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**Superman without Borders:  
The Controversial Renunciation of US-  
Citizenship and the Political  
Implications on it under the Perspective  
of the Narrative**

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**Superman without Borders:  
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Political Implications on it under the Perspective of the  
Narrative<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This paper presents an analysis of the comic book story written by David Goyer and published in the commemorative edition of Action Comics # 900, which has as main topic Superman's renunciation of the U.S. citizenship. Through an exploratory and bibliographical review, the study aims to examine the consequences of this renunciation under the perspective of superhero narratives and his broad mythology and the consequences in the fictional community which the character has a relationship of belonging to and in the *fandom* as well. Questioning the meaning of Superman's renunciation leads into two directions: a formal or discursive disruption and a substantial disruption. The story reflects a critique to the way the U.S. are establishing international relations as well as it expresses the U.S. ideological presence and power over seas, when we take Joseph Nye Jr.'s idea on *Soft Power* as background. The study indicates that there is a critique to the U.S. government inside the story, which can be understood as a critique to the fatherland, to the citizenship, to the American Way of Life.

**Keywords:** Citizenship, Politics, Comic Book Stories, superhero characters. Action Comics # 900.

**Corresponding Author:**

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<sup>1</sup>The original version of this text was written with Ph.D. Student Kathlen Luana de Oliveira and presented in the National Meeting of Studies on Comics and Pop Culture (Encontro Nacional de Estudos sobre Quadrinhos e Cultura Pop), in the city of Recife, Brazil, in 2011.

## **Introduction**

At the end of April 2011, *Action Comics #900 Commemorative Edition* hits the Comic Shops and causes a national uproar. With many special guests, among them the director of *Superman – The Movie*, 1978, Richard Donner, the issue features 96 pages and includes unique stories honoring the icon and all Superman mythology to along the 900 editions. These stories are not necessarily part of Superman’s official chronology. They are an attempt to explore different perspectives of the character. One of these stories—a 9-pages story written by David Goyer—evoked a cross-world debate about the character because of the theme it addressed.

In David Goyer’s story, Superman announces his resignation to U.S. citizenship. According to Hector Lima, ‘the story stirred patriotic feelings in the U.S. and was explored by *Fox News* through its usual ultraconservative and sensationalist viewpoint. The station claims that Superman is now “anti-American”’ (Lima, 2011). Others have announced the possibility of DC Comics to suffer boycott in sales, and in order to calm fears, the co-publisher Dan Didio made a conciliatory statement published in the *New York Post* (Lima, 2011). In the main page of a Brazilian website on entertainment and pop culture, *Omelete*, several readers posted their comments pros (mostly) and cons or indifference to the event. Regardless the story being considered or not as part of the official mythology of the character, the fact is that it messed with the minds locally and globally. The controversy surrounding the story confirmed the repercussions and the impact that this icon of pop culture has around the world and in the life of each fan of comic books or superheroes. And that cannot go unnoticed. In this sense, the aim of this paper is to present some reflections on the meaning and possible consequences of the resignation of U.S. citizenship within and outside the narrative and mythology of the superhero.

## **International Incident**

The story written by David Goyer starts with a meeting with Superman and the President’s National Security advisor. The meeting is marked by an environment fulfilled by Advisor’s lack of trust (or of U.S. government itself) due to some recent actions of Superman, which had wide media coverage. In fact, the reason for the meeting is just to hear the explanation of Superman about his attitudes. When they meet, Superman soon realizes the presence of snipers hidden in strategic points with kryptonite bullets, which indicates the air of distrust of government in relation to him. Superman asks for an explanation of such distrust, and the advisor explains,

Bottom line? We don’t know what to think. We’re hoping you haven’t gone rogue. We’re hoping you can put our minds at ease. So

I'm going to ask you one more time: What, in God's name, did you think you were doing flying into Tehran? (Goyer et al, 2011, 72)

