Reaction as image: Comic books and American life, 1940-1955

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REACTION AS IMAGE: COMIC BOOKS
AND AMERICAN LIFE,
1940-1955

by

William S. Bush

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

History

Department of History
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June 1997

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ABSTRACT

The comic book became a mass medium during a series of defining moments in twentieth-century American history. By telling and retelling narratives of individual achievement during the Great Depression, and tales of patriotism during World War II, comic books gained a popular audience rivaling that of agenda-setting national periodicals such as *Life* or *The Saturday Evening Post*. In the first postwar decade, however, publishers experimented with themes of crime, horror, teen romance, and social satire in ways that provoked a wave of public hostility. Crusading psychiatrists, politicians, civic groups, and religious leaders led a campaign against the industry that revealed much about fundamental changes in American society. The extension of postwar prosperity to adolescent consumers was in the process of creating a youth-oriented market culture that would reshape the central traditions of American consensus. Agitation resulted in an investigation of comic books and juvenile delinquency under the auspices of the United States Senate, and the enacting of a strict censorship code that struck controversial images and stories from the pages of comic books. This "containment" of cultural divisions would prove temporary, but it prefigured the conflicts of the following decades.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: COMIC BOOKS AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The term *consensus* is used often to describe American society at the middle of the twentieth century. As cultural theorist Raymond Williams has noted, the word has carried dual connotations. Some observers have employed it in a positive sense, indicating that American culture, society, and politics revolved around "an existing body of agreed opinions." Contrarily, critics have denounced the idea of an American consensus for its "deliberate evasion of basic conflicts." They allege that the twin rhetorics of consumer abundance and anticommunism which composed an "American way of life" in the 1950s knowingly concealed simmering divisions along lines of class, race, gender, and age. These commentators, writing largely from the vantage point of the social movements of the 1960s and 70s, tend to view the decade after World War II in static terms. Overemphasis of this inclination can obscure an important social shift that gained impetus from the early

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1 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 67-68.

1940s through the peak years of the Cold War—the redirection of market culture toward youth, which eventually drove the tradition-smashing individualism of the 1960s.3

As harbingers of this trend, comic books provide a lens into the core conflicts precipitated by the new consumerism. In the period 1940-1955, comic books moved in public perception from symbols of cultural democracy to plagues upon national morality. The story of this rapid descent in part chronicles the transformation of World War II-era optimism and unity into Cold War-era uncertainty and division; it also suggests how the wartime forecasts of market abundance extended to youth could become a panic over profit-chasing cultural entrepreneurs fomenting a wave of juvenile delinquency. Like other forms of popular culture, the comics medium itself seemed to undermine education. But in the postwar period, this concern receded behind an increase in comic book images of heroic outlaws, rather than champions, of the social order. Some publishers went further, producing stories that questioned the very idea of heroes and explicitly challenged the dominant virtues of legal, religious, and family authority.

By disseminating such images at precisely the time when the domestic Cold War reemphasized traditional authority, comic books provoked demands of censorship from social and political leaders. After 1947, a campaign erupted against the comic book industry; growing numbers of civic groups and public figures voiced their complaints, while polemics denounced the medium as "the marijuana of the nursery."4 Psychiatrist Frederic Wertham seized the scholarly language of those who had studied comic books during the war and transformed it into a powerful case against the medium. For many American parents, Wertham's argument tapped into deep-seated uncertainties over their

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4Frederic Wertham, "The Comics ... Very Funny!" The Saturday Review of Literature (May 29, 1948), 6-7; 27-29.
children's confusing behavior. Public pressure culminated in an investigation of the comic book industry by the United States Senate in 1954. Fearing the possibility of government censorship, comic book publishers banded together and instituted a strict code for self-regulation that removed controversial images and stories from the pages of comic books. Ironically for a historical moment dominated by anticommunism, this episode represented a form of "containment" directed against changes driven by American capitalism, in which markets were shifting to pre-adult consumers.

Comic books entered American life under cultural terms largely set up in the nineteenth century. Reflexive disdain for comic books in the 1940s found its formative roots in the struggles over the definition of "culture" that took place across revolutions in market and industry. At contest was the relationship between two distinct conceptions, material and abstract. Could, as Williams has framed it, "the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" fundamentally be bound to "a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development?" For those who answered yes, such as British thinker Matthew Arnold, culture was limited to "the best which has been thought and said in the world." With the rise of entertainment geared toward the masses, the possibility that the two could co-exist separately suggested to some a step toward social disintegration. To many observers, cheaply produced, commodity accented leisure seemed irreconciliable with the elevation of mind and morals. Arnold warned that the only alternative to his definition of culture in society was anarchy, which he perceived anxiously in the escalating class conflict surrounding him in England.

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5Williams, Keywords, 80.

Arnold voiced the reaction of many genteel Americans to cultural divisions springing from the rise of class interests in an industrializing society, part of a process that historian Lawrence Levine describes as the creation of cultural hierarchy. An emerging middle class led a public discussion on the parameters of legitimacy for this newly conceived "culture." Perhaps most emblematic of the shifting understandings of both class and culture was the rise of popular fiction. Mass-produced fiction, in the forms of dime novel and story paper, embodied at once the worst fears of genteel arbiters of culture and the socialization of lower class readers into the market economy within which gentility thrived. The opinions of middle-class reformers and professionals dominated public debates over cheap fiction, much as they would in discussions of comic books. A closer look suggests that in public perception, methods of production, and content, dime novels were direct precursors to comic books.

Dime fiction, while producing a broader accessibility to literature that threatened social order, belonged to the mass production world of industrial capitalism. As cultural historian Michael Denning argues, the dime novel business can be construed as "one of the first mass media, one of the first culture industries." Firms such as Beadle and Adams, Street and Smith, and Frank Tousey pioneered the mass production of cheap fiction through the tumult of the Civil War, Reconstruction, labor-capital struggles, and economic panics. They gained the nickname "fiction factories" through reliance upon speed, quantity, division of labor, corporate ownership, formulas, and mass distribution. Behind a developing strategy that marketed celebrity authors and characters in dime novel series for


subscription and retail, ghost writers labored in relative anonymity. The dime novel industry utilized market-inspired forms of rationalization, organization, and structure.

Comic book publishers employed similar methods of production. While the medium borrowed much from newspaper strips, the comic book industry's structure resembled cheap fiction houses more than comic strip syndicates. The firm of Street and Smith exemplifies this, having begun publishing dime novels in the 1860s, moving to pulp magazines at the turn of the century, and comic books by the 1930s. Comic books, produced cheaply and in mass quantities, divided labor among low-paid and often anonymous writers, artists, colorists, and letterers. Churning out stories to meet rapid deadlines, these workers followed plot formulas that subsumed creativity within overriding imperatives of standardization. Like dime novel authors, comic book writers and artists relied heavily on formulas.\(^9\)

Because of these impositions on content, both dime novels and comic books created and recreated narratives that engaged a series of American mythologies. In its own way, each cultural form combined industrial structure with mythological content to mediate historically specific conflicts between the integrated world of market capitalism and the long-held tenet of American individualism.\(^10\) Dime novel Westerns put forth images of frontiersmen and cowboys that represented a nostalgia for a bygone age prior to the increasingly mechanized society of the Gilded Age. With their visions of a "true and pure" America, dime novels ahistorically separated economic individualism from what it had

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created, removing the entrepreneurial ideal from its consequences of large-scale industrial capitalism and corporate structures. Comic books continued this pattern of mediation with the superhero, beginning in 1938 with the creation of Superman. With their more than human powers, superheroes offered readers a fantasy of individual power and autonomy during crises of depression and war that seemed to emanate from invisible forces beyond the control or understanding of many Americans.

Offering useful insights into the workings of such mythology are the writings of the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci on hegemony and popular fiction. Gramsci postulates that, unlike monarchies and dictatorships, dominant social classes in Western democracies have maintained their power in a noncoercive way. This was obtained through convincing the masses that the interests, worldviews, and politics of the upper classes could be viewed as "common sense." Critical to this creation of consent was an apolitical veneer that found its most powerful forms with the rise of popular culture. By virtue of their status as "non-political" leisure, dime novels and comic books afforded market-friendly values easier access to the sympathies of the populace than the orations of captains of industry or political candidates. Few observers had expanded on this argument by the 1950s, exemplified in Henry Nash Smith's comment that dime novels and comic books shared the marginal quality of "an objectified mass dream." But in his comments on serial fiction, Gramsci warns against viewing popular culture as meaningless escapism, insisting that the study of "particular illusions" could provide critical insight into historical social relations. Gramsci suggests that the use of specific plot formulas, conventionalized settings, and

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stock characters in popular narratives could elevate market values that favored a narrow stratum to a broader level of shared assumption.\textsuperscript{13}

The Frankfurt School intellectuals stood out in the way they approached these types of questions in the 1940s and 50s.\textsuperscript{14} They applied Marxist analysis to the "mass culture" of film, radio, and popular literature in a context of American capitalism. For Max Horkheimer, mass culture's shallow repetitions suited the market's devaluation of time not used for labor, commodified as "leisure." "[D]irected from above," mass-produced entertainment abetted the regimented life of modern capitalism. Mass culture mechanized production and consumption; stock assumptions and plot formulas predetermined audience reactions.\textsuperscript{15} But this top-down model of culture, while focused on "how the objective elements of a social whole are produced and reproduced in the mass media," constituted its own form of escapism.\textsuperscript{16} Depicting American life as neatly divided instead of messily organic, it created separate spheres for mass culture and the society in which it was produced. Although Frankfurt School analyses made important strides in understanding the role of mass culture under democratic capitalism, they emphasized producers over consumers to the point that the latter group became invisible. By immersing themselves in mass culture, these thinkers argued, individuals fell victim to a manipulated false consciousness that blinded them to their own exploitation by the privileged classes.

\textsuperscript{13}David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell Smith eds., \textit{Antonio Gramsci: Selections from Cultural Writings} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 376.


Recent historians of dime fiction, led by Michael Denning, have attempted to flesh out the contours of hegemony as outlined by Gramsci. Denning argues that some dime novels helped foment an oppositional culture for working-class readers. Tales of urban and labor heroes, read in specific ways by audiences of laborers, could socialize readers against the market. Denning presents a contested point of consumption in which readers could subvert market-driven cultural products to the end of building working-class consciousness. He complements the Frankfurt School's industrial structure of cultural production with a less predictable model of active consumption.\(^\text{17}\)

But also important to Gramsci's question-framing is an examination of individual creators and how they came to write cheap fiction or draw comic books. A society in which authors and readers have shared social and political assumptions explains hegemony more concretely than a sharply delineated hierarchy in which cultural producers have forced their views upon masses who may or may not mount resistance. Although he eschews Gramscian notions of class and culture, literary historian Richard Brodhead offers an approach that integrates the individual act of creation within a social context. In his study of nineteenth-century "authorship," Brodhead argues for the primacy of a given author's historically shaped understanding of literature. He warns against imposing presentist models of class, race, or gender identity upon any author's conception of a written work. For Brodhead, the most decisive influence on an author's approach to writing was "a social organization of the literary field specific to that time and place." Like Denning's description of the act of reading dime fiction, Brodhead constructs "authorship" as a point of struggle between personal experience and a kind of professionalism.\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^{17}\) Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 26-47.

Combining the models of market-driven structure of production, authorship, and consumption, a method emerges for understanding the way creators and readers may have encountered comic books. In any given comic book’s content, the individual experiences of creators and readers interacted with historically specific conceptions of the medium and its broad subject matter to help produce meaning. But the formulaic narratives necessitated by production deadlines and "what sold" could still decisively help shape content. The resulting simplifications made comic books, like dime novels before them, ideally suited to mythology. In examining the American frontier myth that dominated dime novel Westerns, Richard Slotkin defines mythology as

... a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors.19

Slotkin describes the mythmaking process as one that orders experience, belief, and action by appealing to a "narrative mode" of thinking about reality. By reducing the mass of history to a series of tidy stories, mythology simplifies the complex and often contradictory past to an abstracted narrative palatable and attractive to a society. As such, the establishment and perpetuation of mythology is basic to a society's process of creating tradition, of making the new seem old. Slotkin applies this conception of mythology to explain how the American myth of the frontier evolved over centuries of experience. In dime novel Westerns of the nineteenth century, the frontier myth had come to stand in for individualism against the backdrop of a market revolution and industrial capitalism.20


20 Ibid., 6-22.
This myth of the American individual was central to the appeal of the comic book superhero. Writers, artists, and readers of comic books shared experiences that fostered needs for the explicatory powers of mythology. Symbols contained in comic book stories could shift with the anxieties of society; the immoral Axis villains of *Captain America Comics* are replaced by the corrupt authority figures of *Tales From the Crypt*. Cultural critic Kenneth Burke's studies on symbols suggest their flexibility as language, action, styles, attitudes, even gestures. How strongly a symbol may resonate with groups in society depends on how "patterns of experience" condition its production and reception. Burke argues that a symbol appears most powerfully "when the artist's and the reader's patterns of experience closely coincide."21 Thus, the texts and images of popular comic books were indicative of producers and consumers who shared narrative modes for understanding the specific experiences of confusing shifts in economy and international affairs.

The shared experiences highlighted in comic books contributed to a semblance of social unity during World War II. But in the postwar period, comic books presented symbols and types that suggested cracks in the Cold War consensus. Writers and artists created comic book stories that sold well among a generation of young consumers who were beginning to reinterpret American individualism. Representatives of traditional authority clashed with the orientation of the market toward preadults. The campaign against the comics was at once an explicit defense of social mores believed to be under siege and an unconscious attempt to check the excesses of the market in mass culture. Although political pressure succeeded in eradicating controversial images and stories from the comics, the process showed how the defense of American capitalism contained underpinnings of its own fragmentation. The society that placed moral authority in parents, teachers, religious

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leaders, businessmen, and politicians could not withstand changes wrought by its own emphasis on market abundance and consumerism. Over the postwar decades, a new consensus would emerge to replace the old.

The comic book industry formed during the Great Depression, an era when unprecedented federal efforts to organize the economy were echoed in increasingly systematized approaches to the idea of an American culture. The growing use of public opinion polls, documentary films, and symbols in the visual media generally worked to reinforce notions of an "American Way of Life." Although the purposes of this exploration varied from radical writers to speculative advertisers, their common denominator lay in a heightened attempt to locate elements of national identity. As cultural historian Warren Susman argues, this pursuit had important ramifications for the post-World War II era:

A search for the 'real' America could become a new kind of nationalism; the idea of an American Way could reinforce conformity. The reliance on basic culture patterns, stressed by further development of public opinion, studies of myth, symbol, folklore, the new techniques of the mass media ... could and did have results far more conservative than radical.

