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# Heroism and the Anti-hero

*Felipe Fernández-Armesto*

The hero is dead. Long live the anti-hero! 'No more heroes any more', sang the Stranglers in 1977, and it looks as if they were – or have become – right. According to a survey from Farleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind website, most people in the US admitted to seeing 'little in the way of heroism' in 2014, and those who did have heroes tended to nominate personal acquaintances or relatives. Public figures were conspicuous by their absence, unless one counts Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani teenager who was shot by the Taliban, and who, continuing her advocacy of female education, won the Nobel Prize for Peace.<sup>1</sup> The US is probably typical, in this respect, of much of the world or at least of the West. As role models, current celebrities have displaced historical idols. Revisionism exposes giants' feet of clay. Political correctness abjures the breeding grounds of acts of heroism on the battlefield or the barricade. Statues tumble. Collective values dethrone extraordinary individuals. Democratic shibboleths hiss at heroes' fame and hush their trumpets. Heroes succumb to the vengeance of the vanquished and of the formerly voiceless.

The evacuation of the historic pantheon is puzzling. Yet anti-heroes, who, one might think, depend for their own existence on the prevalence of heroes with whom to contrast them, still abound. *Leidschrift* has responded to what we might call 'the age of the anti-hero' by posing a deeper problem for contributors to the current number of the journal: that of why some figures with superficially heroic features, such as courage, historical impact, conspicuous achievement and potentially exemplary roles never made it into the pantheon in the first place.

The present collection of papers has a further, underlying theme: the mutability of cultural memory. Conventional *lieux de la mémoire* typically commemorate individuals who, as role models or targets of collective aspirations, have helped to forge the identities of political communities. We may be able to spot useful generalisations about how heroic reputations form and dissolve if we can understand why – for instance, to cite only the examples chosen by contributors to this volume – William of Orange has been a Dutch hero, while Johan de Witt has not; or why Machiavelli's

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<sup>1</sup> 'Where have all the heroes gone?'. [Http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2015/heroes/](http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2015/heroes/), accessed 20 December 2015.

notoriety in the history of political philosophy contrasts with the fame of other thinkers of hardly superior moral qualities; or why Robert Hooke remained excluded from the Scientific Revolution's Hall of Fame in favour of figures of strictly comparable achievement; or why Hernán Cortés has inspired extremes of adulation and revulsion in rival constituencies in the Hispanophone world; or why Marinus van der Lubbe, who ignited the Reichstag fire, has never been elevated to the status of an early hero of anti-Nazi resistance.

Any such enquiry might founder because of the lack of consensus about what heroes and anti-heroes are. In common parlance – so my students, on whom I rely for such intelligence, tell me – the hero is an exemplar: 'everything I'd like to be' in the words of the song popularised by Bette Midler.<sup>2</sup> For present purposes, however, we have to set individuals' heroes aside and focus either on those adopted by groups as embodiments of distinctive value-sets, ideologies, or identities, or on the archetypes sought in some academic traditions as sources or instantiations of universally admired traits.<sup>3</sup> Anti-hero is a term infrequent in everyday speech and defined in academic literature in flatly contradictory ways: on the one hand, as a protagonist 'conspicuously contrary to an archetypal hero' in some versions, and therefore as evincing unadmired behaviour, such as cowardice, mendacity, and malignity in opposition to the hero's anticipated courage, forthrightness, and benevolence.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, in words *Leidschrift* used in communication with contributors to the present volume:

the tragic individuals in history who just did not make it, despite their qualities and best efforts, such as revolutionaries, scientists that missed the boat and heads of state who became victims of circumstance.

The anti-hero cannot be all bad, just as the hero cannot be all good, for no one can sympathise with unbelievable characters. The most helpful standard of judgement is, perhaps, that of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, whose iniquity is, by definition, extreme, but who exemplifies heroic courage and obduracy,

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<sup>2</sup> Bette Midler, 'Wind beneath my wings' (1988). [Http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bettemidler/windbeneathmywings.html](http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bettemidler/windbeneathmywings.html), accessed 20 December 2015.

<sup>3</sup> C.G. Jung, *Heros und Mutterarchetype* (Augsburg 2000).