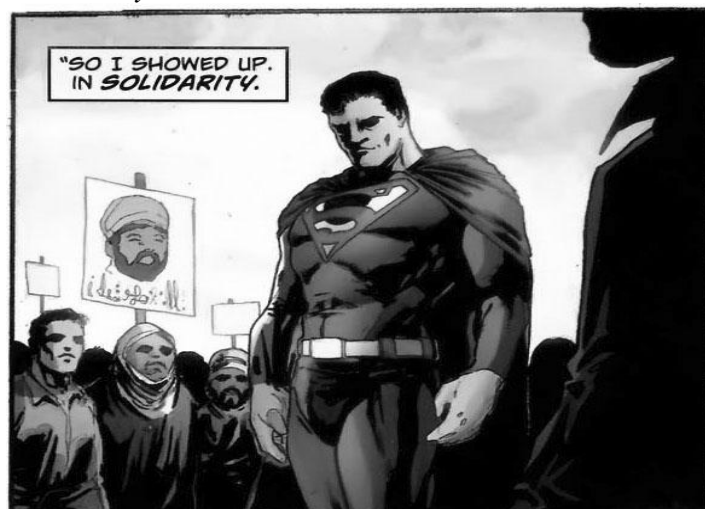
**Figure 1.** *The National Security Advisor of President inquires Superman*



Then Superman answers the question, while the sequence of events narrated by the superhero emerge in the story.

I follow the news, like I said. And I saw the reports of the Iranian people demonstrating. There'd been violence the week before. Ahmadinejad's regime had overreacted. People had been killed. Some of the demonstration organizers...had been disappearing. Apparently, the protest leaders had been using social media sites to help them organize. And the government had been piggybacking onto those sites, so they knew who to arrest—where they'd be. The Iranian army had been warning the public about engaging in further demonstrations. They said there would be 'harsh repercussions.' But these people—students, shopkeepers, mothers, fathers, children—they were putting their lives on the line despite the warnings. I wanted to let them know that they weren't alone. (Goyer et al, 2011, 73)

**Figure 2.** *Solidarity*



And Superman continues,

As a super-hero, as Metropolis' protector, I've fought just about every threat imaginable: alien invaders, time-traveling despots, rogues with every kind of costume and gimmick you can think of. I'm good when it comes to fighting apocalyptic threats. But the everyday degradations that humans suffer? Dying of thirst? Hunger? People being denied their basic human rights? I've never been very effective at stopping things like that. And I want to be. So I showed up in solidarity. I promised myself I wouldn't directly engage. No matter what happened. It was an act of civil disobedience. Nonviolent resistance. I stayed in Azadi Square for Twenty-four hours. I didn't move. I didn't speak. I just stayed there. In that time, the protestors' ranks grew from an estimated 120,000 people to well over one million. Some of the people threw roses at my feet. Others threw green sashes and flags. The color of their protest. Counter-demonstrators threw Molotov cocktails at me. But the army of the Guardian of the Islamic Revolution never fired a shot. The demonstration began and ended peacefully. Then, after twenty-four hours, I left. But did it do any good? Did the Regime promise to start instituting democratic reforms? No. (Goyer et al, 2011, 74-77)

After this report, the National Security advisor continues to question Superman:

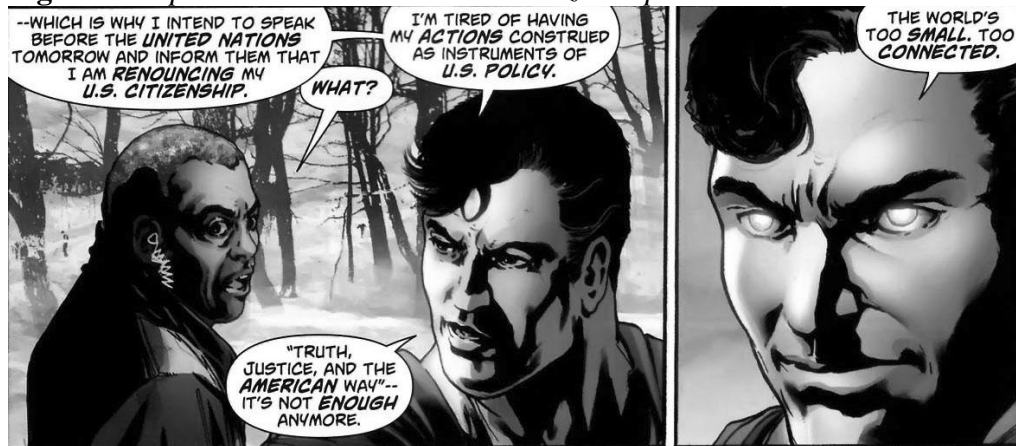
So, what purpose did your showboating served? Your actions have created an international incident. The Iranian government is accusing you of acting on the president's behalf. They're calling your interference an act of war. (Goyer et al, 2011, 77)