The introduction of Superman to the American public in 1938 heralded the incorporation of comic books into the search for national identity. Creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the sons of working-class immigrant families in Cleveland, grew up influenced primarily by pulp fiction. As teenagers, they had spent years looking for a

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publisher willing to sponsor a newspaper comic strip featuring their character. For $130, Siegel and Shuster sold the rights to Superman to National Comics, which had only recently entered the new field of comic book publishing.\(^{24}\) In Superman's first appearance, *Action Comics* #1 (1938), pulp science-fiction themes surface in the protagonist's superhuman powers, use of a secret identity, and status as a visitor from another planet.\(^{25}\)

After publication of several issues of *Action Comics*, the first sales figures showed that Superman had found unprecedented popularity with readers. The fourth issue sold over 500,000 copies, an unheard-of number for the fledgling industry. Somehow, Siegel and Shuster had connected with a substantial readership. Comics historian Thomas Andrae has suggested one reason; Superman's earliest adventures imposed fantastic solutions upon Depression-era social issues that resonated with readers under economic duress. In these stories, Superman was "an outlaw and champion of the oppressed" who stopped a wife-beating; saved a wrongly-convicted woman from state electrocution; spoiled the collusion between a corrupt politician and a munitions manufacturer to foment an international war; forced a neglectful mine owner to improve unsafe working conditions; fought the problem of juvenile delinquency by demolishing run-down slums and coercing government officials to erect decent housing.\(^{26}\) Framed as the righting of "un-American" wrongs, these

\(^{24}\)Steranko, *History of Comics*, I, 38-39. National Comics called the contract "a standard release"; but by 1947, Siegel and Shuster had hauled the publisher into court in an attempt to regain ownership of the character. The lawsuit failed, and the creative duo were fired. It would be over 30 years before the publisher was publicly shamed into some compensation. See Ron Goulart, *The Comic Book Reader's Companion* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 160-161.


episodes highlighted the kinds of experiences that working-class creators and readers could share in the pages of comic books.

As Superman's popularity grew, Siegel and Shuster found other threats to the "American way of life" to pit their hero against. Shortly before American entry into World War II, Superman took on foreign enemies with the blessing of characters representing the federal government. Andrae argues that this marked the beginning of Superman's shift from defender of the weak to "a vapid establishmentarian hero," a move implied to be the result of editorial coercion. But evidence of this is lacking; a more likely scenario has Siegel and Shuster transferring their support of New Deal initiatives to a defense of the American government. The perception of a well-intentioned Administration responsive to disasters caused by depression and fascism could foster the kind of patriotism that led many social critics to endorse national causes.

This was evident in the first Superman comic book concerning war-related themes. Appearing on newsstands in December 1941, Superman #15 featured hostile nations called "Napkan" and "Oxnalia," respectively standing in for Japan and Germany. Operating under the guidance of the Secretary of the Navy, Superman foils the attempts of "bloodthirsty Napkanese saboteurs" to slow down American defense production and set up puppet governments in Latin America. Superman warns the "increasingly warlike" Napkan nation against "encroaching on the Western hemisphere" while dispensing with suicide bombers. In the following story, Superman journeys to Europe to punish "Oxnalia" for invading its small "democratic neighbor Numark." After liberating the king and royal family of Numark, which in the story constituted the political leadership of this "democracy," Superman proposes to "teach the bully a lesson." Single-handedly, Superman dismantles

27/ibid., 132.
the Oxnalian military machine and humbles its leader, a ranting *doppelgänger* for Adolf Hitler named "Razkal."28

In these stories, Superman's disinterested restoration of the status quo represented a simplified version of what many Americans wished for—a painless resolution to an impending war. "Numark," despite being ruled by a monarch, retained the status of "democracy" because of its smallness. Fighting for the underdog, a crucial part of Superman's appeal, could allow a small monarchy to stand in for a democracy. Superman defended the average American, and even became an everyman in his identity as Clark Kent. The transformation of plot themes in Superman comics from depression to war addressed major changes in predominant public issues, presenting solutions that made distant authority seem familiar. As the next chapter shows, it also helped vault Superman into the American cultural lexicon by the start of the 1940s. The comic book exploded on the scene as a new mass medium to be reckoned with.

During World War II, comic books found mass popularity and critical acceptance. Chapter Two surveys the various interpretations and studies of comic books conducted before the peak tensions of the domestic Cold War. In many ways, the discussions of comic books attempted to find civic uses for the medium while proferring the rhetoric of consumer democracy that would become integral to anticommunism. But the defense of capitalism demanded a retrenchment in traditions of home, school, church, and official authority. This movement surfaced in purges of political subversives from politics, show business, and academia; it also lent urgency to the crusade against the comic book industry, which occupies Chapter Three. Many comic books offered images and stories that appealed to a segment of readers while it undermined the moral society that critics of the comics sought after. Anger over "crime and horror" comic books fed the rise to prominence of a

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psychiatric theory that excessive readings caused adolescents to become juvenile
delinquents; this disposable medium was held largely responsible for a crisis of authority.
The controversy finally commanded the attention of the United States Senate in 1954.
Chapter Four analyzes three days of hearings on comic books and juvenile delinquency,
during which social assumptions and official mechanisms combined to accomplish little in
understanding delinquency but much in controlling the content of comic books. Increased
public pressure forced the industry to institute a strict censorship code that outlined the
divisive issues held in check temporarily. By studying the shifting place of comic books in
American life from 1940 to 1955, this thesis offers a prism into broader social conflicts.
CHAPTER 2

ACCEPTABLE VIOLENCE: COMICS AND WORLD WAR II

By the end of the 1930s, the success of Superman gradually had sparked the formation of a whole "culture industry" around comic books. Indeed, the Superman character alone represented a burgeoning multimedia empire. By 1942, the Superman comic book titles (Action Comics and Superman) were selling 1,250,000 copies bimonthly. A comic strip syndicated in over 285 daily newspapers reached an estimated audience of 25 million readers. 85 radio stations broadcast a weekly Superman program as early as 1940, while Paramount Studios released a series of 24 color animated cartoons. Retail outlets stocked over 60 articles of Superman-related merchandise on their shelves. The degree to which adults endorsed the character can be measured in the application of Superman's name to an Army tank corps, a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade float, and the theme for an entire day at the 1942 New York World's Fair.¹

On the shoulders of this phenomenon stood a plethora of imitators as the "costumed superhero" quickly became the dominant archetype in the suddenly booming comic book industry. Publishers sold large numbers of comics featuring characters such as Captain Marvel, Batman, Hangman, the Human Torch, the Sub Mariner, and the Flash. Even before Pearl Harbor, World War II helped prolong this phenomenon, providing writers, artists, and editors with the ideal villains to pit against their fictional protagonists. But it

also served as the context for a public discussion of comic books and their proper place in American life. By telling certain kinds of stories about a widely-supported war, comic books not only helped shape the way that war was perceived; they also found a niche of legitimacy within which the comics medium could receive public consideration as a form of mass communication. Thus even negative attitudes toward the comics, often expressed in denunciations of poor literary content or "escapism," generally focused on how to improve, rather than eliminate, the medium.

This chapter considers first the way comic books that featured costumed superheroes fighting Axis enemies helped gain broad popularity and limited criticism for the medium. It situates the critical debate on the comics within a pattern that specifically drew upon the struggle over films in the 1930s. While social scientists, intellectuals, educators, and industry professionals searched for meaning in the popularity of both films and comic books, they inadvertently created a foothold for later attacks on their objects of study. Similarly, the arguments made against comic books in the first half of the 1940s placed national identity at the center of concerns about what children read in comics. Arbiters of culture and morality proposed specifically how comics should portray American life, prefiguring the way the later crusade against the comics would find common ground with the imperatives of the domestic Cold War.

Unlike the preceding "war to end all wars," World War II received overwhelming support from Americans. Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and militarist Japan presented obvious threats that few disputed. While "25 million workers gave of their pay envelope regularly for war bonds," virtually every major public and private institution endorsed the war effort.2 This attitude was well-represented in the growing comic book industry. Many

of the artists and writers came from working-class immigrant families that had struggled through depression, ghettoization, and discrimination. Yet these individuals, ostensibly predisposed to be oppositional or even revolutionary, formed the pool from which sprung the undeniably patriotic content of wartime comics. Understanding requires a look at the conditions of individual creation and mass publication.

The career of Jack Kirby, a legendary figure in the comics industry, provides a prominent example. Born Jacob Kurtzberg in 1917, he grew up in a poor neighborhood in New York City. Kirby's fascination with pulp fiction, films, and comic strips led him first to a career in animation, then comic books by the late 1930s. "Jack Kirby" became the most-used of several pseudonyms, a common industry practice initiated in the dime novel era that created "the illusion that a small staff was much larger." Also traceable to the dime fiction days was the transitory nature of the mass publication industry with which Kirby had to contend in the 1930s. Kirby worked for Timely Comics, whose publisher Martin Goodman had recognized trends in shifting his line first from pulp magazines to comic books, then from science-fiction to superhero-oriented subject matter.3

In the February 1940 issue of Marvel Mystery Comics, almost two full years before American entry into World War II, Timely pitted superheroes against Nazi submarines. Goodman, Kirby, and several other Timely employees were Jewish and consciously anti-Nazi.4 They were also, as Kirby himself later recalled, "extremely patriotic."5 Despite impoverished backgrounds, many artists and writers viewed their opportunities in America as the best available in the world – a vision heightened by the spectre of fascism. This


4Ibid., 36.

feeling embraced the rhetoric of unlimited class mobility that long had been central to the American notion of individualism. Kirby’s nationalism crystallized in his best-selling wartime creation, Captain America, which first appeared in March 1941. The first cover of Captain America Comics features a hero costumed in the American flag delivering a right cross to the jaw of none other than Adolph Hitler himself.

In its pages, an "origin" story depicts the transformation of Steve Rogers, a poor, scrawny 4-F reject, into a super-powered being by means of a serum. Motivated by both poverty and patriotism, Rogers volunteers as a test subject for this government experiment that held unknown dangers; several others had died in the process. Miraculously, Rogers perseveres through the painful and life-threatening metamorphosis; moments later, the serum’s inventor dies by the gunshot of a Nazi spy. Since the scientist had committed the serum’s formula to memory, Rogers becomes the first and last super-powered fighter in the government’s arsenal. More so than Superman, Captain America represented the ascendency of the everyman from poverty to success, weakness to strength, obscurity to importance, that faithful service to country could offer.

Hostility toward the Nazis dovetailed with a renewal of patriotism, inspiring demonstrations of Americanism. Captain America Comics offered its readers means to do so that surpassed the enthusiastic consumption of anti-Axis stories. Membership in the “Captain America’s Sentinels of Liberty” fan club included a card which enjoined participants to “assist Captain America in his fight upon the enemies who attempt treason against the United States of America.” Advertisements instructed readers on how to join a paper drive, exhorted the rationing of goods, and sold war bonds. While Timely Comics

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6 In superhero comics, an "origin" story indicates a tale that explains how the main character came to be, how he/she gained supranormal powers, etc.

7 Daniels, Marvel, 40.
forwarded membership dues to the War Department, it reminded readers to "Remember: Your dime may pay for the bullet which will finish off the last Jap!"*8

Efforts such as those of Captain America Comics joined private consumption with civic duty, merging entertainment and national policy in ways that lent official sanction to violence against specific groups. Often this could result in the promotion of values that differed little from those espoused by the Axis powers; the extreme nationalism attributed to enemy countries required nearly a similar mobilization of "us against them" at home. This was especially evident in depictions of the Japanese in comic books.9 Artists rendered Japanese villains as rat-like, drooling monsters; writers portrayed one-dimensionally obsessive murderers. Far from calculated acts of racist propaganda, these images (and the lack of significant protest they generated) reflected the predominant consensus among white Americans. The subhuman status of the Japanese and their Nisei children in the United States, taken as a given in most discussions among military strategists, newspaper reporters, and magazine editors, found its peak expression in the mass internment of Japanese-Americans in "relocation camps."10

American soldiers, with their own reasons to view the enemy as something other than human, composed a secondary readership augmenting the main audience of adolescent civilians. Newsweek complained that comic books far outsold established magazines such as The Saturday Evening Post at military PX stores. Estimating industry profits at $30 million for 1943, Newsweek argued that "the war-developed soldier market" lent a significant boost to sales figures. The article cited a survey in which 35% of respondents in

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the 18-30 age bracket described themselves as comic book readers. Despite wartime paper shortages, the comic book sales output as a whole reached approximately 25 million copies monthly, including 35,000 issues of *Superman* exported to military bases.\(^{11}\)

Of the few objections raised against the violent content of these wartime comics, the most serious drew a comparison between the culture of the United States and its declared enemy. Margaret Frakes wrote in *Christian Century* of the fascist implications she perceived in monstrous renditions of Germans and Japanese, accusing comics publishers of "fomenting race hatred." For Frakes, many American comics differed little from Nazi "primers created for German children" that featured distorted images of Jews. But Frakes went further, suggesting that the violent, extralegal methods of obtaining justice employed by costumed superheroes promoted a fascist mentality.\(^{12}\)

Others concurred, comparing Superman to Nietzsche's *ubermensch* against a background of Nazi doctrine. The Nazis' appropriation of Nietzschean concepts in their notion of an Aryan "master race" caused many contemporary observers to accept such interpretations at face value.\(^{13}\) This tendency only increased toward the end of the war; Nietzsche and anything related to his writings became associated with a kind of proto-fascism. Thus, for some, Superman's popularity came to imply stirrings of a dangerous "herdist phenomenon."\(^{14}\) Reverend Robert Southard, a Missouri professor of theology,

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\(12\) Margaret Frakes, "Comics Are No Longer Comic," *Christian Century*, 59:44 (November 4, 1942), 1349-1351.