<sup>4</sup> P.K. Jonason e.a., 'The Antihero in Popular Culture: Life History Theory and the Dark Triad Personality Traits', *Review of General Psychology* 16 (2013) 192-199.

engaging readers' sympathy, even as – true protagonist that he is – he drives the story of his own and humankind's undoing. In the present compilation, Robert Black's subject, Machiavelli, seems the example closest to the model of Satan, sharing with the Prince of Darkness a soubriquet as 'Old Nick'. It is hard to think of a case of more determined demonisation by intellectual adversaries. Johan de Witt, too, Miel Groten et al. remind us, was 'den grooten en witten duyvel' in Orangist eyes. The admirers of Cortés had to contend with similar demonisation.<sup>5</sup> For resisters on left and right alike, there was a mephitic whiff in the fire Marinus van der Lubbe kindled.

In the absence of agreed definitions, I suggest that the best way to proceed is not to attempt to define the terms of *Leidschrijf's* project, but rather to profile heroes and anti-heroes according to the characteristics commonly displayed in the respective categories.

One prior stipulation is in order. Strictly speaking, heroes and anti-heroes belong in fiction or myth, rather than what we conventionally call 'real life' or 'history'. They arise in the mind, not in experience, as movers and shapers of the stories they dominate. To be a hero or anti-hero you must therefore be a protagonist. In a mere supporting role, as Hollywood would term it, you can be at most a villain or antagonist. There may be more than one hero or anti-hero in one book, because one book can contain more than one story, but there can only be one protagonist per story. When heroes and anti-heroes appear in purported versions of history, it is usually because those versions are mythical or fictional, or else the sense in which the characters so designated are heroic is metaphorical. The heroes of Burckhardt<sup>6</sup> or Carlyle,<sup>7</sup> the 'great men' who shaped the stories of their times by the power of their wills, never existed – so most scholars think – outside the minds of their admirers. That 'the history of the world is but the biography of great men – now seems an antiquated claim, quaint or queer or querulous, according to how seriously one fears despots or bullies. Carlyle now evokes our pity, derision or detestation when we read:

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<sup>5</sup> I. Almond, *The Thought of Nirad C. Chaudhuri. Islam, Empire, and Loss* (Cambridge 2015) 151.

<sup>6</sup> J. Burckhardt, *Reflections on History* (1868), G. Dietze trans. (Indianapolis, IN 1943) 270-296.

<sup>7</sup> T. Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* (London 1857 [orig. 1840]).

We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world (...) a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven.<sup>8</sup>

Democracy, which Carlyle defined as ‘despair of ever finding any heroes to govern you’, has made heroes seem superannuated.<sup>9</sup> We are likely to endorse Herbert Spencer’s riposte to Carlyle:

You must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown. (...) Before he can remake his society, his society must make him.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, we can allow some impact to exceptional individuals. To focus only on the protagonists of the stories in the present collection, one can hardly deny to Machiavelli a signal role in the history of political thought (though not, perhaps, the role he wanted), which developed from his influence a tradition of *Staatspolitik*. Nor would any reasonable person discount Cortés as a major influence on the history of the Spanish monarchy, which his adventure in Mexico turned from a typical maritime empire into the world’s first great empire of land and sea (despite the probably greater and largely unacknowledged role of his native translator in forging the alliance that overthrew Mexico); Johan de Witt seems secure in his pride of place in the history of the Netherlands during his time as *raadpensionaris*, Robert Hooke’s honoured status in the history of physics or in the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire seems unquestionable. Equally beyond cavil is Marinus van der Lubbe’s key role – however unsought – in the ascent of Nazism to supreme power in Germany. So all the anti-heroes proposed below function as protagonists in stories in which they belong.

Indeed, in the case studies that follow, many other features representative of the way heroes are commonly characterised occur prominently. Courage, selflessness and skill – the qualities identified as

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<sup>8</sup> Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> T. Carlyle, *Past and Present* (New York, NY 1918) 249.

