot of superheroes kind of fundamentally conservative as a sort of arc and understanding of of that narrative construction. And, you know, as I talk about, you know, it's like in Thor Ragnarok, as you asked me, one of my favorite films in the genre that, you know, it's making Asgard great again. And so it is often sort of taking that tagline from President Trump.

Judith Kelly [00:25:44] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:25:45] And applying it to each sort of situation where you have somebody who's come along and messed up your society, right?

Judith Kelly [00:25:52] Is that in itself a political message?

Lilly Goren [00:25:55] I would think so, because, you know, it goes back to suggesting that the status quo was just fine.

Judith Kelly [00:26:00] Right.

Lilly Goren [00:26:00] And that's something we want to return to as opposed to necessarily moving forward into a different direction.

Judith Kelly [00:26:05] Right. So I guess that that makes me think about the fact that there are so many different movies and different writers, different directors, people who participate to the content of these different movies, is there even a cohesive narrative? Is there a thread? Is there a viewpoint that binds these different authors together? Or does the Marvel Universe itself have sort of a political throughline? Or is it just whatever works in each movie? Or what do you think?

Nicholas Carnes [00:26:39] I think one of the things that surprised me when we were putting this together was how sort of not monolithic, how diverse the storytelling is across the different films that make up this shared fictional story. So all the films are interconnected.

Judith Kelly [00:26:52] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:26:52] And now the Disney Plus shows are all interconnected. They're all taking place in the same fictional universe, but the styles are quite different. So you've got comedy, heist movies and traditional action movies, spy thrillers. And the political orientations are different. They evolve over time. As you know, Lili was mentioning, you know, when we first meet the character Black Widow, she is, you know, portrayed in this very sexualized way. By the time we reach sort of the end of the storytelling, the film Black Widow, she has her own film and she has a character and a background and depth.

Movie Scene - Woman 3 [00:27:28] My mom and Gaia sister. I should have come back for you.

Movie Scene - Man's voice [00:27:33] You don't say that. It's ok.

Movie Scene - Man's voice [00:27:36] It was real to me to.

Nicholas Carnes [00:27:40] And it's no longer just like kind of skimpy outfits. And so even within the same character in the franchise, you see diversity evolution.

Judith Kelly [00:27:50] All right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:27:50] Hopefully progress on some fronts. And so, I mean, the stories have big through lines, big arcs. They're organized into big phases, which are then organized into even bigger groups. But I think one of the things that's appealing about it is that the political meant that there's not a single political message that's being pushed forward in every single film.

Judith Kelly [00:28:11] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:28:11] And they're tackling all sorts of different issues. And to come back to the book, I think part of our motivation for assembling instead of, you know, Lily and I writing one book about the politics of the MCU.

Judith Kelly [00:28:21] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:28:21] I would've been hopeless because there are so many films and we would need expertise on so many different subjects.

Judith Kelly [00:28:26] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:28:26] And so this was part of our motivation for pulling together all.

Judith Kelly [00:28:29] These different contributors.

Nicholas Carnes [00:28:31] Thirty political scientists and political theorists and scholars of popular culture communications and getting all of this big group together and say it's going to take all of these different perspectives to appreciate and properly analyze the many different political threads.

Judith Kelly [00:28:47] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:28:47] In this massive cinematic undertaking.

Judith Kelly [00:28:50] Right. So speaking of all the different contributors you had, if some of our listeners out there and they're thinking about going and picking up the Politics of the Marvel Cinematic Universe from their local bookstore or from online, and was there a particular chapter-what do you each have a chapter that somebody wrote, not necessarily that's your favorite, but that made you think that made you pause or reconsider something.

Nicholas Carnes [00:29:19] There was one in particular that was really personally important to me. It was by Daniel Hanley and it's called Avengers Assemblage, and it's about the concept of family assemblages, which is a concept in political theory I had never been exposed to before. And it's important to me first, because part of the goal of this book is to do exactly that use fiction to teach people important concepts in political theory and political science. So as it was working on me, and it was also important to me because the idea of a family assemblage is that family means something quite different from your biological relatives.

Judith Kelly [00:29:51] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:29:51] It's a much more expansive. It includes found families, it includes pets. Pets are our family. It even includes potentially places or experiences that are really a part of what makes a family what it is.