\(14\) "Are Comics Fascist?" *Time*, XLVI:17 (October 22, 1945), 67-68.
warned readers of the *New York Times* that superhero comics were "paper incarnations of the devastating Nietzsche Nazi philosophy of force."\textsuperscript{15}

These arguments remained somewhat marginal; the excesses of comic books matched those of films and political speeches in creating a wartime atmosphere. The ensuing public discussion of comics necessarily limited its criticism of violent images and moral boundaries. Triumphs over Axis enemies employed violence with an exaggerated reluctance; merciless, immoral behavior could reside only in Germans or Japanese. Critics of the comics avoided this thinly veiled distinction between "us" and "them." Unlike the anti-comics crusaders of the postwar years, even the most bilious condemnations of comic books never argued for censorship or abolition of the industry. Comic books, if not taken as seriously as "high" literature, earned a level of consideration resembling that given to other mass communications.

Despite the acknowledgement that adults read comic books, a broad concern for adolescent readers dominated the discourse. In many ways, the public forum on comics in the 1940s followed a familiar pattern to those who observed the struggle over the content of films in the 1920s and 30s. A public groundswell of anger had emanated from the well-circulated belief that "hard-boiled" and "realistic" films were responsibility for juvenile delinquency. In response, the film industry instituted a Production Code in 1927 as an attempt to circumvent government intervention with self-censorship. When this failed to alter content satisfactory to leading critics, a two-level debate ensued that was exemplified in the Payne Fund studies of the early 1930s. Academics offered "carefully qualified" conclusions, arguing that films were "one among many influences which mold the experience of children." But these studies appeared subsequent to a purported summary of the Payne Fund project, Henry James Forman's 1933 book *Our Movie Made Children*. As

the title suggests, Forman presented a simplified version of the research that lent intellectual legitimacy to the sweeping indictments of the film industry levelled by magazines such as *Christian Century* and *Parents' Magazine*, and organizations led by the Legion of Decency.¹⁶

The resolution of the controversy included the enactment of a stricter film ratings system, to be administered by a "czar" with a public reputation for morality, in this case former Indiana judge Bill Hays. But the Payne Fund also placed a share of the responsibility for film content upon consumers. As Joel Spring points out, some scholars recommended raising the critical ability of audiences through a partnership between Hollywood and the public school system. Film appreciation courses offered in public schools were central to a strategy of improving public taste in hopes of creating a market for "better" films. By 1937, an estimated three million high school pupils were studying films as literature, with the assistance of printed study guides and educational films produced in Hollywood.¹⁷

Both approaches, which would resurface in the comic book debate, constituted an official acceptance of film as a powerful medium capable of communicating information and entertainment to audiences of all ages. Traditionally, the comics form had lacked the comfort of this assumption. Comic strips, which began appearing regularly in major newspapers in 1897, were generally looked upon as child's play.¹⁸ George Gallup's first

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major poll uncovered contrary evidence in 1931, revealing that "an overwhelming margin" of adults read the comics sections. This discovery's most immediate impact was upon the advertising industry, which had been hard hit by the depression. Prominent advertising campaigns utilized the comics form in various print arenas, from William Randolph Hearst's *Comic Weekly* to glossy magazines. Comic-created spokespersons sold products in print and on radio, with some success. Nevertheless, cultural historian Roland Marchand maintains, advertisers felt this was something of a debasement of "higher" advertising forms. They questioned the purchasing power of the audience for such ads, equating adults who read comics with children – an implicit class bias against those considered too undereducated to appreciate "real" literature or hold paying jobs.19

While business leaders reluctantly acknowledged the marketability of comics, defenders of traditional literacy occasionally expressed more pointed disgust. Polemics intermittently complained that newspaper strips and the proliferation of the comics form represented "at once an effect and a powerful contributing cause ... of the prevailing infantilism of the American mind."20 But the circulation of comics in "book" form by the end of the 1930s lent a different cast to the issue. Receptiveness among adolescents met with hostility from adults, particularly as comic books began surfacing among the notebooks and textbooks of schoolchildren.

The issue warranted public debate by 1940, due largely to an angry diatribe published by literary critic Sterling North. In an editorial that first appeared in the *Chicago Daily News*, North issued what he called "A Challenge to American Parents." Denouncing comic books as "a national disgrace," he called on parents to monitor closely their children's literary diet. North excoriated comic books for everything from bright colors that


"strained young eyes and nervous systems" to poor vocabulary and moral content.
"Superman heroics, voluptuous females in scanty attire, blazing machine guns, hooded 'justice,' and cheap political propaganda" were all elements that made a teacher's job more difficult, for regular comic book reading conditioned a child to become "impatient" with literature prescribed in schools. Ominously, North warned of "a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one" unless parents and teachers took drastic action.21

Reprinted in several publications, North's polemic provoked both discussion and action. It particularly struck a chord with librarians, many of whom added comic books to a list of threats to the library system that included funding cuts and political neglect. This concern that comic books undermined the literary mission of libraries arose in a December 1944 press conference on library issues held by Eleanor Roosevelt. Helen Ferris, Director of the Junior Literary Guild, defined this mission for the First Lady; if not for comic books, librarian-selected books could serve as both "preventive" and "cure" for the shiftless attitude toward education attributed to children in poverty.22 Many critics openly acknowledged the fundamental role of economic and environmental circumstances in a child's educational development, citing these factors to explain why some children might read comic books to the utter exclusion of "higher" literary fare. Indeed, one commentator aptly summarized this image of the typical comic book reader in his description of "the so-called 'Dead End' kid ... who thinks libraries are for sissies."23

But librarians and education professionals, perhaps taking a cue from films, also had been among the first to conceive the comics form as a potentially useful educational


tool. As early as 1937, the New York Board of Education had embarked on a joint project with WPA-sponsored writers and artists to circulate comic adaptations of prose tales in some public schools. Largely considered a success and greeted with enthusiasm by pupils, the comic books were distributed on a trial basis among 50,000 students in 140 schools.\footnote{24} By attempting to meet the reading skills of disadvantaged children halfway, experiments of this kind engaged the material circumstances of students and sought to overcome them. Similar projects in libraries met with some success; one report touted the favorable reception of a book collection titled "Heroes and Supermen" that included tales of Robin Hood and Paul Bunyan.\footnote{25}

But *Parents' Magazine* undertook perhaps the most ambitious of such projects. Among the leading critics of the allegedly "escapist" content of comic books, the editors insisted on the importance of "realism" in art and narrative. They expressed concern that American children would adopt the violent methods of comic book superheroes to the point of undermining institutional authority entirely. Crucial to this notion was the assumption that children would abandon such tripe happily, if offered an attractive alternative of "realistic" comic books. When it entered the field of comic book publishing in early 1941, *Parents' Magazine* sought to provide examples of what that reality should look like. Touting *Parents'* line of titles as "really well-drawn," editor Clara Savage Littledale proclaimed that children finally could enjoy comics entertainment with "real educational value." Littledale juxtaposed this image against "lurid, fantastic, cheap, terrifically time-wasting, and over-stimulating" content for which *Parents* hoped to provide "a substitute."

\footnote{24}{"Action' Primers Hailed By Pupils," *New York Times*, November 28, 1937, II, p.6.}

Several assumptions informed this venture. Implicitly, decades of comments had figured the audience for the comics form to be predominantly lower class; thus Littledale's well-used prescription that a child's leisure time be spent "constructively" or "educationally" suggested the imposition of one class' concept of regimented leisure upon another. The notion of a didactic relationship between a form of communication and its audience imbued comic books with an unequivocal power to teach readers good or bad behaviors. It set up a one-way model of interaction with an active text and a passive audience that reduced all cultural communication to the level of propaganda. Given this, the content of the comic books published by Parents' Magazine contains overt, self-conscious political messages. Obviously intended to teach, the Parents project suggests not only how "high" notions of culture could be expressed through "low" outlets, but also how the appearance of conflict in mass culture during the depression could become a veneer of consensus in the postwar years.

In a prominent article titled "What To Do About The Comics," Littledale introduced the first in their new line of comic books, True Comics.26 The article featured a group of adolescent celebrities, including Mickey Rooney, Gloria Jean, and Shirley Temple, who were to serve as the "junior editorial staff" for True Comics. Also active in the creative process were several intellectuals; the senior editorial staff included Ivy League professors of history and education, and prominent pollster George Gallup. This carefully composed group of participants lent authenticity to Littledale's claims that the new line of comic books would be both entertaining and realistic.

The article reprinted several "splash" pages from the inaugural edition of True Comics, indicative of what the editors considered proper stories. "World Hero No. 1" was the title of a biography of Winston Churchill, while the conquest of the American West was

26Clara Savage Littledale, "What To Do About The 'Comics'," Parents' Magazine, 16 (March 1941), 26-27; 93.
to be rendered heroically in a feature titled "Frontier Fighters." In a lengthy article the following year in Print, comics publisher M.C. Gaines attempted to historicize the comics medium and display its beneficent potential. Appended to the essay were several reprinted examples of so-called "good" comics, among which was a True Comics feature entitled "The Minute Man Answers The Call." Within the space of four pages, the image of the "Minute Man" is superimposed upon fighting Americans in every war from the Revolutionary era to the contemporary conflict. This story combines elements of what is commonly called "consensus-school history" with wartime propaganda to create a specific vision of the American past intended to promote unqualified support in the future.

Despite the obvious spatial limitations of such a story, the narrative is still striking in its selection of words and images. The original Minute Man fights for "freedom," of which the only example given is "the right to tax ourselves." In a subsequent panel, a thoughtful Uncle Sam ponders the twin threats of "Indians in the West" and "ships seized at sea." These external menaces force "a new generation of Minute Men" to win international respect for the United States through armed struggle. Prominent is the notion, characteristic of the consensus ideal, that all meaningful conflict in American history has emanated from outside American borders. But its peak expression comes in portrayals of the Mexican War and the Civil War, in which nonwhite peoples are noticeably absent. War with Mexico unproblematically "gave us" land, allowing Americans to generously spread "the spirit of human freedom" from sea to shining sea. Similarly, slaves and even slavery itself, seemingly obvious affronts to "the spirit of human freedom," receive no mention in the two panels devoted to the War Between the States. Instead, anonymous soldiers appear charging into battle animated solely by the impulse "to preserve the Union." So devoid of conflict is this depiction that even the words "North" and "South" are omitted.

Escalating “despite Lincoln’s efforts” in this interpretation, the Civil War becomes only the first in a line of conflicts in which the United States is a reluctant participant. The story reiterates the well-worn idea that the United States always has undertaken official violence to achieve a stated goal only after exhausting all peaceful alternatives. This theme, when accompanied by such words as “we,” “our,” and “us,” works to include the reader in the author’s worldview. As the story moves into the twentieth century, its predilection for a conflict-free, unquestioningly patriotic society becomes overblown. In 1898, “the Minute Man’s spirit wiped out ugly Spanish oppression in Cuba” even as “we also took the Phillippines and made them our lasting friends.” Woodrow Wilson’s vast attempts at “peaceful persuasion” failed to prevent peace-loving American policymakers from being “forced to enter” World War I. In the next panel, the contemporary German enemies become the direct descendants of Revolutionary-era Hessian mercenaries. Finally, the story closes with FDR exhorting “today’s Minute Men,” followed by the ruminations of “the Minute Man of 1942” on American courage. An advertisement for war bonds serves as a postscript.

None of these obvious historical distortions would have disturbed the majority of Americans in 1942. Promoting a Herrenvolk democracy, this True Comics tale merely replaces one kind of violence with another. The officially-sanctioned action of the state, while resembling that of the costumed hero, aims to reinforce faith in institutions and leaders by reconciling individual acts of heroism to national goals. For the editors of Parents’ Magazine and like-minded institutional figures, this represented the way comic books should portray reality. Disorder threatened American society from outside physical and social boundaries, embodied in the subhuman status assigned to the official Japanese adversary and the “enemy alien” designation for Japanese-Americans.
The work of *Parents' Magazine* represented one of the most prominent of many responses to comic books in a climate of experimentation with the form. Intellectuals from the fields of anthropology, psychology, sociology, and education studied the role of comic books in American society with approaches ranging from unbridled enthusiasm to professional detachment. At the heart of this scholarly discussion was an interest in the very issue that preoccupied the editors of *Parents' Magazine* – the relationship between mass entertainment and its audience. This question had been central to studies of film and radio, which in the 1930s had elevated the social sciences to new levels of public importance. Paul Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Research at Princeton University had led the development of empirical approaches to the measurement of the effects of mass media upon audiences.

Emblematic of the Bureau's reliance on statistics and surveys was Hadley Cantril's study of the panic engendered by the October 1938 radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. Cantril offered a multifaceted explanation, based on 99 of his own case studies and a CBS survey of 460 respondents, for the broadcast's ability to convince listeners of an imminent Martian invasion. A variety of factors, including education, economic background, and immediate setting, comprised what Cantril called an individual's "critical ability" to distinguish truth from fiction. But this was conditioned by a broader cultural setting of "emotional insecurity" over the obscure power of science and technology, the possibility of war in Europe, and the constant threat of economic disaster. For Cantril, the panic indicated an anxious society that was suggestible to demagoguery and panaceas, the responsibility for which lay in neither the inherent power of the radio nor the ignorance of the masses. Cantril never stated clearly where in fact culpability might lie for the panic; his main concern was to counter the image of an all-powerful mass media that dominated the shaping of opinion. By showing the variety of responses to the survey
questions and interviews, the study showed the difficulty of identifying patterns among populations and cautioned against hastily concocted explanations.28

Studies of comic books during World War II followed Cantril's methodology. Academics evaluated sample groups of adolescent readers and analyzed the vocabulary of selected comic books. The earliest published works of this type dealt with the charges that comics were detrimental to a child's education. Paul Witty, a sociologist at Northwestern University, conducted interviews with two groups of students from grades four through eight. The answers given by a random sample of 2500 students from seven schools in three cities led Witty to ambivalent conclusions. In the younger students, he found a "general and consistent" interest in comics that failed to correspond to grades, behavior, or overall reading habits.29 But Witty's analyses of responses given by students from the higher grades expressed concern that "excessive reading" of comics could cause "a decline in artistic appreciation, and a taste for shoddy, distorted presentations."30 While his first study had cited the importance of examining comic book reading in the context of "a desirable or ... undesirable total pattern"31 of activity, Witty's second work expanded on this approach. Perceiving a decline in reading habits, Witty warned of "the inadequacy of the school and the home in cultivating a taste for ... literary merit."32


32 Witty, "Reading the Comics," *JOEP*, 181.
Social scientists who analyzed the content of comic books themselves arrived at less
ominous conclusions. Accompanying Witty's first study published in the December 1941
issue of the *Journal of Experimental Education* was Robert Thorndike's survey of the
"range and difficulty of vocabulary" contained in samples of *Superman, Batman, Action
Comics*, and *Detective Comics*. Although these comic books used some slang words and
meanings, Thorndike argued, "the bulk of the vocabulary was standard English." Thorndike
qualified his evaluation, pointing to the difficulties posed by comic books' combination of words and pictures; nevertheless, he estimated the reading difficulty at about the fifth or sixth grade level. Suggested was the possibility that comic books might provide a "supplementary resource" to education in the future.