<sup>10</sup> H. Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (New York, NY 1896) 34.

definitive in a recent survey – are a useful starting-point.<sup>11</sup> No one could seriously impugn the ability and bravery of our featured anti-heroes: Machiavelli combined literary genius and an original mind with audacity in challenging convention and defying political opponents. Cortés created a byword for boldness by beaching his ships, and carried courage to the point of recklessness by transcending his commission – which was for a reconnaissance, not a conquest – and attempting to take over one of the most rapidly expanding and ecologically diverse empires of his day. He demonstrated stunning military or at least diplomatic skill in bringing his improbable project to fruition. Johan de Witt showed his courage from his first confrontation with a mob in his twenties to his death in his last such encounter, through his consistent defiance of the Orangists, even when they were in the ascendant. The performance of Dutch forces in war under his leadership suggests his statesmanlike skills, to say nothing of his celebrated mathematical prowess. Without an endowment of valour Robert Hooke could hardly have been a willing controversialist in his day, often challenging rivals more powerful or better connected than he. His ability in physics, surveying and architecture are beyond a peradventure. Marinus van der Lubbe's talents were more modest, but no one can gainsay him his status as an accomplished incendiary. And if the stubborn tenacity with which he practised arson and faced arrest, interrogation, and death were not bravery it would be easily mistaken as such.

Selflessness is harder to calibrate. It hardly seems prominent in Machiavelli, whose career in the emulous Florentine political world of his day depended on unremitting self-seeking. As Robert Black shows below, the apparent contradictions between Machiavelli's political texts on principalities and on republics were intelligible in the context of his search for patronage. He shifted from pro-Medicean to pro-republican postures when he gave up on the Medici as potential sponsors. His character was capacious enough for virtue as well as vice. He was consistently noir, misanthropic, and pessimistic and during his years without preferment his values were increasingly those of *The Prince*: irreligious and amoral. *Mandragola* – ironically, Black tells us, Machiavelli's most admired work – was unashamedly 'a play without hero or heroine'. With career success, however, Machiavelli restored moral advocacy to his political writings, and *Clizia*, his last drama, 'represents a return to more conventional norms'.

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<sup>11</sup> S.T. Allison and G.R. Goethals, *Heroes: What They Do and Why We Need Them* (Oxford 2011) 28.

Which stance was posture? Perhaps neither. The real Machiavelli was both, alternately, a moralist and a pragmatist. In service to the state, when the opportunity was vouchsafed him, he seems to have been honest and unegotistical.

The other anti-heroes who appear in this volume were equally capable, if not of selflessness, at least of aligning their own interests with those of the communities they served. For Matthew Restall the essence of heroism is altruistic helpfulness – not a quality associated with the subject of his contribution, except as ‘defined by centuries of churchmen and chroniclers in terms of salvation’; in their eyes, he saved Spain from its enemies, and millions of ‘Indians’ from damnation. Restall finds that the ‘first impulse’ of Hernán Cortés ‘was for self-preservation’, but a share in a universal instinct is no disqualification for service to others and, unlike many *conquistadores*, Cortés continued to defer loyally to the crown despite his disappointment with the level of reward he obtained. His fiercest critic among his followers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, berated him for taking an unfair share of loot, but joined in campfire-side sing-songs in praise of the leader as a hero *redivivus* of chivalric romance.<sup>12</sup> De Witt, like Machiavelli and Cortés, sought power for himself but used it for the enhancement of the state and the promotion of republicanism and collective leadership – a self-denying ideology for a ruler. Hooke’s irascibility derived, no doubt, in part from egotism, but not to the exclusion of a creditable record of service to the scientific community of his day. As for Van der Lubbe, despite the impenetrability of his mind and motives, there is no denying that his role in the Reichstag fire led to the sacrifice of his life.

Our anti-heroes, therefore, were not without conventionally heroic qualities. They also shared the tragic fate we expect of heroes in fiction – whose misfortunes, in Aristotle’s uneclipsed formula, derive not from wickedness but from pardonable flaws of character. Black distances his Machiavelli from the simplified tragic stereotype of romantic tradition, assuring us, for instance, that

Ridolfi’s vision (...) was a product of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italian romantic culture in which he had himself been nurtured. The great individual and lonely creator beaten down by historical forces beyond his powers is not what emerges from

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<sup>12</sup> B. Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (Madrid 2011).

Machiavelli's own words or from those who knew him in his last days.