Movie Scene - Woman 3 [00:30:03] He's our friend.

Movie Scene - Woman 3 [00:30:03] Oh, any of you do is yell at each other. You are not friends.

Movie Scene - Man's voice [00:30:07] You're right. We're family. We leave no one behind.

Nicholas Carnes [00:30:14] And this is really dear to me as you know. My household is, you know, we are bio adoptive foster in the case of my step parents. And so this-this notion of family assemblage is like was both educational to me as a political scholar and politics and was also like deeply touching.

Judith Kelly [00:30:32] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:30:33] To read. I mean, that was one of the chapters that were I literally had tears in my eyes as I was like doing the work of an editor, you know, marking this chapter.

Judith Kelly [00:30:40] Yeah.

Nicholas Carnes [00:30:40] And so I don't have a favorite. They're all really, really special.

Judith Kelly [00:30:45] Right.

Nicholas Carnes [00:30:45] But I want to mention that one because that was one that hit me not just intellectually, but emotionally and had a big impact on me.

Judith Kelly [00:30:52] Lilly, did you have any chapter that stood out to you in any particular way?

Lilly Goren [00:30:55] One of the chapters that I really, really liked as the all the jobs that are coming in is the same. Like I don't want to pick one, but the second chapter in the book by Heather Poole and Allison Rank, which takes Charles Mill's understanding of the racial contract and sort of applies that to Wakanda as as a kind of understanding of what could have been. I've actually integrated that into my political theory class. And my students find it really useful to sort of think about the MCU and Mills racial contract and then see it in these films that they understand. And after we've been reading, you know, The Republic and Machiavelli and Hobbs, they're like, Oh, my gosh, I get this now? And, and I, and I think that Allison and Heather just did such a great job of really sort of delineating how Wakanda itself is a character in our understanding of what kinda as a place and, and what it represents in terms of its Afrofuturism and how that sort of fits into thinking about sort of the racial contract and the social contract.

Movie Scene - Man's voice [00:32:04] We mourn the loss of our King, but do not think for a second that Wakanda has lost her ability to protect our resources. We are aware of the ongoing efforts by some to find vibranium outside of Wakanda and wish the best of luck.

Lilly Goren [00:32:27] I really found that chapter when I first read it. It was just like. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Judith Kelly [00:32:33] Well, obviously, some of our listeners out there care about the Marvel Cinematic Universe, otherwise they wouldn't be still listening. They would have tuned in and they wouldn't still be listening at this point. So obviously, there are people out there that care about the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but why should they care about the politics of it? Why does this matter?

Nicholas Carnes [00:32:52] I think for those audiences, we're trying to show them a different perspective on something that they already like. And, you know, I'm shameless in saying this book is, in a way, an advertisement for the fields of political science and political theory. We want to invite people who love the MCU, love Marvel characters. We want to invite them to see all the interesting political science perspectives that are right beneath the surface of their favorite shows and movies. Just as we want to introduce, you know, people who are interested in political science, who haven't seen the films to this really significant, socially important fictional universe.

Judith Kelly [00:33:29] Any last thoughts on that?

Lilly Goren [00:33:30] And also that, you know, it's it's everywhere. So it's really hard, even if you haven't seen the movie. As you said, you dressed your child up as Spider-Man. Right. My children had underwear that had the the Marvel characters on it. It's really hard to avoid this corporate behemoth. And so that's one of the things that we interrogate a bit in the course of the of the book is, you know, sort of how do we think about something that can generate $5 billion in five days? That-that's something that maybe we should pay a little bit of attention to.

Judith Kelly [00:34:07] Right. For sure. Well, thank you so much, both of you, for joining me today. Lilly Cohen is chair of the History, Political Science and Religious Studies Department at Carroll University.

Lilly Goren [00:34:19] Thank you for having me.

Judith Kelly [00:34:21] Thank you for coming. Nick Carnes is a professor of public policy and political science at the Sanford School of Public Policy here at Duke.

Nicholas Carnes [00:34:28] Thanks, as always. You do it.

Nicholas Carnes [00:34:29] Their book is called The Politics of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. And it's just out from the University Press of Kansas. And we'll have a link on our website policy 360 dot org. I will be soon back with another conversation. I'm Judith Kelly.