This theme recurred throughout the discussions of comic books and child education in the early 1940s. When Irving Friedman, a New Jersey schoolteacher, discovered that many of his 150 students read comic books, he held an informal survey. Friedman's students seemed to contradict the conventional wisdom on comic book "escapism;" respondents differentiated clearly between fantasy and reality, leisure and work. Comic books allowed adolescents to engage reading at the level of leisure and seemed less like conscious work. To Friedman, this represented a potential breakthrough in the development of literacy. Not only were comic books "just as potent a force today as were the dime novel, Nick Carter, and Horatio Alger;" they indicated possibilities for the extension of American ideals of democracy to civic, moral, and formal education. Used

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34 *Ibid.*, 113. See also George E. Hill, "The Vocabulary of Comic Strips," *JOEP*, 34:1 (1943), 77-87. Hill actually quantifies slang words as a percentage of the total vocabulary used in particular newspaper comic strips.

properly, the medium could foster "democratic ideals," "worthy character and personality traits," and "vocabulary development."\footnote{Irving R. Friedman, "Toward Bigger and Better 'Comic Mags,'" \textit{The Clearing House}, 16:3 (November 1941), 166-168.}

Growing as an explicit response to the diatribes of Sterling North and others, this type of thinking peaked in a December 1944 symposium in the \textit{Journal of Educational Sociology} devoted to "The Comics as an Educational Medium." Commentators mixed sociological jargon with celebratory rhetoric, the latter exemplified by editor Harvey Zorbaugh's description of the comic book as both "an American institution" and "far and away America's favorite form of literature."\footnote{Harvey Zorbaugh, "The Comics – There They Stand!" \textit{Journal of Educational Sociology}, 18:4 (December 1944), 196-203: 196.} Zorbaugh argued that comics enjoyed a mass readership across lines of class, age, and occupation that helped bring Americans closer to a national culture. Through their diverse audience, comic books created unique kinds of shared experiences. According to Zorbaugh, significant indicators of the positive influence of comics on American culture included colloquialisms such as "goon" or "heebie-jeebies," holidays like Sadie Hawkins Day, references to men "as strong as Superman," and notions of gaining Popeye's prowess through the eating of spinach. While his general argument amounted to a form of cheerleading for the industry, Zorbaugh also picked up on the educational uses to which comics had been put. In 2500 schools, Superman workbooks had entered the curriculum; 2000 Sunday schools taught from Bible comics; countless readers learned about World War II's nuances in part from war-related comic books.

Sidonie Gruenberg expanded on this assessment, arguing for the democratic implications of the popularity of comics. What made the comic book a literary form for the masses was its capability "to address ... the smallest \textit{common} denominator." The comic
book would grow from its purported infancy, Gruenberg suggested, from "mere entertainment" to a "social force" to meet the demands of both the market and interest-group politics. But this maturity might never take place if those who dismissed the comics outright had their way; Gruenberg contended that many critics had allowed aesthetic elitism to obscure the medium's potential virtues and its undeniably substantial audience. Comics seemed to offer new means of disseminating values traditionally bound up in conventional literary forms. For Gruenberg, True Comics showed how comics could serve "clear educational and social purposes;" such interpretations hinted at the investment of a near-magical power in the medium itself to play upon readers' thoughts, hopes, and fears.38

Josette Frank summed this up as "wish fulfillment," a benevolent rephrasing of what Sterling North had deemed "escapism." Through comic book stories, adolescent readers could indulge fantasies that allowed them to "participate vicariously" in "adult business."39 Frank particularly singled out war comics for praise, finding them far healthier for children than "jungle girl" genres alleged to have sexual overtones. The action-oriented stories, colloquialisms, and contemporary settings that made comic books appealing to young readers suggested to Frank a stage from which children inevitably would graduate. Much of Frank's article referred to a study she had conducted one year previously for the Child Study Association, a nonprofit advocacy group. Surveying 100 comic books for content, Frank and the CSA had sought to offer a set of guidelines for concerned parents. But it did so in a way consistent with Zorbaugh and Gruenberg's framing of the issue as one of marketplace democracy versus moral and aesthetic elitism. Reiterating the theme of choice, the CSA study had emphasized the presentation of comic books and more traditional literature as only two of many options. Children, the CSA had

38Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, "The Comics as a Social Force," JOES, 18:4 (December 1944), 204-213.

39Josette Frank, "What's in the Comics?" JOES, 18:4 (December 1944), 214-222.
contended, found comic books attractive in part because they, rather than their parents, selected them.\textsuperscript{40}

Frank's argument rested heavily on the depiction of comic book reading as healthy, which she bolstered by referring specifically to the war-related themes that dominated the field. The telling of war stories was crucial in allowing comic books to join the shift to a growing consumer culture, a trend which accelerated after World War II in the United States. Social science professionals played an important role in making sense of this for an uncertain public. Some academics had more than a passing interest in the way the comic book controversy would be resolved; both Zorbaugh and Frank served as advisors to comic book publishers, associations that would help underpin more strident rebukes of the industry by the end of the 1940s.

The observations of individuals more directly involved in comic book production surpassed the celebrations of Zorbaugh and his ilk. Seeking to historicize the medium, they hoped to demonstrate how its universal appeal transcended boundaries of time and place, freeing it from the moral and aesthetic judgments of the contemporary world. Even Zorbaugh had expressed this desire in his comparison of comics to "folklore and fairy tale." Allegedly, they functioned similarly in mediating "the relationship of the individual to his social world."\textsuperscript{41}

In William Moulton Marston, the social sciences and comic book production met. Marston was a psychologist who had lectured at several universities; in late 1941 he assumed a pen name and created Wonder Woman for National Comics.\textsuperscript{42} Entering the comic book debate in 1943, Marston weighed in with his opinion on the meaning of the

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\textsuperscript{41}Zorbaugh, "The Comics," \textit{JOES}, 203.

\textsuperscript{42}Goulart, \textit{The Comic Book Reader's Companion}, 178-179.
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medium's spiraling popularity. Like Zorbaugh, he figured a vast audience for the comics, multiplying the 18 million copies sold monthly by the sharing of each comic among four or five individuals to arrive at a total of 70 million readers. Only universal terms sufficed for Marston's explanation of this phenomenon; comic books offered a brand of "wish fulfillment" that was both a "radical departure" from past fiction and "the same thing precisely" that had lent power to pictorial stories over centuries. For Marston, the rise of mass culture democratized access to a timeless form of storytelling in a particularly American way. By appealing primarily to "primitive" emotions, comic books had no need to live up to the traditional aesthetic standards of "high" art or literature. Their engagement of readers at a level more relaxed than textbooks or essays endowed comic books with a unique ability to teach morality through their portrayals of heroism.43

Much of Marston's theory on comic books derived from the work of Max C. Gaines, who had published the first modern comic book in 1933 and facilitated the acceptance of the Superman character by National Comics in 1938. Gaines' influential 1942 article in Print historicized the comic book as the consummation of centuries of evolution in "narrative illustration." Cave paintings, Sumerian tablets, Bible blockbooks, and trifold works of art such as Hieronymus Bosch's The Garden of Earthly Delights all represented attempts to reach a popular audience, making them forerunners of the comics. Human nature explained the production of comics, "for man thinks in images," and the medium's appeal, offering readers "the same type of mental catharsis ... that Aristotle claimed was an attribute of the drama."44 Comic books must be understood anthropologically, as products of a culture; for Gaines and others, this meant American democracy.

43William Moulton Marston, "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics," The American Scholar, 13:1 (Winter 1943-44), 35-44.

Gaines referred to a touring exhibition sponsored by the American Institute of Graphic Arts that presented "for the first time a history of narrative art from the first recorded picture-story to the comic book of the twentieth century." Comic books appeared side-by-side with prehistorical wall scratchings from Spain, paintings of American Indians, Egyptian tomb paintings, Japanese scrolls of anthropomorphic satires, and Western European religious picture scrolls. Gaines produced the article "Narrative Illustration" in book form, one historian argues, for distribution at the exhibit itself. When the traveling display began its tour at the National Arts Club in New York City, Gaines gave a featured talk; Publisher's Weekly described the show as "one answer to the criticism which has been leveled." The framing of comic books as the results of the historical evolution of universal forms of expression thus served to promote both the medium and this exhibit.

By the late 1940s, sociologist Coulton Waugh and anthropologist Lancelot Hogben produced scholarly work that reiterated Gaines' theses. They described the ascendancy of comic books as a metaphor for the evolution of mankind to democracy. Uncritically, Gaines had joined mechanically-produced comic books to preindustrial forms of expression. Economic analysis appeared nowhere in these celebrations; comic books were artifacts of a democratic, rather than a market, culture. Implicitly, the discussion of comics followed the long-standing American tradition of equating the market with democracy. In


attempting to contextualize comic books broadly, many observers had removed them from the particular circumstances of the contemporary world. Lost amid the rhapsodizing over historicity and market democracy was the relationship between comic book and reader.

The analyses that maintained a tight focus on understanding the act of reading comic books suggested the complexities behind celebratory simplifications. Child psychologist Lauretta Bender’s contribution to the 1944 symposium on the comics referred to a series of controlled reading experiments. Comic books offered children one "constructive approach to reality, not an escape;" they allowed adolescents to experiment with social mores and boundaries in a harmless arena. Bender constructed a form of identification with comic book stories that was dialectical; child-readers projected their fantasies upon narratives and characters, while incorporating a story’s solutions into their thinking about real problems. Comic book fantasies assisted children in working out aggressive feelings without providing a model likely to inspire mechanistic imitation. Ironically, Bender criticized True Comics for creating anxiety in children by offering violence purported to be "real." By facilitating a more relaxed form of language repetition that stimulated learning, the comics most often attacked for being "escapist" better served a child's educational growth.

In 1948, a major study produced by social scientists at Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Communications Research echoed Bender's desire to integrate comic book reading into a child's total experience. Researchers Katherine Wolfe and Marjorie Fiske held detailed interviews with a sample of 104 children, "carefully stratified according to age, sex, and economic status." Wolfe and Fiske emphasized "insight into the nature of comic book reading experiences among different kinds of children" over previous studies' interest in "procuring a quantitative picture of how many and what kinds of comics are read by the

population at large."50 Children read comics in stages that corresponded to their own maturation process and socioeconomic background. In early adolescence, children identified with "funny animal" and superhero characters as outlined by Bender; but by their teens, readers perceived comic books as leisure offerings.

Wolfe and Fiske broke down comic book readers into three types — excessive fans, moderate readers, and indifferent browsers. Of the three, fans were most likely to be compulsive readers for whom Superman-like heroes provided objects of worship rather than identification. These children formed simplified thinking habits that inhibited their ability to read "noncomic material" in a way not dissimilar to Sterling North's references to "impatience" with literature. Unlike North, however, Wolfe and Fiske located the cause of some children's obsession with comic books in the socioeconomic environment, rather than the medium itself. The children of "professional parents" were seven times less likely to become fans than those of "nonprofessional parents."51 Class was often a decisive factor for the atmosphere in which a child approached the comics; that readers from working-class families continued to identify with comic book characters into their teens gave concrete meaning to the most virulent criticisms of the comics. The association of comic book reading with the lower classes generated "a double standard of comic reading morality" in both parents and children interviewed for the study. This ambivalent attitude found comic books to be at once beneath legitimate concern and "seriously dangerous." Yet Wolfe and Fiske argued that comics satisfied "a real developmental need in normal children" and could only harm the "already maladjusted."52


51 Ibid., 43-45.

52 Ibid., 48-50.
Social scientists stood in the midst of a nascent consumer culture that exploded on the scene with new force after 1945. The rapid growth of the comic book industry prefigured the youthful composition of the market for new goods and mass communications offerings. While academic and cultured observers alike failed to realize this in the midst of World War II, celebrators of comic books employed the rhetoric of consumer democracy that would dominate the postwar decades. For them, comic books' extension of a centuries-old form of popular communication to untold masses of readers suggested the democratic heights to which the market might aspire. Simultaneously, their potential use in education gave comics a civic function that wedded them to central American institutions.

For the medium, appeals to patriotism had paved the way to success. To criticize comics that exhorted American soldiers and rallied young civilians was to argue against the war itself. But for the comic book industry, the rise to popularity and critical acceptance contained the seeds of its own destruction. If comic books could teach good behaviors, they also could teach bad ones. Few responses to the attacks on the comics disputed this one-way relationship between a comic book and its reader; those that did offered theoretical constructs that would be put to use in a more potent crusade against the industry. Critics of the comics in the first postwar decade would capitalize on Lauretta Bender's identification model as explanation for nervous parents of deviant behavior in adolescents. Comic books represented one side of a growing contest over social boundaries after the war, one that would inspire a crusade to shut down the industry.
CULTURAL MENACE: THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE COMICS

Like many American parents in the late 1940s, journalist Marya Mannes worried about her eight-year-old son's habit of reading comic books. She feared an addiction to a "comic book world of violence, adventure, escape, and sex" stunted the boy's moral and educational development. Comic books wasted time better spent "learning, playing ... or dreaming," contributing to the formation of lazy thinking habits and crass tastes generally attributed to the lower classes. Like the study performed by the Lazarsfeld social scientists, Mannes equated lack of education and poor economic standing with "needs" for comic books. By 1947, however, celebrations of the medium's educational potential rang hollow. While Mannes applauded the efforts of projects like True Comics, she warned that her child represented numerous others who found "elevating" comic books boring; "left to himself, he reaches for the marijuana."¹

This portended more than merely a lowbrow infiltration of middle and upper class leisure pursuits. Comic book heroes like Superman became barely distinguishable from their opponents; both sent messages of disrespect for authority. Increasingly, heroes and villains alike seemed "accountable to no law, no higher body or organization, no state or city or national discipline." Formerly, costumed superheroes had fought the Axis powers in

cooperation with the aims of military and governmental authorities. But as comic books turned to domestic settings and situations, superfluous images of law-enforcement and legal mechanisms suggested lawlessness. Mannes denounced this as a short-sighted "exploitation" of adolescents by profit-seeking adults, warning that "a profound vacuum" gaped within the lives of many readers. For right-thinking Americans to allow comic books to fill this void was to exercise a dangerous level of neglect, with consequences of illiteracy, violence, and the elevation of vigilante justice at the expense of education, social peace, and official institutions of authority.\(^2\)

Unknowingly, Mannes had highlighted nascent changes that would reshape the issues surrounding comic books. Children shared with their parents in the benefits of the shifting emphasis from production to consumption in the postwar era. Unprecedented leisure time and economic prosperity "came to symbolize the American way of life for adults and teenagers alike." Magazines such as *Seventeen* and *Hot Rod* were among the first to recognize what became apparent by the late 1950s - the growth of a market of adolescent consumers.\(^3\) But this group's conception of the "American way of life" clashed with a more tradition-oriented consensus that found heightened importance behind the impetus of the Cold War. Youth markets and anticommunism could be a volatile combination; new mores among teenagers, labelled as a value system for "juvenile delinquency," violated the moral society American leaders wished to show the world and threatened to undermine future struggles against the "Communist menace."