Yet the author of two comedies was also the protagonist of two tragedies – of his failure to win Medici approval, and of his cosmic fate, cast as the demon of political pantomime on the basis of an unrepresentative work. Even more than Machiavelli, Cortés – as Lope de Vega saw – was cast for tragedy: frustrated by his own egregious ambitions, embittered by his enemies' successes, turning for a consolation to a religion of apostolic perfection that he was temperamentally ill equipped to practice. De Witt died ironically – as a spokesman for the republic who became a victim of the mob – and tragically as a consummate politician fatally unable to make a final compromise. Hooke, like every hero, had flaws: he was quarrelsome, touchy, proud, and incapable of tolerating people who did not take him at his own high self-evaluation. Daan Wegener chronicles his disputes for us: with Adrien Auzout (over lens-grinding), Johannes Hevelius (over the use of telescopes in astronomy) and Christiaan Huygens (over the development of the pocket watch), before the conflicts with Newton that led to the subversion of Hooke's reputation. It may seem hard to attribute heroic status to Marinus van der Lubbe, a simpleton with pyromaniac tendencies, but in the last essay in the present volume, Dennis Bos finds him both heroic and tragic, reviled by the Nazis as a red terrorist and by the Soviets as a Nazi stooge and scapegoat.

Finally, I think our anti-heroes exemplify a heroic quality unnoticed in previous literature but essential for any convincing profile. For the hero is necessarily surprising. Unless we expect David to fail against Goliath, or Roland to blow his horn, or Napoleon to wear purple naturally, or Alexander to conquer the world, or Christ to save it, the hero's tale lacks dramatic tension. Typically, therefore, he starts handicapped or disqualified by some potentially incapacitating peculiarity, such as youth, age, infirmity or derogation. Or else the hero is, in some sense, external to the society he serves or saves: he may be a stranger, a foundling, an orphan, an alien, a social outcast, a returning exile, a god, a maverick, a rebel, a self-isolated misanthrope or a lonely, masked crusader – foreign or extra-planetary. The anti-heroes studied below were all marginal figures in their worlds except for De Witt, who was conspicuously a child of privilege aligned by birth and education with the Dutch elite of his day – and even he was outside the militantly Calvinist religious establishment. Machiavelli was excluded from citizenship and experienced prison and exile. Cortés was an arriviste and

technically, at an early stage of his Mexican escapade, in rebellion or, at best, defiance of orders. Hooke, who never belonged in the acceptance world until, as Wegener observes, he became ‘fashionable, of all things’, in the twenty-first century, suffered from crippling social deficiencies. He lacked the gentle status of Boyle and the power and patronage of Newton. Van der Lubbe was a classic outsider: a reputed dimwit, orphaned, hampered by half-blindness, seeking refuge from a hostile world in criminal behaviour and clandestine groups.

On the other hand, our anti-heroes fail to match one widely advocated criterion of heroism: they would disappoint enquirers after archetypes. The theory of heroic archetypes, however, is misleading, formulated by observers who mistook Western norms as universally applicable. One has only to think of the variance among heroic ideas over time or in different cultures. In Japan, heroes can be as inert and epicene as Genji, the hero of Murasaki Shihibu’s homonymous novel, or as vital in ‘the nobility of failure’ as Saigo Takamori, the so-called ‘last true samurai’ who died resisting modernisation in 1877.<sup>13</sup> In China, filial piety and personal humility are part of the typical profile of heroes. Some figures celebrated for heroism have exhibited remarkable cultural elasticity. Alexander became the namesake of Indian monarchs and the subject of a Malay epic. Ali Baba, Sinbad and Aladdin are mainstays of Western tradition. Usually, however, cultural transitions are impossible without adaptations to the norms of the host cultures, such as those Disney movies effect, with shameless irreverence, in turning Pocahontas, for instance, or Mulan into embodiments of feebly feminist values or simulacra of the paradoxically robust and romantic self-images of U.S. female teens in the early twenty-first century. Even in a single culture, purported heroes come and go according to fashion, their monuments defaced or toppled or transferred from public exhibition to the obscurity of a warehouse or the recesses of some unfrequented museum. Or, with changes of regime or scholarly re-evaluation, or enlargement of public sympathies, supposed villains can be rehabilitated, or anti-heroes reclassified as bit-part players in other people’s stories.