Superman recognizes the problems that his interference in the Middle East has caused and, as a result, he decides to advertise before the United Nations that he is renouncing the U.S. citizenship:

- I realize that. And you're right, of course. It was foolish of me, which is why I intend to speak before the United Nations tomorrow and inform them that I am renouncing my U.S. citizenship.
- What?
- I'm tired of having my actions construed as instruments of U.S. policy. The world's too small. Too connected. (Goyer et al, 2011, 77)



**Figure 3.** *Superman renounces his U.S. citizenship*



Before the statement causes any misunderstanding, Superman recalls the President's advisor that he is an alien, born on another planet, that is, he is not a human being. As alien and as a superhero, he cannot get stuck or be associated with a specific country, if he wants to think about the bigger picture of his saving actions. And he ends by saying that his view of the demonstration may not have had a significant effect on a large scale, but there was a change on a small scale:

I looked down and saw something. Two men. A member of the army of the guardian of the Islamic Revolution and a protestor. The protestor was extending a rose to the soldier. I thought the soldier was going to fire, but then he did something unexpected and incredibly brave. (Goyer et al, 2011, p. 78)

**Figure 4.** *Superman sees something unexpected*



### **A Superman without citizenship?**

There is no way of denying that Superman is an icon of American culture in particular and an icon of pop culture as a whole. He is a character known worldwide and is part of the pantheon of super-heroic characters that are part of the imagination of millions (if not even billions) of people around the world, whether implemented by the narratives in comics (its original birthplace) either by stories told by movies, cartoons or even the toys and other licensed products. Thus, there is no way of denying that the stories that affect (or may affect) the future of the character and his mythology cause an uproar among the most devoted fans, especially in his home community, the American society.

The question to be asked here is about the meaning of this particular history. What does this renunciation of the U.S. citizenship mean from the perspective of the character's mythology? Is it indeed a renunciation? What does the story mean? And how could we understand it from the perspective of the superhero's narrative? Besides, we cannot ignore the reaction of people over this story. And, as we seek to analyze the intentionality of the narrative, the interpretations arising from it, which permeate the *fandom*, can be controversial, contradictory, conservative or even relativistic.

The first answer for these questions comes from the story itself. It is Superman who says: 'which is why I intend to speak before the United Nations tomorrow and inform them that I am renouncing my U.S. citizenship'. And Superman himself explains the reason for his decision: 'I'm tired of having my actions construed as instruments of U.S. policy. . . Truth, Justice and the American Way . . . it's not enough anymore' (Goyer et al, 2011, 77). So there is indeed a break with the United States of America spoken by the character: the renunciation of citizenship. And, in the perspective of the story, it should be taken seriously. It's Superman the one who says and it should be assumed seriousness in his words.

Superman renounces his U.S. citizenship alleging that he does not want that his actions would be understood as actions of the U.S. government. He states that he is not a human, but an alien, a being from another planet, and that he did not want to be considered an American citizen. Being a citizen means belonging to a nation, having a homeland and being supported by it; it means having rights and duties towards the society to which we belong. Citizenship implies identification with a particular nation, society. It is not an apparent identification, but rather an identity that assigns membership and guarantees rights. 'To exercise full citizenship is to have civil, political and social rights' (Pinsky, 2003, 9). In the words of Dalmo de Abreu Dallari (1998, 14), 'Citizenship expresses a set of rights that gives a person the opportunity to participate actively in the life and government of their people. Who has no citizenship is marginalized or excluded from social life and decision making, getting a position of inferiority within the social group'.