Like other forms of mass communications that functioned in part as adolescent leisure, comic books seemed to represent all of the wrong values. Images of children engrossed in tales of crime, teen romance, horror, and superheroes paralleled a perceived

\(^2\)ibid.

failure in low-selling educational comics. This trend suggested that the medium had no visible uses beyond seducing readers away from the proper influences of home, school, and church – a theory that gained credence with multiplying reports of a rise in juvenile delinquency. Embedded in the controversy over comic books were embryonic conflicts that would become apparent long after the debate ended; children threatened adult authority, lowbrow culture menaced genteel values, and lawless individualism undermined the social order maintained by official leaders and community institutions. Market abundance and traditional society represented deeply conflicting elements of the anticommunist consensus that surfaced in the crusade against the comics.

In his survey of American life in the 1940s, historian William Graebner finds "a culture of contingency." Media reports and the proclamations of acknowledged "experts" on child sex crimes, homosexual deviants, UFOs, Communists, and juvenile delinquents convinced Americans that danger "lay behind any and every door."4 Strangers menaced American families from outside the known spheres of domesticity and community. Purveyors of mass entertainment, including comic book publishers, joined this growing list of external threats. Among the first to discover the comic book menace was law-enforcement; the August 1947 national convention of the Fraternal Order of Police produced a statement that comic books were "one of the contributing factors to the cause of juvenile delinquency." In the following month, the president of the American Prison Association (APA) complained of the "crime-provoking content of many ... comic magazines."5


These warnings preceded a wave of well-publicized "copycat" crimes that would become the basis for organized efforts to control the comic book industry. Two days after the APA's statement, a Pittsburgh jury declared comic books responsible for a twelve-year-old boy's suicide by hanging. The boy's mother had arrived at this conclusion because "her son was an incessant reader ... and probably hanged himself re-enacting one scene." Other incidents suggested that child offenders had picked up on adult sensitivity to this connection. Notions of cause and effect became jumbled; juveniles said what many adults wished to hear, which often led to demands for legislation or boycotts of comic books. Arrested for piloting a stolen airplane 120 miles, two boys told policemen that they "had looked at some comic books" for detailed instructions. Perhaps the most symbolic episode occurred in Indiana, involving three boys from "good families" and a minister's son, all between the ages of six and eight:

The three tormentors ... forced him into the woods at the point of a knife, made him disrobe and bound his hands behind him. They tied a rope around his neck, looped it over a tree branch and pulled him nearly off the ground ... then danced around him, whooping in a simulated war dance. They touched lighted matches to parts of his body ... the three youths told [the probation officer] they were avid fans of comic books dealing with crime and torture. County authorities asked for a ban on the sale of such books.

Citing such reports, the New York State Sheriff's Association issued a call to action against comic books. Copycat crimes proved, in the eyes of the sheriffs, "the relationship


that clinical studies have shown between crime and comic books." The statement referred to the work of New York-based psychiatrist Frederic Wertham, a complex figure at the forefront of a growing crusade against the comic book industry. As head of psychiatric wards at Queens Hospital and the LaFargue Clinic in Harlem, Wertham and pediatrician Hilde Mosse had treated hundreds of juvenile patients through the 1940s. Much of Wertham's clientele was poor and in trouble with the law. His work with these patients had convinced Wertham that environmental factors strongly influenced a child's emotional health. In 1951, this conviction would lead Wertham to give pivotal testimony on the negative effects of segregated schools in one of the cases consolidated as the landmark Brown v. Board of Education.

But this approach also caused Wertham to consider the influences of mass culture, and particularly comic books. On a case-by-case basis, Wertham built a theory that comic books were a leading cause of deviant behavior in youth. Comic books, with their seeming ubiquity, targeting of adolescents, and violent content, especially angered Wertham. Historian James Gilbert points out that Wertham fell victim to the same error that plagued other adults; his method of question-framing in interviews with children often prefigured responses. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this approach, Wertham's views gained a substantial following among an audience of worried adults.

In March 1948, Wertham organized a Manhattan symposium on "The Psychopathology of Comic Books" during which his notions became known and found

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11 Gilbert, Cycle of Outrage, 97-100.
support from individuals with diverse politics. Radical folklorist Gershon Legman, author of a treatise that denounced violence in comic books and other media, presented statistical backing for Wertham's assertion of a problem spiraling out of control. With 500,000,000 comic books printed annually, every "city child who was six years old in 1938 ... [had] absorbed an absolute minimum of 18,000 pictorial beatings, shootings, stranglings, blood puddles and torturings." Wertham added that the rising circulation of comic books went "hand in hand" with the growth of juvenile delinquency; comics incited illicit and illegal behavior and suggested forms for it to take.  

Wertham's full argument appeared in the May 29, 1948 issue of The Saturday Review of Literature. Relating one anecdote after another, Wertham insisted that children identified with comic book characters and imitated their often violent, lawless, and anti-social behaviors. This argument, which Wertham maintained consistently for several years, stood the identification models of Josette Frank and Lauretta Bender on their collective heads. If, through "role models," comic books could teach good behaviors, they could and often did inspire bad ones. Since crime and violence dominated the content of most comic books, Wertham argued, parents should concern themselves with shielding their children from the medium entirely rather than seeking to improve its offerings. Thus, Wertham attacked notions of harmless, therapeutic, or educational uses for the comics as palliatives put forth by "apologists ... who function under the auspices of the comic book business."

In Wertham's estimation, these scholars and professionals abused their knowledge and status "to bolster up free enterprise" instead of serving community concerns. Authorities misdirected their focus on the juvenile offender, "while the comic book publishers who

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killed his mind ... and their experts who [said] his reading was good for him" went unpunished.13

This formulation tapped into deep wellsprings of anxiety. From a perspective of social liberalism, Wertham's explanations made sense to those Americans who fretted over a perceived erosion of traditional order. By locating blame in a small segment of producers of mass culture, Wertham offered a simplified process for the manufacture of behavior that appealed to a populace weary of moral ambiguities. His indictments of complicit peers only magnified Wertham's appeal as an authentic expert in an age of finger-pointing at "fellow-traveler" intellectuals and professionals. Civic organizations ranging from parent-teacher associations to the Legion of Decency agitated against comic books, capturing the ears of local and state politicians; Wertham proved a major influence on nationwide efforts from across the political spectrum to regulate or ban the sale of comic books.

Reports of local actions to ban or control the sale of comic books began appearing frequently in the press. "Indianapolis magazine distributors and city officials and civic groups," working in unison, banned thirty-five titles in May 1948; a drive by the Detroit police department removed similar numbers from city newsstands.14 "Parent and teacher associations, civic organizations and women's clubs' pushed successfully for city ordinances banning "objectionable" comic books from San Diego and Los Angeles. Activists hoped to convince state legislators to expand such laws to expel comic books from California entirely.15 Wertham's influence could be seen in the wording of the Los Angeles statute:

13Wertham, "The Comics ... Very Funny!" Saturday Review, 6-7; 27-29.


Whereas, it appears that children below the age of 18 years are of susceptible and impressionable character, are often stimulated by collections of pictures and stories of criminal acts, and do in fact often commit such crimes partly because incited to do so by such publications ... 16

By October, the New York Times estimated that fifty cities had either banned or set up "censorship committees" to prescreen comic books. 17 This flurry of activity, causing significant losses for publishers in terms of sales and public image, forced the industry to respond. That summer, the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP) announced its existence and promised to implement a code of "minimum standards." The new ACMP regulations proscribed sexual images, "glorifying of crime," torture scenes, vulgar language, "glamorizing of divorce," and negative portrayals of racial or religious groups. With ambivalence, national publications noted the ACMP's efforts but underlined them by pointing out that only fourteen of the thirty-four known publishers had joined the organization. The membership represented about one-third of the estimated monthly circulation of fifty million comic books; critics maintained that publishers of titles that contravened the code's requirements had simply "refused to join in the cleanup." 18

The formation of the ACMP and the creation of a code was part of an industry counteroffensive to growing criticism in the national press. In August, National Comics Group, publishers of Superman and Batman, announced an "educate-the-public promotion


campaign." The president of National Comics explained the purpose "to get the American public (and advertiser) to differentiate between the good comics and the not-so-good comics." Underlying this statement was the competition for dollars that divided the industry; ACMP-affiliated publishers could derive substantial benefits from the ouster of rivals from the comic book market. A full-page advertisement in the *Saturday Evening Post* demonstrated this lack of industry solidarity, suggesting that National Comics protected its own readers, but could not "pretend to defend the content of all comics magazines."

Omitting any mention of the ACMP, the advertisement nonetheless acknowledged the organization's message that publishers had a responsibility to distinguish "clearly between right and wrong." National Comics' primary interest in immunizing only itself against criticism appeared also in an open list of the company's advisory staff, which included Josette Frank, Lauretta Bender, and W.W.D. Sones, previously depicted by Wertham as silent collaborators.20

Another aspect of the campaign had ACMP executive director Henry Schultz making several public appearances. In a debate with the Federal Director of Prisons on children and the mass media, Schultz argued that exaggerated reports of "copycat" crimes and images of a uniformly adolescent readership had caused "a wild kind of hysteria" to envelop discussions of comic books. Schultz led the formation of a high-profile Advisory Committee that attempted to serve two functions - write a stricter code for ACMP members and reemphasize the wartime notion of comic books as "an educational force in the mass marketing area."21


20 "A Million Young People Will Be Better Citizens ... Because of a Comics Magazine Character!" *The Saturday Evening Post* (August 14, 1948), 73.

Despite these efforts, the ACMP campaign drew overwhelmingly negative attention to the industry. Critics added meager industry support for what they perceived as minimal standards of content to the list of offenses committed by comic book publishers. The ACMP's strategy had the additional misfortune of coinciding with a national incident that provoked widely-expressed concerns over the American image internationally. On November 5, 1948, federal officials announced that 60,000 comic books with titles like *Startling Detective* and *True Confessions* were to be shipped to Germany under the Economic Cooperation Act (ECA), central legislation to the "Marshall Plan." The ensuing storm of protest convinced ECA administrators to rescind their approval of this subsidy within one week. At stake was "the critical propaganda struggle ... between the Soviet Union and the Western democracies." Critics warned that comic books, which presented "the worst and most distorted aspect of American life," inevitably would undermine the goals of the Cold War.\(^{22}\)

In January 1949, a highly unsympathetic *New York Times* article summarized how the ECA incident had caused the public relations campaign of comic book publishers to backfire on the industry. The United States Army had announced that it would begin removing "lustier crime and horror favorites" from the comic book racks at post exchanges; however, remarked the *Times* columnist sardonically, "New York youngsters with ten cents and violent tastes will be able to go on buying them indefinitely." This state of affairs was due to the utter failure of the ACMP code, after six months of alleged implementation, to alter the content of most comic books. Arguing that the situation actually had

deteriorated, the writer quoted Wertham's finding that 120 new crime titles had been introduced since early 1948.23

This lent impetus for civic organizations and city politicians to begin coordinating local activities at the national level. The failure of the ACMP code to cure the "headache for city governments" convinced the United States Conference of Mayors to compare notes on what worked. Cities such as Tacoma, Washington, and Terre Haute, Indiana, had patterned laws after the influential Los Angeles ordinance. But the emerging model featured cooperation between public officials, citizens groups, and local retailers or distributors. The National Congress of Parents and Teachers endorsed this approach at a planning meeting for an anti-comics drive. As part of a nationwide education project, the proposal called for a "ratings list" of comic books to assist local legislators, vendors, and parents.24

The idea gained credence in many cities. In a January 1949 article in The American City, Reverend Thomas Allport explained how his censorship committee had succeeded in controlling comic books in Bellingham, Washington. Allport chaired a board that included a schoolteacher, a "housewife and mother," and a representative from the local chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. The group created a "system of judging" comic books in separate thematic categories; bluntly, Allport reported that this was done according to "what we would like in a comic magazine." Aesthetic and moral imperatives interspersed in criteria that comic books should be "interesting" and "legible," while also upholding the "authority of the law" and "dignity of women." Of the 278 titles reviewed, 67 met with rejection; the majority of the latter were "lurid, vivid, sensational" crime comics. Allport


recommended that this "definite method of censorship" become "a continuous pattern of control;" agreement appeared in the requests for information from 25 cities.25

Another influential approach, resembling that of Allport, more explicitly spelled out the issues at stake. The cities of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Cincinnati, Ohio, formed large censorship committees that included representatives from clergy, women's clubs, high schools, and the Legion of Decency. Their standards required that comic books portray "home life based on a stable and permanent marriage bond," positive depictions of law-enforcement and "proper legal procedures," and "respect for the moral laws of God." Evaluators rejected comics that featured profanity, religious or racial slurs, graphic violence, heroic criminals, and detailed descriptions of crime techniques. The Cincinnati system "provided for rating the art work, printing, color arrangement, grammar, and overall appearance" of comic books. Based on these requirements, the two committees had created a list of acceptable and objectionable comic books. Publication of the experiment caused a large number of requests for the list, which the committees produced on an annual basis until at least 1952.26

The importance of images promoting Judeo-Christian morality in American mass culture, reiterated by these censorship efforts, took on forms similar to those employed in the domestic Cold War. Like the Hollywood blacklist, lists of "good" and "bad" comics sought to give concrete measurement to a seemingly unquantifiable problem. Both campaigns looked to tradition as a bulwark against perceived threats to American society;

25Thomas A. Allport, "Comic Book Control Can Be a Success," The American City (January 1949), 100.

anticommunists such as Ayn Rand and Alfred Kohlberg endeavored to purge politics critical of free enterprise, the excesses of which preoccupied the concerns of moralizing critics of comic books. Would-be censors of the comics viewed their efforts as protecting children from a pernicious influence that could leave them ill-equipped for the ongoing struggle against "international Communism." Comic books potentially could fracture the social order necessary to maintain vigilance.