In the present volume Groten et al. present a perfect case. Orangists deplored Johan de Witt, but revisionism excited ripostes. More than a

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<sup>13</sup> I. Morris, *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* (New York, NY 1975); Idem, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (New York, NY 2013).

century after de Witt's death, the revolutionaries of the Batavian Republic awakened sympathy for him. In the nineteenth century he received modified approval from liberals (who did not, however, endorse his enmity for the house of Nassau) and socialists (who deplored, on the other hand, his aristocratic credentials). In the twentieth century he appealed more strongly to nationalists – including, remarkably, Geert Wilders – as well as to Marxists, and republicans. Now official approval has domesticated the demon and assimilated him as part of the national story. He even has a Dutch warship named after him. Robert Hooke, in Daan Wegener's account below, has undergone a similar transfiguration. Newtonian partisans demonized him, but historians have uncovered his positive achievements and rehabilitated him as a reputable if unheroic journeyman of science (though Wegener notes that *De Volkskrant* omitted the most positive account, by Lisa Jardine, from the works listed in the paper's obituary of her). So thoroughly has historical and more broadly intellectual fashion side-lined the notion of archetypes that some psychologists go even further and suggest that heroism is entirely in the eye of the beholder, depending not only on culturally selective judgements but on the degree to which the admirer's individual tastes match the supposed hero's attractions.<sup>14</sup> Marinus van der Lubbe seems, somehow, less potent a figure than previously, now that a series of somewhat belated judicial revisions have pardoned his crime and reclassified it as a valid act of civil resistance to tyranny.

Efforts to show the universality of heroes, indeed, seem doomed to fail. Ari Kohen's is the most recent. He claims that the pattern of every hero can be traced to one of three archetypes, none of which is likely to inspire assent.<sup>15</sup> All belong narrowly in Western tradition, according to one rather old-fashioned version of it, which derives everything Western from ancient Greece. Disappointing hopes of originality, Kohen's first hero is Achilles, the supposed archetype of the warrior for glory. Achilles is a great protagonist, but an unsatisfactory archetype, because the peculiar and personal complexity of his motives – which include pique, sexual jealousy, outrageous egotism, and material cupidity, make him realistic. As an archetype he would be one-dimensional and irresistibly forgettable. His

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<sup>14</sup> M.P. Venter and A. Sullivan, 'Defining heroes through deductive and inductive investigations', *Journal of Social Psychology* 150.5 (2010) 471-484.

<sup>15</sup> A. Kohen, *Untangling Heroism: Classical Philosophy and the Concept of the Hero* (London 2014).

counterpart in Kohen's typology is Odysseus, the archetype of heroic endurance of pain and suffering in a cause universally recognizable – in his case, to return to homeland and family. Again, however, Odysseus is so riven with complexity – including unheroic qualities such as guile that embraces mendacity, and unheroic actions such as the slaughter of the suitors – that archetypal status is derogatory to him. In any case, Homer's world was not that of Carlyle. Gods and fate ruled it, not human heroes, who were protagonists at one level but puppets at another – in a cosmic story warped and checked by vast, capricious forces. Kohen's last and, he would claim, most enduring and influential archetype is Socrates, whom he calls the 'other-regarding hero'. His Socrates, who submits to self-sacrifice for trying to bring disinterested education to benighted Athens, and who therefore exemplifies self-abnegation for the good of others, is unrecognisable. The real Socrates executed his own death-sentence in obedience to the state and deference to the law. Unsurprisingly, Kohen ends by abandoning the quest for archetypes and admits that heroes are specific to the cultures and places in which people adopt them. 'In a post-Socratic world', he avers, 'we have chosen to place a premium on heroes who make other-regarding choices over self-interested ones'. He suggests that

at the heart of this reverence for the heroic man or woman is almost certainly the egalitarian and populist sentiment that defines the American democratic experiment for the vast majority of Americans who honour citizens who help to raise others up by inspiration or direct action.<sup>16</sup>

Even when they are foreigners, such as Zorro, or rich, such as Batman, or extra-terrestrial, such as Superman, or bathed – as it were – in Styx-like waters, such as Captain America, or mildly psychotic, such as Rambo, Americans want heroes who belong to them: fellow citizens who exemplify their dreams, protagonists of the standard myth of the ordinary American.