According to Jaime Pinsky (2003), citizenship is a historical concept and it is therefore subjected to changes in time and space. Rules which ensure citizenship, rights and duties vary from nation to nation, from society to

society, from era to era. Being a citizen, having citizenship is fundamental to belong to a society and enjoy political rights, which distinguishes the one who is stateless. In the words of Kathleen Luana Oliveira, ‘People with no place in the world—no citizenship, no opinion, no profession or no action—reduced to their natural differentiation, their individuality, no longer have relevance to public life, to the human organization’ (Oliveira, 2011, 151).

In Oliveira’s view of Hannah Arendt’s thinking, the great evil of German totalitarianism was precisely the revocation of citizenship, statelessness of the Jews, who were deprived of all rights and subjected to various forms of violence by the State. Naturally, Arendt’s thinking, which is born from her experience of terror, is just questioning ‘the possibility of guaranteeing human rights to stateless, i.e. people with no place in the world and subjected to the worst forms of violence’ (Oliveira, 2011, 131). According to Oliveira, ‘For Arendt, it would be more respectable to be a criminal than a stateless: a criminal possessed rights’ (Oliveira, 2011, 149). Thus, by renouncing U.S. citizenship and reiterating his extraterrestrial origin, Superman is stated as a stateless person, i.e., someone without rights or duties towards the state. Different from the people who have been rendered stateless and subjected to any kind of violence, the mere fact that Superman has his powers makes him difficult to manipulate, imprisoned, tortured (not that we want it). In any case, he is the one who decides, who chooses to become stateless.

When he decides to become a stateless person and to waive any rights and duties he would have as an American citizen, Superman affirms that consequently he does not want nor need more to answer for his actions. If he does not have a legal basis to help him, he also ceases to have a legal basis that enforces him. And the question here is whether it is possible for humanity as a whole to put all their faith in decisions and ethical stances of a being who has power over everyone and who is not subjected to anyone. Is it not that the principle of tyranny? And by declaring himself completely autonomous, who will he represent: the abstracted humanity or himself? Yet set in another perspective, is it possible to think of a being which represents all mankind? How can humanity defend them from Superman when he renounces be part of it? Thus, the fact is that Superman announces a rupture. To clarify and deepen the debate, we will appoint and differentiate two types of ruptures here, which we will call here, for the purpose of this paper, a formal or discursive rupture and a substantial rupture.

#### *The Formal or Discursive Rupture and the Substantial Disruption*

In character’s perspective, the renunciation is a formal or discursive rupture. What super-hero wishes is that his actions would not be recognized as actions of the government of the United States of America or of American people, but as actions of a super-hero who has the task of safeguarding justice and fighting against oppression, violence, natural disasters, etc. A formal rupture, as we prefer to call here, happens in the sense that the character is declared as no longer belonging to a nation. By announcing, firstly, to the president’s national security advisor and by committing to announce it in the

next day to the United Nations, the rupture becomes official. Superman exposes arguments, announced publicly and, politically speaking, there are not mechanisms that may prohibit him of doing so. By contrasting the world of fiction with the “real world”, we can realize that Superman’s attitude becomes ironic, because we can identify in the real world rather a search for the best citizenship or a dual citizenship than a renunciation of one’s own citizenship. Regardless, it is clear that Superman does not want to be subjected to U.S. foreign policy. Anyway the fact is that the renunciation is declared, it is a formal rupture and it concerns more for Americans than for people of other nations, since it may imply a strong critique of U.S. international relations.

In another perspective, what we propose to be understood here as substantial rupture is not likely to happen. That’s because denying citizenship substantially means denying cultural, social and identity characteristics. Superman cannot deny his cultural roots, unless, of course, he would suffer a terrible brainwash. Thus, even if his actions should be considered as his own actions, values, principles of right and wrong, ethics continue to be Americans elements embodied in his personality, unless, of course, Superman himself, some way, could reduce his moral and ethical principles to such a level of abstraction that could be considered universal.