Overseas, the connection between comic books and the Cold War was more obvious. International objections to American comic books tarnished the image of the United States. Reports of these incidents offered a predictable double standard; unlike the domestic efforts of city and civic leaders, censorship of American comic books by Stalinists simply reflected a natural tendency toward totalitarianism. Thus, French Communists behaved opportunistically by blaming "peculiarly American" comic books for increased youth crime in France. By design, such criticisms fed rhetoric that "the Marshall Plan means 'colonization' of France and forced feeding of Hollywood movies and 'degenerate' comics to the French people."27 Other sources for these accusations likely included the ECA's dissemination of anticommunist comics throughout Europe; similar projects backed by UNESCO and the State Department in Third World nations, and perhaps the attacks on crime comics by American reformers.28 Certainly American comic books offended across the political spectrum. Canada, Great Britain, West Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Portugal, and Brazil enacted bans between 1949 and 1953.29


From 1947 until the Senate hearings of 1954, the center for the comic book controversy was New York City, home to leading crusader Frederic Wertham, the agenda-setting *New York Times*, and every single comic book publisher. Agitation spread rapidly throughout the state of New York. County-by-county pressure applied by civic and religious groups led to official threats and bans against the distribution of comic books. Catholic schools sponsored mass burnings "to dramatize their movement to boycott publications which ... stress crime and sex." In February 1949, the Superintendent of Schools for New York City warned that comic books could "stimulate destructive tendencies ... even for children with good home influences." This statement captured the growing sense that juvenile delinquency had spread inexplicably to middle and upper class families. A further recommendation laid bare the consequences:

> Perhaps one of the greatest needs in our life today is respect for authority ... a vital contribution to the American way of life could be made by helping children to develop respect for authority in relation to parents, religion, teachers, police, and people in governmental office.  

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While this suggestion went unheeded by publishers, the debate shifted to the floor of the New York State legislature. Party and geography divided political positions; upstate Republicans, controlling both houses, pushed through a bill on comic books over the lukewarm objections of city Democrats. The legislation proposed delegating power to the State Education Department to regulate the sale of comic books; for a small fee, publishers would be required to submit proofs to a censor board in order to obtain a permit. After the Times, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the American Book Publishers Council registered opposition to this obvious form of prior restraint, Republican Governor Thomas Dewey vetoed the bill. Undaunted, opponents of the comic book industry formed a joint legislative committee to study "means of restricting or regulating the circulation of undesirable comic books." Between 1949 and 1953, the committee conducted public hearings, issued threats to the publishers, and proposed several more bills that ended in veto. While the national ire toward comic books subsided somewhat after 1950, the New York committee worked to maintain public attention on the issue. Along with Frederic Wertham, this group kept alive the potential for larger action against the industry, realized when the reigniting of popular outrage resulted in hearings by the United States Senate in April 1954.33

In Wertham's well-publicized testimony before New York committee hearings in 1950 and 1951, he consistently called for a "public health law" that would uniformly ban the sale and display of crime comic books to children under the age of fifteen. By

juxtaposing this proposal against a "crime comic book industry" alleged to view "children as a market of child buyers and no more," Wertham ran squarely against the central contradiction in the "American way of life." Wertham's indictments correctly noted the changing calculations of market thinkers, who increasingly saw potential profits in adolescent consumers. This challenged an entire way of thinking about the child, whose status was shifting from ward of family and community to private individual with decision-making powers resembling those of adults. Wertham's ill-timed call for public welfare found its peak expression in 1954, with the publication of his best-selling book Seduction of the Innocent; however, it came at a moment when private consumption and "free enterprise" preoccupied anticommunist crusaders and upwardly mobile Americans alike. Its extension to youth, however, created possibilities for radical reworkings of traditional social relationships.

After World War II, the comic book industry had underwent important changes. Publishers found that war-related themes had lost their appeal; to hold on to the recently-cultivated readership, many editors began experimenting with stories of crime, teen romance, and horror. During this shift, the clear notions of right and wrong that preoccupied critics became muddied further. For many writers and artists, stories in which good always triumphed or authority figures uniformly represented virtue made little sense; rising circulation figures suggested that many readers shared this outlook. As these types of comic books found a substantial niche in the market, their success convinced other publishers to imitate the best sellers. From brief history of the most controversial publisher,


and a survey of the content of some of its comic books, a clearer picture emerges of what appealed to some and outraged others.

Most comics historians consider Max C. Gaines to be the "father" of the comic book industry. His experiments of the early 1930s had inaugurated the mass publication of comic books; of the countless publishers and syndicates that had rejected Superman, Gaines alone had seen and convinced National Comics of the character's potential. Gaines had been active in gaining a measure of legitimacy for the medium among intellectuals and some community leaders in the early 1940s. Working in cooperation with religious and educational leaders, Gaines' Educational Comics (E.C.) publishing group had disseminated such titles as *Picture Stories from the Bible* and *Classics Illustrated*.

When Gaines died suddenly in a boating accident in 1947, his son William inherited the publishing business. Years of low sales for comics concerning themes of religion and traditional literature had saddled E.C. with a large financial debt. In 1949, the younger Gaines hired editor Al Feldstein and introduced some crime and western titles. Changing the company's name in the following year to Entertaining Comics, Gaines and Feldstein initiated a series of horror titles. *Crypt of Terror, Haunt of Fear,* and *Vault of Horror* sold well enough to lift E.C. out of debt within one year. Several other titles followed, including *Shck SuspenStories, Frontline Combat, Two-Fisted Tales, Tales from the Crypt, Weird Science, Panic,* and *Mad.* E.C. comics offered stories of crime, horror, science-fiction, war, and satire, usually in a short eight-page format with what Feldstein later described as the "snap ending." While E.C. gained a consistent readership, it also attracted attention from critics of the comics.36

E.C. comics vividly portrayed situations that ran directly counter to the images of American life mandated by the various censorship codes. Marriage relationships routinely appeared to be far from sacrosanct. Spouses cheated with best friends, felt "seething" jealousy, abused their children and one another, and committed murder in cold blood for reasons of passion or greed. Stories of crime portrayed characters from believable walks of life as individuals who could be motivated to commit devious crimes for personal gain. Criminals in E.C. comics suggested that some situations justified illegal acts and deceptions of law-enforcement, intolerable imagery for social leaders who agonized over declining respect for authority. Ambivalence and cynicism marked the content of most E.C. offerings; in contrast to World War II-era comics, stories of soldiers in the Korean conflict showcased human foibles in the enemy, uncertainty and fear in Americans, and the arbitrary dangers of war. Tales of horror featured graphic depictions of supernatural monsters that terrorized families with little remorse.37

Social satire comics like Mad and Panic openly mocked the values treasured by would-be censors. The inaugural issue of Panic provoked the Attorney General of Massachusetts to issue a ban in late 1953. Four stories in the comic subjected traditional icons and contemporary celebrities to unflattering portrayals. In "My Gun Is The Jury," the fictional detective Mike Hammer appears as a lawless, wanton murderer and womanizer. The final panel reveals Hammer to be a transvestite. "This Is Your Strife" suggests that the typical contestant on a game show had less than perfect morals. Most of the outrage stemmed from the last two stories, however, which satirize childhood myths. In Panic's

37"Grandma's Ghost," The Vault of Horror, No. 9 (August/September 1951); "When the Cat's Away," Crime SuspenStories, No. 15(February/March 1953); "Air Burst," Frontline Combat, No. 4(January/February 1952), are three samples from many.
rendition of "Little Red Riding Hood," the little girl turns out to be a werewolf; "The Night
Before Christmas" portrays Santa Claus as a bumbling, "recently divorced" drinker.38

While competing publishers scrambled to copy E.C.'s successes in crime and
horror comic books, angry critics, politicians, and parents petitioned their Congressmen to
act. The shifting symbols put forth by young artists, writers, and editors connected with a
popular audience; but they offended the sensibilities of a generation steeped in the
traditional morality centered in families, schools, churches, and legally constituted
authority. Reformers who attempted to police the content of mass culture clashed with a
rising consumerist ethic elevating private morality over that of any community. For the
younger generation, shared experiences of consumption promoted a kind of autonomy that
could crack the social consensus of the Cold War. But what youth called "freedom,"
parents labelled "delinquency." With their alleged pipeline into the minds of adolescents,
comic books seemed to glamorize disrespect for all forms of established authority. By
1954, the federal government was ready to step in and bring together all of the evidence on
mass culture and juvenile delinquency.

Chapter 4

Containing the Market: The Senate Hearings and the Comics Code

Official hearings provided some of the most defining moments of the postwar era. The sensational trials of Alger Hiss and the Hollywood Ten, much-documented in the national media, significantly influenced the growing belief among many Americans that Communists had infiltrated core institutions. As the new medium of television increasingly broadcast government inquiries into Communism, another kind of subversion made its way into the national spotlight. Organized crime, highlighted in the televised hearings held by Senator Estes Kefauver, gripped the popular imagination in 1950-1952. Like many of the inquiries into Communism, Kefauver's investigation searched for enemies of the American Way of Life. This experience would lead Kefauver into a prolonged fact-finding mission on juvenile delinquency and particularly its relationship to mass culture.

Held in April and June of 1954, the comic book hearings highlighted the application of conspiratorial thinking to public affairs. Warnings of "the moral fiber of our youth being destroyed at the back door while we are trying desperately to fight communism through the front door" captured this tendency to conflate Communism, organized crime, and juvenile delinquency.1 While public figures agonized over enemies within, they simultaneously

1U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books), Hearings for the Committee on the Judiciary, 83rd Cong., 2nd sess. (1954), 289.
located culprits who were largely outside of common experience. Communist ideology, Italian gangsters, and comic books stood together as external invaders of the blissful life enjoyed by middle-class Americans. These images drove the merging of political subversion with criminal activity. Public officials, the press, and Hollywood films depicted gangsters as un-American and subversives as criminal.  

With such heightened importance placed on institutions of official authority, many comic books passed beyond distasteful into the realm of criminal. That they might signal shifts in the marketplace implicitly alarmed observers who feared that cultural entrepreneurs were selling lawlessness to a new generation of Americans. Frederic Wertham convinced Kefauver of this problem during his own testimony before the organized crime committee. In the summer of 1950, Kefauver distributed a Wertham-written survey among public officials, child-care experts, social scientists, and comic book professionals. The overriding question, whether "crime comic books ... influence[d] in exciting children to criminal activity," signalled the direction a full-scale investigation of comic books and juvenile delinquency might take. Like most official inquiries of the day, the assumed answers virtually predetermined the framing of questions.  

In his study of the Kefauver crime hearings, historian William Howard Moore has observed that federal investigations "do little real investigating, but rather, they dramatize a

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particular perspective on a problem and place the prestige of a Senate body behind a chosen point of view." For the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency in 1954, that meant an assumption that some causative connection existed between "horror and crime comic books ... depicting crimes or dealing with horror and sadism" and the ongoing crises of authority in homes, schools, and churches. The search for a solution placed Senators in the awkward position, acknowledged obliquely, of attempting to regulate undesirable effects of market dynamics at a time when American capitalism was perceived to be under siege. Industry self-regulation, in the form of the Comics Code Authority created in late 1954, seemed to present a curative in which mass culture and the social consensus necessitated by anticommunism could maintain a "peaceful coexistence." But this proved a feeble check; adolescent consumers continued to assert a new type of American individualism that cracked the fragile consensus throughout the 1950s.

Like juvenile delinquency, organized crime had a storied history in the United States. But thanks to national press coverage of local controversies over gambling and racketeering, a new spectre of organized crime arose after World War II. Figures such as Frank Costello, Lucky Luciano, and Bugsy Siegel became national symbols of an unprecedentedly large network of illegal activity. Local law-enforcement, civic groups, and the press mounted a clamor for federal action. This provided an opportunity for two "freshmen senators with far-reaching ambitions," Joe McCarthy and Estes Kefauver, to establish themselves within their respective parties and in the national spotlight. Both men took an interest in chairing a Senate inquiry into organized crime.


5Senate, Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books), 1.

6Moore, The Kefauver Committee, 44-45.
Kefauver's experience from 1945-1949 on a House Judiciary subcommittee investigating local corruption in Pennsylvania had exposed him to a range of thought on organized crime, leaving him better disposed to respond to the call for federal action. Chairing this investigation served both his political advancement and issue-based concerns. Shortly after Kefauver seized the initiative on the crime issue, McCarthy went on to fame as an anticommunist crusader. While their personalities and styles differed dramatically, both men framed their issues similarly in seeking to uncover extensive hidden conspiracies.

Communism had infiltrated the hearts and minds of individuals in the State Department, the entertainment industry, and academia; first and second generation Italian immigrants had imported a crime organization called the "Mafia."7

In both cases, "the repetition of common rumor," facilitated largely by the mass media, substituted for hard evidence. Journalist Richard Rovere ascribed the successes of McCarthy's crusade to the "Multiple Untruth," a mass distribution of falsehoods that disarmed most of his critics. Similarly, Moore suggests a striking absence of proof in the Kefauver hearings that a "Mafia" organization existed. The myth, fomented in the national press before 1950, had created a predisposition to construe the testimony of organized crime figures as alternately concealing or affirming the existence of a "Mafia;" this bias reproduced the notion in more explicit terms with federal endorsement. Lack of evidence, for Moore, reappeared in the failure to achieve any meaningful resolution beyond reinforcing public fears. Combined with the new medium of television, this penchant for dramatization made the government investigation itself into a form of mass culture that catered to the anxieties of its audience.8

7Ibid., 110-114.