Equally unsuccessful in establishing archetypes is a survey of 'Heroes and Villains of World History across Cultures' recently published in *PLOS ONE*. Like most opinion surveys, the effort was vitiated by the pollster's unhelpful demands, which meant, no doubt, different things to different respondents. The researchers asked 6,902 university students from 37

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<sup>16</sup> Kohen, *Untangling Heroism*, 1, 8.

different countries to rate forty historical figures on a seven-point scale from 'extremely negative' to 'extremely positive'. By nominating the figures concerned, they warped the results, which, for what they were worth, supported Kohen's expectation that contemporary people value peaceful service as heroic and discard heroes of former cultures in which violence commanded esteem. Overall, Albert Einstein rated most praise. Mother Teresa ranked next. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Isaac Newton, Christ, Nelson Mandela, Thomas Edison, Abraham Lincoln and Buddha completed the top ten. Of these, only Lincoln was, in any sense, a warmonger. The ten most widely nominated villains, by contrast, evoked bloody connotations: in reverse order of abhorrence, Hitler, Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, George W. Bush, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Lenin, Genghis Khan, Saladin and the Qin Emperor. 'At least among university students', the researchers concluded, 'the pursuit of scientific excellence appears to be evaluated in a pan-cultural manner: that is, positively across all sampled cultures'.<sup>17</sup> Again, however, the only incontestable inference is that heroic values change.

The reason why heroes are not and cannot be universal is not hard to identify. Saints are, perhaps, potentially universal, whereas heroes are necessarily partisan. To be a hero, you must engage in struggle. To engage in struggle you must have opponents. The borderland between sainthood and heroism is, of course, densely populated. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, for instance, has attained sainthood in popular devotion prior to her formal canonization. But she is a hate-figure for atheists and secularists.<sup>18</sup> Some saints feature in the calendar only in the communities they served – sometimes with zeal overspilling in blood. It is, however, at least open to a saint to be a saint for everybody, whereas a hero never is nor can be heroic for those against whom he or she contends. In some cases, which perhaps include those of Martin Luther King and Abraham Lincoln, the descendants of some opponents, at least, can relent, but even these honoured dead are still reviled by the partisans of racism and secessionism in the United States. One man's hero is another man's villain.

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<sup>17</sup> K. Hanke, J.H. Liu e.a., "Heroes" and "Villains" of World History across Cultures', *PLOS ONE* 10.2 (2015).

<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0115641>, accessed 20 December 2015.

<sup>18</sup> C. Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (London 1995).

The same ambiguities seem to cling to the anti-hero. Machiavelli has become almost as admired among political realists as reviled by moralists. Johan de Witt, as Groten et al. remark, has been seen as ‘held of schurk’, according to the political affiliations of the beholder. Hernán Cortés is a hate-figure in the ‘Black Legend’ tradition of Spanish cruelty and rapacity, but so far the civic authorities of Seville have not expunged his name from the city’s main street. Robert Hooke was a victim rather of oblivion than enmity. Still he was a victim of partisanship in his dispute over his claim to have preceded Newton in describing gravity. Marinus van der Lubbe, though denounced by Nazis and repudiated by communists, is the beloved martyr of some liberals. So is the line between heroes and anti-heroes as indistinct as that between heroes and villains? So far, the list of shared traits, properties and qualities is impressive: protagonism, strangerhood, partisanship, hubris, courage, skill, even a certain measure of altruism. If, however, we return to the popular notion of heroism, which Bette Midler’s lyrics exemplify, we may get close to understanding the heroic ingredient that anti-heroes lack. In one of the studies appointments consultant Michael Sullivan and psychologist Anré Venter presented in 2010, participants really did define their heroes as exemplifying ‘everything I’d like to be’. Roughly a third ‘defined heroes in terms of ideal self-images, as models of what individuals should or could be as people (as opposed to modelling actions)’ while the rest ‘based their identification of heroic figures on the basis of the individuals’ actions’.<sup>19</sup> Readers of *Leidschrift* might plausibly seek to imitate – or claim to imitate – Christ or Buddha or Mother Teresa, or even Achilles or Odysseus. But will any – even after reading the sensitive and humanising studies that follow – want to be quite like Machiavelli, or Cortés or De Witt or Hooke or Van der Lubbe?

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<sup>19</sup> Venter and Sullivan, ‘Defining heroes’, 471-484.