

“Hactivism,” the State, and Neoliberalism: *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and the Limits of the Political Imagination

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The opening episodes of *Marvel's Agents of SHIELD* establish an ideological opposition between the ‘free information’ ethos of The Rising Tide—a thinly veiled allusion to hacker groups like Anonymous—and SHIELD's intelligence agency rhetoric (as Ward puts it, SHIELD must “protect people from news they aren't ready to hear”). At first glance, this aspect of the series appears to be a right-wing inversion of *Buffy's* critique of the militaristic Initiative—not only is the show's central collective a part of the secret military group rather than critical of it, but the narrative also goes to great lengths to discredit The Rising Tide's “idealism” by revealing that Skye's former partner Miles accepted money for leaking information (1x05). However, I want to suggest *MAOS's* ideological project is more complex: in both the aforementioned episode and, most importantly, in episode 3, the series is in fact interrogating the discursive complicity of free information rhetoric with free trade ideology. Both Miles and (especially) Ian Quin, the corporate CEO from episodes 3 and 12, parrot The Rising Tide's utopian calls for free information, but with a neoliberal twist: for them, free information and free markets are synonymous. My paper suggests that these episodes of *MAOS* are staging a key contradiction in anarchist-leaning “hactivist groups”: their frequent inability to confront their rhetorical and political dovetailing with the impulses of neoliberalism. However, *MAOS* does not simply side with the other ideological pole of the state: I also demonstrate the series' sustained critique of SHIELD's hierarchical organization, especially in episodes 10-12 in which Coulson learns the truth about his death. I thus read the series as a dialectical double negation in which SHIELD and the The Rising Tide function within the show's ideological matrix as critiques of each other. This double negation suggests the limits of political action in the era of neoliberalism and allows the series to interrogate the implications of working for change within existing institutions, which also allows me to draw connections with season 5 of *Angel*.