For Estes Kefauver, hearings on comic books and juvenile delinquency followed a logic similar to that of the organized crime inquiries. In both cases, an official investigation was consistent with larger ambitions and ongoing concerns. Unlike the crime investigations, the juvenile delinquency hearings were less likely to alienate Democratic party insiders, which had cost him the presidential nomination in 1952. Here he could continue to be an active figure in an issue salient to a segment of American voters. Even in 1950, Kefauver had framed an assault on juvenile delinquency as a preemptive strike against the roots of adult crime. Again, however, he endorsed conspiratorial interpretations of the problem. Convinced of Wertham’s allegations that comic books were a major causative factor in juvenile delinquency, Kefauver also endorsed the notion that social scientists who criticized this theory were paid consultants to a cabal-like “comic book industry.” Kefauver solicited testimony from Wertham at the crime hearings, inquired into possible means of federal suppression of comic books in the mails, and in June 1950 served as a guest moderator for a discussion of crime comics on NBC’s radio and television broadcast *American Forum of the Air*. Wertham and Kefauver’s questionnaire went out in July, with divided results. To Wertham’s chagrin, the “opinion of the majority was that comics and juvenile delinquency had no direct connection;” the issue was left to local debate after the crime investigation ended in 1951.9

But as the issue of controlling comic books regained force, a new impetus arose for federal action. In early 1953, Kefauver and Republican Senator Robert Hendrickson proposed the establishment of a massive investigation into delinquency. With the Republican majority in Congress, Hendrickson chaired the Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency until 1955. Although wary of sensationalism and supportive of local action,

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Hendrickson conceded that mail from "thousands of American parents," conflicting local legislation, and evidence of divided expert opinion on comic books warranted investigation. Moreso than Kefauver, Hendrickson was leery of panaceas, and believed delinquency had complex causes. But the well-publicized campaign of Frederic Wertham, civic groups, and local, state, and national officials had helped shape powerful images of comic books as menaces to American life.10

Despite these biases, indecisiveness characterized the hearings, representing an inability to confront underlying issues. Commercial comic books, television, film, and radio, and luxury items aimed at teenagers threatened to undermine the moral influence of family, school, and church. They pointed to two warring elements within American consensus, unlimited individualism represented by consumption and unquestioning obedience to institutions. A profound ambivalence marked defenses of conformity that attacked the engine powering the American economy, the profit motive. Intentionally or unconsciously, the attack on comic books had to rely upon a conspiracy theory that placed the industry outside the American experience. Indeed, its opponents repeatedly depicted the comic book industry as a shadowy conspiracy whose strings were pulled by a "power elite."11 Lending credence to such theories was the typical corporate structure of a comic book company, often organized into several separate publishers under one umbrella. Thus, Executive Director to the Subcommittee Richard Clenenden could conclude that "while there are many corporations involved in the publishing of comic books, the entire industry really rests in the hands of relatively few individuals."12


12Senate, Comic Books, 9.
Yet a hidden conspiracy was both unrealistic and unnecessary. The comic book industry operated, like any other business, within the normal market constraints of American capitalism. A report submitted by the New York State Joint Legislative Committee to Study the Publication of Comics criticized "publishers of completely wholesome and acceptable comics"\(^{13}\) for standing in solidarity with their less wholesome competitors against public attacks. However, the same brand of industry competition that had undermined previous attempts at self-regulation surfaced repeatedly during the hearings, exemplified in the testimony of Helen Meyer, Vice President of Dell Comics. As publisher of licensed Disney and Warner Brothers "funny animal" comics, Dell had abandoned the Association for fear of being "used as an umbrella for the crime comic publishers."\(^{14}\) Separating Dell's target markets from those of crime and horror comics, Meyer fervently expressed her company's desire to eliminate what amounted to unwanted siblings. Walt Kelly, creator of the syndicated *Pogo* newspaper strip, voiced similar sentiments. His attempt to "help clean up the comic-book business" during the war had failed to gain much support, which lead Kelly to conclude that the medium's fan base had not supported stories offering "certain moral lessons."\(^{15}\)

Critics outside the publishing industry seemed oblivious to this simple law of supply and demand, offering analyses with a strikingly socialistic temperament. Samuel Black, vice president of the Atlantic Coast Independent Distributors Association, reasoned that "the greed for profit ... is apparently not easy for some ... to overcome."\(^{16}\) Many agreed with the moral assessment of Canadian House of Commons member E.D. Fulton

\(^{13}\) *Ibid.*, 19.


that profits constituted "improper motives."\textsuperscript{17} Ironically, New Jersey lawyer-activist J. Jerome Kaplon lamented the decline in popularity of the Horatio Alger mythos of class mobility achieved through hard work, even as he vilified potential examples of its creed as "a mass industry ... used to impair the morals of a child"\textsuperscript{18} for economic gain. Images of ill-gotten, vast wealth supplanted the entrepreneurial reality in Kaplon's descriptions of comic book publishers.

Monroe Froelich, business manager of the Magazine Management Company (MMC), pointed to obvious market realities for defense. As publisher and distributor of Marvel Comics and Atlas Magazines, and stockholder in thirty-five separate publishing companies, MMC's business decisions were based on their "share of the market." Sales trends had indicated that content favored by reformers "would be basically uneconomic and inconsistent with ... the other vast media;" put bluntly, it would not sell. However, Froelich hedged his argument when he criticized "a few hard-skinned, marginal publishers" for bringing negative pressure on the rest of the industry. Though an omen of how self-regulation would soon function, this "bad apple" concept momentarily offered little to appease conspiracy theorists.\textsuperscript{19}

Most virulent of the latter were those retailers and regional wholesalers who claimed personal victimization by the industry in the form of "tie-in sales," a policy that denied mainstream magazines and publications to retailers if they refused to sell crime and horror comic books. Representing the News Dealers Association of America (NDA), counsel William Richter claimed on April 22 that retailers had no voice in which publications were "foisted and thrust" upon them by wholesalers, leading the subcommittee to devote the

\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid.}, 250.
\textsuperscript{18}\textit{Ibid.}, 285.
\textsuperscript{19}\textit{Ibid.}, 175-181.
entire June 4 hearings exclusively to "tie-ins" and legislative remedies.\textsuperscript{20} New York State Assemblyman James A. Fitzpatrick, who had participated in the state's five-year investigation of the comic book industry, here offered perhaps the most sophisticated conspiracy theory. Although "tie-ins" forced many retailers into selling crime and horror comic books, many others used this coercion to cloak handsome sales profits. The repressive chain went all the way to the top; publishers pressured national distributors and regional wholesalers to impose the "tie-in" policy on hapless retailers.\textsuperscript{21} Vendors had reason to fear defying these demands, insisted NDA chairman Benjamin Freedman. For years, ruthless distributors had threatened his membership with legal action, physical harassment, and economic retribution in the form of delivery cut-offs, late bundles, and delayed credit on returned materials. Emotionally, Freedman compared such tactics with those of Communist distributors of the \textit{Daily Worker}; like the Reds, comic book conspirators had tested newsdealers' courage and been forced underground by public pressure.\textsuperscript{22}

National distributors denounced these portrayals as extreme exceptions. Harold Chamberlain, circulation director of the Independent News Company (INC), flatly stated that there was "no such thing as tie-in sales." By explaining the workings of distribution at the national, regional, and local levels, Chamberlain demonstrated that typical business operations scarcely required such pressures. National distributors worked out print runs and regional distribution quantities with individual publishers "based on sales figures." Although regional wholesalers had no say in which publications they received, "tie-in" pressures were unnecessary; typical competitive market forces drove wholesalers to handle

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 210.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 216-19.
as many publications as possible. At the retail level, Chamberlain's testimony rendered the potential existence of any coercive "tie-in" conspiracy more remote. The average newsdealer carried about 65 comic book titles; with approximately 250 active monthly titles, retailers "could not possibly be forced to hold and display and try to sell" all of them. For instance, when a large Cleveland dealer under public pressure cancelled all of his comic book shipments, INC had no power to force him to carry even "good" comics.23

Other distributors corroborated Chamberlain's testimony. George Davis' Kable News Company distributed "objectionable" comic books and adult magazines to cities (and not suburbs), but only to adult locations frequented by "soldiers, sailors, [and] ... every working guy."24 William Eichhorn, executive vice president of one of the largest national distributors, dismissed "tie-in" sales as an alarmist creation of "various organizations around the country ... putting on campaigns to eliminate comics."25 The subcommittee was moved to admit in fairness that comic book publishers, rather than distributors, should be held responsible for content.26 However, subcommittee chair Senator Robert Hendrickson (R-NJ) later expressed strong support for heavy-handed state legislation punishing any individual or business handling "obscene" materials, cheerfully suggesting verbage specifying "crime comic books" in the pending bill.27

Such proposals relied heavily upon Wertham's argument, summarized in Seduction of the Innocent, blaming adults for juvenile delinquency.28 Social science experts who

23Ibid., 227-231.
24Ibid., 243.
25Ibid., 277.
26Ibid., 243.
27Ibid., 288.
28Wertham, Seduction, 149, offers one of many such arguments.
publicly criticized Wertham's methods and theories were cast as especially suspect, having offered allegedly objective opinions while on the payrolls of comic book publishers. Two of the four articles that had appeared in the damaging December 1949 issue of The Journal of Educational Sociology were authored by paid industry advisors Harvey Zorbaugh and Josette Frank. However, Wertham failed to address the other two critical articles, thus offering an insidious facet to the comic book conspiracy — complicit intellectuals, a popular contemporary target for crusaders against subversion of the American way of life.

Kefauver vehemently raised this issue in attacking the testimony of Gunnar Dybwad, executive director of the Child Study Association of America (CSA), a long-standing independent "parent education organization." Reading directly from Wertham's book, which had been entered into the subcommittee's permanent record, Kefauver accused a CSA study published in 1952 of minimizing the comic book industry's role in fomenting youth crime. Two of the authors, Josette Frank and Dr. Lauretta Bender, were at the time paid consultants to publishers. Vilifying the CSA as a front for the comic book industry, Kefauver declared that Dybwad had deceived the public in presenting these reports, coming from a high-sounding association ... by putting out advice to parents, when the principal direction and the writing is being done by people who are in the pay of the industry, or publishers themselves.

29Ibid., 223.


31Ibid., 128-133.

32Ibid., 136.
However, Dybwad pointed out that only National Comics and Fawcett Publications, neither of which published crime or horror comic books, consulted regularly with the CSA. Much of Dybwad's rebuttal was indicative of things to come; CSA and National had collaborated on a strict set of guidelines that would be applied to the entire industry in 1955. Advocating industry self-regulation, Dybwad argued that "the fly-by-night man escapes censorship and the good publisher is hit by it."33 Most embarrassing to Kefauver's allegations, Dybwad showed that professionals' associations with certain publishers were public knowledge – Josette Frank's name had appeared in every Superman comic book since 1941. But Dybwad reserved his strongest criticisms for Seduction of the Innocent, which offered "not one documented reference of [CSA] material ... [in] an entirely unscientific study which is a mockery of research."34 Despite these indignant expressions, Dybwad became intimidated under pressure; this allowed Kefauver to sidestep facts and successfully conjure images of shadowy agreements between social science professionals and comic book moguls. Kefauver's rhetoric convinced the press; the following day's New York Times headline read "SENATOR CHARGES 'DECEIT' ON COMICS: Kefauver Says Child Study Group's Experts Also Were In Pay of Publishers."35

That such relationships were matters of public record appeared emphatically in the testimony of Dr. Lauretta Bender, who described herself as senior psychiatrist at Bellevue Hospital in New York City, professor of clinical psychiatry at New York University Medical School, and an advisor to the editorial board of National Comics.36

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33Ibid., 145.
34Ibid., 139-143.
36Senate, Comic Books, 151.
volunteering her associations immediately, Bender temporarily defused the conspiracy issue and steered the discussion towards juvenile delinquency itself. For years, Wertham's view had dominated the headlines and public debates, focusing rabid attention on mass culture to the exclusion of other causes for the problem. While several of his fellow professionals had rebutted his arguments in academic journals, Wertham's polemics continually had appeared in popular magazines, most recently in *Ladies' Home Journal*. At the Senate hearings, Wertham found his thesis challenged by several professional opinions.

Dr. Harris Peck, director of the Bureau of Mental Health Services for the Children's Court of New York City, cautiously speculated that comic books were potentially "an aiding and abetting influence" on youth crime. But he pointed to more fundamental roots for juvenile delinquency – two working parents, disrupted homes, poverty – perhaps precipitated by negative portrayals of parental and authority figures in comic books. Studies submitted by Dr. Frederic Thrasher, a University of Chicago criminologist who had participated in the Payne Fund film studies, compared the comic book controversy with previous debates over the negative effects of films and radio. Arguing that juvenile delinquency and "criminal careers can be understood only in terms of the interaction of many factors," Thrasher criticized Wertham for disclaiming a monocausal thesis while contrarily insisting "that the comics in a complex maze of other factors are frequently the precipitating cause of delinquency." Wertham's arguments were themselves pathological, illustrating "a dangerous habit of projecting ... social frustrations" on mass

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38 Senate, *Comic Books*, 64.
culture. Critics who had accepted Wertham's thesis scapegoated comic books "for parental and community failures to educate and socialize children."\(^{39}\)

Thrasher's analysis hinted at the fears of moralists that children were not adopting their parents' cultural values, tastes, and respectful attitudes toward community, religious, and legal institutions. Mass culture seemed for many to glamorize a "lowbrow" culture hostile to the established order. Even the Child Study Association expressed concerns for the increasing cultural influence of the lowest common denominator.\(^{40}\) For Kaplon, "the constant torrent of filth" allegedly emanating from comic books was indicative of an increasingly "delinquent society."\(^{41}\) Reading comic books instilled in juveniles "disrespect for the law and a completely warped sense of values," according to Fitzpatrick.\(^{42}\) Based on reading aptitude tests conducted with convicted juvenile offenders, Wertham added that comic books hindered formal education and promoted illiteracy.\(^{43}\) Juvenile delinquents read comic books, offering distorted and negative portrayals of adult society, to the exclusion of "proper" literature that imparted "reality."

Clenenden, himself a social worker, examined samples of the types of comic books that most alarmed reformers; such stories dealt frankly with alcoholism, divorce, crime, and murder.\(^{44}\) Traditional authority figures, such as policemen, schoolteachers, and foster parents, often appeared as incompetent, corrupt, or sadistic. For example, in a sampled

\(^{39}\textit{Ibid.}, 17-26.\)

\(^{40}\textit{Ibid.}, 124.\)

\(^{41}\textit{Ibid.}, 284-285.\)

\(^{42}\textit{Ibid.}, 205.\)

\(^{43}\textit{Wertham, Seduction}, 84-85.\)

\(^{44}\textit{Senate, Comic Books}, 4-10.\)
issue of E.C.'s *The Haunt of Fear*, a child's foster parents turned out to be werewolves. Other stories offered female characters who functioned as homicidal gang leaders and vengeful divorcees, images obviously antagonistic to the gender roles being promoted in consensus society. In the July 1952 edition of *The Haunt of Fear*, an "ice-hearted" husband who had refused to sponsor a life-saving operation for his mother-in-law found himself being stabbed to death with an icepick by his wife.