From the perspective of the other characters, especially those who do not know details of Superman personal life, those who see him as a being from another world, who took the Earth as a home and do not imagine even that the superhero can live a normal life, that he has an alter ego, it may be that this waiver is perceived as substantial. In this direction, to place all hopes of the world in a being of which not much is known and which does not have a past or a society becomes really challenging. However, the idea that the world as a whole is the home of Superman and his saving actions are directed to the entire planet can be, at first, quietly accepted (both inside and outside of comics). By the hero archetype and the models of heroism diluted in the popular imagination in general, we can understand that Superman will always seek the common good and defend human rights. However, the issues that are delineated from there are very different: “What if” something goes wrong and Superman, somehow, turns himself against humanity? When proposing to defend the basic rights of every human being, which is the understanding that underpins his actions, since we realize that human rights is a polysemic, polyphonic, controversial concept, especially, when we refers to the most fundamental rights of every human being? His understanding of common good is structured in which thought? How does Superman think of being possible to implement human rights without the support of States, without political support? Is it possible? He will act alongside, above or under any State? We know that human rights is also a mechanism for dialogue, action, and that it does not work perfectly as it should, but is it possible to think of continuity or permanence of human rights without relying on actions or reforms of the State? How does Superman think to act if humans are still subjected to specific laws? Would his action just be executed timely, only in

cases of extreme human degradation? If a war begins among countries, what will he do to restore or implement peace?

From the perspective of the American readers and also the readers over the world, both ruptures can be identified. However, the suspicion arises about a substantial rupture. Especially among readers outside the United States, there are those who understand the resignation of Superman as a formal or discursive rupture, i.e., they are aware that Superman does not cease to be an American, but that he wants freedom of action instead. In this way, this story could be understood as a metaphor for a crisis of the individual in relation against the State, as well as a metaphor for the *civil disobedience*, i.e., when the law should be review to correspond better to the interest of a political community. Anyway, naturally, his actions continue sidewalks in American values though.

Already among American readers, some consider the renunciation of citizenship only as a formal rupture, but there are also those who consider as a substantial rupture, moved by patriotic spirit of the American people unique. The former governor of the U.S. State of Arkansas, Mike Huckabee, in an interview in the channel *Fox News*, on April 30, 2011, argued the following:

Well it is a comic book, but, it is disturbing that Superman who has always been an American icon is now saying I'm not going to be a citizen. I think it's a part of a bigger trend of Americans almost apologizing for being Americans. Here's the point that I think we need to make from a policy standpoint, this idea that if we quit being so American our enemies will love us. What kind of idiocy is that? That's not going to make them love us more. They don't hate us just because we are Americans. They hate us because we represent everything they consider to be horrible, individual freedom, individual responsibility, a sense in which we have liberties that are not confined to somebody else's idea of what we ought to be doing with our every moment of every day.

And, before the official justification and "apology" (or conciliatory statement) DC Comics and Superman's own argument in the narrative, which is to take a global approach to superhero's endless battle, the former governor asserted:

I'm not, and I'll tell you I'm disturbed by this whole globalist trend. You know what I think we ought to be teaching young Americans that they're young Americans. That it means something to be an American...I'm tired of kids of kids coming up with this attitude that there is something horrible about this country. There's something great about this country, and we ought not to make ourselves think that we would be better off if we lost our borders. We lost our identity, and we became some part of a great big stew pot of idiocy where we forgot that we are the greatest country on earth because of who we are, not in spite of it.

We can realize how the action of Superman, a fictional character, stirs the patriotic spirit of the American people. The entire story of Superman has a deep relationship with the messianic ideas and the Manifest Destiny (Reblin, 2008). Perhaps what we might suspect is that there is a correlation between the patriotic spirit and the American character, i.e., a patriotism that is not only confined to the geographical boundaries of U.S. nation, but that relates, discusses and defines ideals with all nations the planet. We can also see how much American patriotism is distinguished from Brazilian patriotism. We can also make a reading from an American who becomes global, without implying an abandonment of his American identity. In this second position lies the criticism of the government and its international relations, the tension between those who agree and those who do not agree with the current situation.