For Wertham, these narratives were antithetical to feelings of "[t]rust, loyalty, confidence, solidarity, sympathy, charity, [and] compassion;" most other reformers simply preferred to defend traditional values. Unlike his largely conservative followers, Wertham also levelled serious charges of racism at the comic book industry, likening some stories to Nazi propaganda. Many comic book stories substantiated this allegation, portraying black characters as servile, superstitious, and illiterate. Wertham's sensitivity to racial discrimination, which had led him to testify in the *Brown* case, made him relatively unique in this concern. The fact that the subcommittee and the press opted against pursuing this particular charge spoke to pervasive white attitudes, starkly revealed during the reaction to the *Brown* verdict later that year, that lurked behind racist content in comic books. That this issue could be shunted aside suggested which hierarchies concerned most critics of the comics.


47 Wertham, *Seduction*, 94.

48 The charge appears several times in Wertham, *Seduction*. See also Senate, *Comic Books*, 95.

49 "Practical Yolk!" *The Vault of Horror*, No. 14 (June/July 1952), is but one of several examples.
Unpleasant realities and the moral agents who created them became two crucial battlegrounds in the controversy. Blaming comic books for juvenile delinquency removed agency from children, parents, and institutions, placing it instead solely in the hands of publishers. This formulation represented an increasingly consumption-based approach to social problems that focused on private individuals rather than socioeconomic inequalities. Conspiracy theories required victims in need of defenders. Indeed, Wertham portrayed himself as a "defense counsel" for children led blindly into criminal acts by comic book stories.50 Victimized through ignorance and complicit through neglect, many parents were "just as bad as the children," according to one prominent newsdealer.51 Wertham's testimony even exonerated comic book artists as forced labor, generally portraying them as "decent people ... [who] would much rather do something else" but for the unrelenting demands of their bosses.52

William M. Gaines, publisher of E.C., directly addressed issues of agency in what was easily the most charged testimony of the hearings. For four years, E.C. had published the most prominent and successful line of horror comic books.53 Gaines had taken an outspoken stance against the anti-comic-book crusade, offering sardonic commentary to the press and printing an advertisement in his publications that had red-baited Wertham and like-minded reformers.54 Demonized by the press and virtually all other individual testimonies as "among the worst offenders," E.C. comic books appeared on display

50Wertham, Seduction, 13.
51Senate, Comic Books, 220.
52Ibid., 84.
throughout the hearings as examples of the most offensive products the industry had to offer. However, Gaines' testimony questioned the basic assumptions behind the anti-comic book hysteria; reading from a prepared statement, he asked:

What are we afraid of? Are we afraid of our own children? ... We think our children are so evil, simple minded, that it takes a story of murder to set them to murder, a story of robbery to set them to robbery?  

Gaines insisted that "delinquency is the product of the real environment in which the child lives and not of the fiction he reads." Unpleasant realities depicted in newspapers equalled the violence of those presented in comic books. Similar "real" environmental trauma figured prominently in the testimony of Bender, a widowed mother of three, as critical to a child's emotional development. Her studies coupled with personal experience to indicate a pattern of avoidance and rejection of violent fiction, rather than the identification-imitation process outlined by Wertham. Furthermore, the "normal child" whose welfare so concerned Wertham and his ilk was for Bender a vaguely defined social construction that did not exist outside of wishful imagination. A climate of delinquency produced, rather than emanated from, graphic portrayals of violence in comic books. Bender strongly defended the ability of children to distinguish fantasy from reality, a talent that proved problematic for the subcommittee, as shown during its various exchanges with Gaines on some E.C. stories:

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56Senate, Comic Books, 98.

57Ibid., 98-99.

58Ibid., 153-159.
Mr. Hannoch: You mean the houses that had vampires in them, those were not
nice homes?
Mr. Gaines: Yes.
Mr. Hannoch: Do you know any place where there is any such thing?
Mr. Gaines: As vampires?
Mr. Hannoch: Yes.
Mr. Gaines: No, sir; this is fantasy.59

The discussion degenerated from laughable to antagonistic when Gaines declared
that the only limitations placed on the content of E.C. comic books were within the bounds
of his personal "good taste." Kefauver immediately displayed samples of Gaines'
publications, questioning the "good taste" in a graphic depiction of "a man with a bloody ax
holding a woman's head up which has been severed from her body." Gaines pointed out
that gory artwork was appropriate "for the cover of a horror comic."60

These exchanges indicated social concerns beyond juvenile delinquency,
exemplified in the hostile reaction to Gaines' contention that "virtue does not always have
to triumph."61 This concept, presumably acceptable to E.C.'s audience, was anathema to
those obsessed with hard and fast moral distinctions. Occasionally, reformers complained
of "many crime comic books being read by children and adults" (emphasis mine).62
Froelich's market research had shown "a substantial percentage of adult readership," a
conclusion recalling the World War II-era complaints about comic books' popularity with

59 ibid., 101.
60 ibid., 103.
61 "A True Champion of Horror Comics," Hartford Courant, March 14, 1954,
reprinted in Senate, Comic Books, 303.
62 Senate, Comic Books, 22, in reference to Wertham's November 1953 Ladies'
Home Journal article.
servicemen. However, this revelation raised no impediment to legislative activists like Fitzpatrick, who insisted that "whether they are for children or adults, ...certain types of comic books ... should not be published." Rhetorical concern for the most vulnerable members of society proved a facade for a broader agenda of control over the content of mass culture, regardless of the age of its consumers.

Discussions of potential remedies inevitably raised issues of censorship and the Bill of Rights. Virtually all speakers, particularly those representing the comic book industry, opposed national censorship as blatantly inconsistent with an American tradition of free expression embodied in the First Amendment. Gaines invoked a federal court opinion which had lifted the ban on James Joyce's *Ulysses* to argue that social deviants, rather than the majority of the population, would be the targets of any censorship law. Froelich advocated "enlightened self-regulation resulting from full public discussion," while suggesting that a double standard had been applied to adult literature and comic books. The National Cartoonists Society, represented by Walt Kelly, endorsed the "marketplace of ideas" and "local option" over federal oversight.

Reformers attacked the First Amendment defenses put forth by comic book publishers. Wertham maintained that "the sinister hand ... of [the] comic-book industry" intervened in its own interests to restrict free speech. Allegedly, industry pressure had hampered the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, with threats of libel suits issued to


65 Senate, *Comic Books*, 98.


67 *Ibid.*, 110-11. However, "local option" offers scant protection for minority tastes in the so-called "marketplace of ideas."
Wertham, magazine editors, and book publishers; typically, he offered no evidence to support these insinuations. Wertham pointed to the huge profits National Comics had reaped from the Superman character, while creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster had received not one cent.

But most legislators seemed less interested in remedying economic inequities than in categorizing crime and horror comic books as legally obscene. Citing Oliver Wendell Holmes' famous statement that falsely shouting "fire" in a crowded theatre was not speech protected by the Constitution, Kaplon insisted that "the right to protect the morals of youth is just as sacred as the right to freedom of the press." Such freedoms were privileges rather than inalienable rights; Kaplon called upon the federal courts to reinterpret the First Amendment in light "of present day social conditions." He offered as a blueprint pending New Jersey legislation that criminalized all phases of production and dissemination of "obscene" comic books by imposing heavy fines on convicted violators. Kaplon portrayed such legislation positively as "forcing a collapse of the unethical publisher, while building to even loftier heights the proud profession of a great and free press."

Fitzpatrick, whose New York state committee's investigation offered the same philosophical interpretations of the First Amendment, wanted federal legislation to take a

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68 Ibid., 91-92.

69 Wertham, Seduction, 260-270, makes passing references to this scandal. See Chapter 1.


71 Ibid., 294.

72 Ibid., 292-93.
multi-tiered approach. He requested "right to sell" laws to protect individual retailers from "tie-in" policies, laws granting the Postmaster General speedy injunctions to halt the flow of "sacrilegious" literature in the mails, and limited antitrust immunity for a group of publishers to act as industry censors.73

The formation in October 1954 of the Comics Magazine Association of America rendered such precautions unnecessary. "[I]ntensified community action throughout the country"74 after the hearings had convinced most publishers to take action or face increased local censorship. In Gaines' words, "the other publishers kind of took over. All they wanted was a censor."75 The organization quickly adopted a code and appointed Charles F. Murphy, a former New York City magistrate, as administrator of the new Comics Code Authority (CCA). All comic books required a seal of approval from the CCA before their print runs and subsequent distribution to the market. The CCA mechanism often functioned as pure censorship; Ron Mann's 1991 film Comic Book Confidential offers chilling government footage of Murphy whiting out portions of storyboard artwork before stamping the CCA seal. In a 1955 interim report, the Senate subcommittee (now chaired by Kefauver) approvingly but cautiously noted the industry's new attempt at self-regulation, warning that any failure on the CCA's part would be met with "other ways and means ... to prevent our Nation's young from being harmed by crime and horror comic books." The report reached basic conclusions substantially similar to those of critics, advocating "continuing vigilance on the part of parents, publishers and citizens' groups."76

73Ibid., 211-12.

74U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency, Interim Report to the Committee on the Judiciary, 84th Cong., 1st sess., 1955, 32.

75Filmed interview with Gaines in Mann, Comic Book Confidential.
The victorious reformers' aesthetics permeated the code itself, which embraced the industry's responsibility to uphold "the standards of good taste ... for the protection and enhancement of the American reading public." Touting its set of content guidelines as "sterner moral standards than any other entertainment medium," the CCA portrayed itself as a model of self-censorship. The restrictions represented the encoding of values, expressed in publications like *True Comics* and the requirement of local censorship committees, to be applied to all comic books. The Code required that "[i]n every instance good shall triumph over evil;" law-enforcement officials and institutions could "never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority." Code-approved comic books were to emphasize good grammar, respect for parents, heterosexuality, and "the sanctity of marriage."

An entire section of the Code aimed directly at Gaines' E.C. line. Banned from comic books were the words "horror" and "terror;" also outlawed were "lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations." The CCA's prohibition of "[s]cenes dealing with ... walking dead, torture, vampires ..., ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism" constituted an obvious assault on E.C. When a new line of titles attempting to conform to the Code quickly failed in 1955, E.C. joined many of its competitors in closing up shop. *Mad* became the only title Gaines published; its editor Kurtzman noted wistfully that "the code put anything that was good in comics out of business." Recent evidence has suggested that the larger

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76 Senate, *Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency*, 32-33.
77 Ibid., 36.
79 Senate, *Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency*, 36-37.
publishers used the CCA to force E.C. to discontinue its competitive line of comic books. Knowing that distributors refused to carry E.C. comics without a seal of approval, the CCA applied the code arbitrarily in repeatedly rejecting E.C. submissions.82

A revealing dispute arose over a story called "Judgement Day," which the CCA alleged was a violation of the Code's dictum that comics not offer negative depictions of religious or racial groups. As Al Feldstein recounted, it was a science-fiction story about a clash between

...the orange robots and the blue robots and this space galaxy investigator comes to see whether this planet is ready for admission into the galactic empire, and he decides that they're not ready because there's prejudice. ...the last scene was that [the investigator] took off his helmet and he was black, which was a socko demonstration that yes, racial equality now existed in the universe. And Murphy wanted to change it. He couldn't be black.83

This hinted at the purely symbolic nature of some of the CCA's directives, and their intended effects on society at large. The Code was a product of expediency for publishers fearful of public boycotts or government censorship, and politicians leery of imposing any regulation on the marketplace. Perhaps most aware of this was Frederic Wertham, who became a vocal critic of the CCA. Wertham had called for a ban on the sale of comics to children under 15 even as he denounced censorship. But his arguments became tied to the heightened importance of traditional authority that formed a critical part of anticommunism. These concerns politicized what Wertham had described as a public health issue. Despite its emphasis on the problems posed by comic books, the mechanism of the official

81Interview with Kurtzman in Mann, Comic Book Confidential.


83Ringgenberg, "Interview with Al Feldstein," The Comics' Journal, 85.
investigation worked to obscure, rather than clarify, the issues at hand. For many political leaders, controlling the potential for disorder within mass culture superceded the arrival at real understandings or solutions for the emotional problems of children. The class and race inflected disobedience of a growing youth culture required controls. But the cultural "containment" that maintained a semblance of consensus would not long endure.
EPILOGUE

AFTERMATH: THE CULTURE WARS

The comic book controversy represented an episode in what modern-day moralists have termed "the culture wars." Long after the struggles over violent images in comic books, Americans continue to bicker over the relationship between mass culture and social misbehavior. In a society defined more than ever by consumption, proclamations of "traditional values" seem anachronistic at best. Increasingly since 1945, Americans have learned to define themselves through purchases and leisure choices; the world of private activity has moved to a dominant position in consensus society.

But for the first post-World War II generation, the notion of unlimited consumer choices threatened order. From the stirrings of leisure in previous decades had come a full-blown shift to an economy based on consumption, in which a broader spectrum of the population could partake in the privileges of buying things. The entry of children into the market, however, allowed a measure of autonomy that could undermine the socializing influences of family, religion, and school. As peer cultures began to form, their styles reinterpreted the American rhetoric of individual freedom. By the 1960s, notions of individualism among youth joined in oppositional movements to protest inequalities in race and gender, and injustice in foreign policy.

Although this impulse helped cultivate mass movements, its foundation in individual consumption worked to undermine a long-term commitment to such efforts. The counterculture of the 1960s gave way to the self-absorption of the so-called "me-
"generation" and the "yuppie." Stripped of much of their threatening aspects, trappings of social rebellion have remained in American culture largely as style choices tinged with nostalgia. In recent years, this trend has rehabilitated the image of the comic book publisher whose products had been denounced most for causing juvenile delinquency. Entertaining Comics and William Gaines have become cultural icons; two popular television shows have reproduced the formerly controversial themes in Tales From The Crypt and Mad. The "culture wars" have shifted attention to other media, but progress has been nil. Commenters still frame the issues in Wertham's terms—mass culture either inspires mechanical imitation in youth, or it produces no meaningful effect on audiences beyond entertainment. A consumer mindset has stunted the ability to frame the questions; until Americans insist upon a completely different approach, it will persist.
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