Would not Superman's resignation be a reflection of the current situation that the country is going through? Why break with the American people when there are just expectations of political hope in the United States, from the election of Barack Obama? In this direction, it is curious that the issue of Action Comics # 900 hits stores on the same day (April 28, 2011) in which President Barack Obama lays out his birth certificate to silence the accusations that he was not a U.S. citizen and therefore would not be eligible. That is, coincidentally or not, the same day that President reiterates his American citizenship, Superman renounces his.

One last consideration deserves to be called into question. And the question that accompanies this critical reading of the story by David Goyer is the extent to which this story is not, in fact, a strategy to influence ideologically and culturally other "political bodies". In the apology or conciliatory statement before the stir that the renunciation caused, as well as its repercussions, publishers of DC Comics said that Superman should be seen and understood globally and that he will never cease to be American. This argument finds resonance in the idea of Soft Power, developed by Joseph Nye Jr. (2005).

We cannot deny the presence and the ideological power of the United States. The big Hollywood company reaches many people in many places. As Joseph Nye, there are several types of power. And the United States have a wide spread of its power—Soft Power—in which ideas and brands influence other nations. Nye analyzes the conflicts experienced by post-globalized world, checking the use of various types of power, discussing the role and leadership of the United States especially after eight years of the Bush administration, that is, a difficult period between the relationship between Washington and the international community.

Military power and economic power are both examples of hard command power that can be used to induce others to change their position. Hard power can rest on inducements (carrots) or threats (sticks). But there is also an indirect way to exercise power. A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness. In that

sense, it is just as important to set the agenda in world politics and attract others as it is to force them to change through the threat or use of military or economic weapons. This aspect of power—getting others to want what you want—I call soft power. It co-opts people rather than coerces them. (Nye, 2002, 36)

Following the idea of soft power, it becomes possible to evaluate how the entertainment industry propagates idea(s) of being an American, and how it shapes worldviews. Surely, there is not a monolithic idea, because we can watch movies or read comics that represent the U.S. in a romantic or an epic way, as well as we can realize the opposite, a critical or dubious point of view. In any case, there are only extrinsic speeches that comprise the United States in a dichotomous way, but the very representation of identity can follow the same process.

Thus, the hypothesis that we can identify through the reading of Goyer's story is that Superman is not a super-hero who becomes stateless, but rather a super-hero who becomes cosmopolitan, in the sense that the United States are taken in a global and not merely local perspective. To be cosmopolitan would mean rather the way of being a kind of global American. In this direction, the renunciation would not be a denial of citizenship, but rather its own reassurance, i.e., it means asserting that the "American way of living" can be experienced all over the planet, for good or bad. The greatest symbol of American pop culture extends thus his influence to the entire planet. The blurring of the distinction, in fact, is its expansion.

### **Final Considerations**

At the end of this exploratory journey, it is possible to reiterate that there is rather a formal rupture, but not necessarily a substantial rupture in the renunciation of citizenship announced by Superman. In formal or discursive rupture, Superman expresses dissatisfaction with U.S. foreign policy and decides not to have their actions tied to the U.S. government. If it is possible an extraterrestrial to implement actions of peace and justice above or outside from the political bodies of the nations, without their support, it is a question to be debated and reflected further. What's embedded in the story is a criticism of the government. For the Americans, besides the criticism to the government, the story gives rise also to be understood as a critique to the country, citizenship, at the end, to the American way of living. This criticism could result in disapproval and a possible boycott which might be able to affect the marketing of the issues. It was no accident, therefore, that DC Comics 'apologized' and published a conciliatory statement suggesting a relativization of the interpretation of the narrative. In any case, for non-American readers, the resignation of Superman will not be felt as much as in the United States. After all, the character will still wearing the colors of the flag, his stories will still be written by Americans, published there and imported in Brazil (not that it is

negative) providing criticism, entertainment and reflection and the ability to go up, up and away!

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