



Invited Review

Comics, comics studies, and political science

International Political Science Review
2017, Vol. 38(5) 690–700
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0192512116667631
journals.sagepub.com/home/ips



Kent Worcester

Marymount Manhattan College, USA

Abstract

Many readers look to comics and cartoons for entertainment, but they can also inform, as well as inspire, controversy and even acts of political violence, as the *Jyllands-Posten* and *Charlie Hebdo* cases demonstrate. Indeed, politics and comics connect and overlap in all sorts of ways. This review essay explores the nexus of politics and comics at a time when a growing number of cartoonists are creating extended works of graphic nonfiction that address serious political and historical themes.

Keywords

Political culture, political ideas, popular culture, graphic novels, editorial cartoons

Books under review:

José Alaniz, *Comics: Comic Art in Russia* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010)

Hillary L Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016)

Rikke Platz Cortsen, Erin La Cour, and Anne Magnussen (eds), *Comics and Power: Representing and Questioning Culture, Subjects and Communities* (Cambridge, Cambridge Scholarly Publishing, 2015)

John A Lent, *Asian Comics* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015)

Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji (eds), *Postcolonial Comics: Texts, Events, Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2015)

Daniel Worden (ed.), *The Comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism in a Visual World* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015)

Corresponding author:

Kent Worcester, Department of Political Science, Marymount Manhattan College, 221 East 71 Street, New York, NY 10021, USA.

Email: kworcester@mmm.edu

Political scientists tend to work with numbers, and documents like laws, articles, and manifestos, rather than images. The number of political scientists who specialize in visual political communication is negligible. Yet many of us would accept the proposition that the proliferation of images is a defining characteristic of daily life not only in the global North but across much of the global South as well. Urbanization, globalization, and new technologies are delivering images to billions of people in a myriad of formats and guises, from print media, street ads, billboards, and clothing, to streaming, gaming, smart phones, and satellite dishes. Much of this imagery is consciously invested with political meaning. At a time when activists routinely coordinate mass protests using social media, often with a strongly visual component, op-eds, judicial rulings, and official statistics are clearly not the only communicative channels through which political discourse, mobilization, and conflict is generated and distributed. Ranking images below data and documents offers an awkward fit with public cultures that are increasingly preoccupied with their production, dissemination, and consumption.

Comics and cartoons represent a small patch of this larger pictorial landscape, but they have intersected with political movements for centuries. (The term ‘cartoon’ is usually reserved for single-panel image-texts, while ‘comics’ denotes multi-panel storytelling.) Broadly speaking, cartoons and comics predate the print revolution – medieval art often relied on sequential wood panels to frame scenes from scripture, while some of the oldest surviving cave paintings used stylized imagery and animal caricatures to suggest movement and personality. But the print revolution plays a central part in the story of modern comics. Rebellious Protestants used woodblock prints to rally the peasantry; James Gillray, William Hogarth, Thomas Rowlandson, and other 18th-century commercial artists created engraved prints that lampooned public figures and social mores. Innovations in printing and paper production during the second half of the 19th century made it increasingly affordable for newspapers and magazines to reproduce cartoons and illustrations. The result was a profusion of caricatures, cartoons, and comic strips on printed material. Popular with readers, these handcrafted images enlivened drab columns and, on occasion, called attention to issues of injustice and corruption. By the early 20th century, cartoons had become, according to the cultural critic Gilbert Seldes ([1924] 2001), one of the ‘seven lively arts’, along with film, radio, pop music, musical theatre, vaudeville, and dance. Today, the medium is undergoing something of a renaissance. Graphic novels and graphic nonfiction (memoir, travelogue, historical, journalistic) represent a growing slice of the book trade in many languages and markets. Some of the best-reviewed books these days inhabit the form of narrative art. Far from being a relic of the newspaper age, words and pictures in combination are more ubiquitous than ever.

Many readers look to comics and cartoons for entertainment, but they can also inform, as well as inspire, controversy and even acts of political violence, as the *Jyllands-Posten* and *Charlie Hebdo* cases demonstrate. Indeed, politics and comics connect and overlap in all sorts of ways. Editorial cartoons affirm, encapsulate, and sometimes challenge positions held by political elites. Comic strips use recurrent characters that reflect and sometimes interrogate social attitudes. Comic books deploy superheroes, talking animals, and other fantasy elements that comment on and sometimes parody political ideas and movements. A growing cohort of longer works of graphic storytelling – fiction and nonfiction – place politics and history at the center of their narratives. (Prominent examples include Guy Delisle’s *Pyongyang* (2007), Kate Evans’s *Red Rosa* (2015), John Lewis and Nate Powell’s *March* (2013), Jason Lutes’s *Berlin* (2000), Keiji Nakazawa’s *Barefoot Gen* (2004), Alecos Papadatos and Annie Di Donna’s *Democracy* (2015), Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2007), Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1996), and Osamu Tezuka’s *Buddha* (2014).) The close study of these varied cartooning formats represents an underutilized resource for scholars interested in understanding how political themes are reflected in and addressed by visual

popular culture, a category that not only includes comics and cartoons but also movies, television, web clips, traditional and computer varieties of animation, and advertising campaigns.

The claim that cultural artifacts provide clues about the political cultures that produce them is hardly original, however. The more interesting question is whether comics as a medium brings something special to the table when it comes to presenting and exploring political themes. Are there specific insights that cartooning can offer the student of politics? Are there intrinsic features of the cartoonist's craft that gives the medium overlooked advantages when it comes to covering politics? Does the medium itself matter? While the political science literature is largely silent when it comes to cultural forms of expression, the burgeoning field of comics studies has been wrestling with the specificities of the comics formulary for the past couple of decades. It makes sense, then, to turn to relevant examples of recent comics scholarship to explore the nexus of comics and politics.

While comics and cartoons are an established, if lowly, art form, they have only recently commanded sustained scholarly engagement. Academic inquiry into comics came into focus in the 1990s, and both the quality and the quantity of monographs and journal articles have ballooned over the past couple of decades. It used to be the case that a halfway decent biography, thematic collection, or theoretical investigation came along once every five or 10 years. The field now generates dozens of monographs and edited volumes, many of them published by university presses, on an annual basis. At the end of the 20th century, a couple of quasi-academic periodicals were devoted to the field; two decades on, the field accommodates numerous peer review journals. Comics studies has come to embrace a diversity of cases, themes, and theoretical approaches, from historical studies and comparative studies to biography, close readings, postmodernism, and linguistics. Although a handful of political scientists have made their mark on the field, mainly in the context of writing about editorial cartoons, and, perhaps surprisingly, superheroes, specialists in literary studies, media studies, and communication arts dominate the secondary literature, along with a much smaller number of historians and art historians. To date, scholars of comics have done a better job of analyzing individual narratives, and recovering the lives and works of past cartoonists, than of finding ways to measure the social, political, and economic impact of comics and cartoons.

The books under review represent a tiny sliver of the specialist titles that have been issued in recent years. They are typical to the extent that almost all of their contributors are based in the humanities. They are less typical in that they are concerned with political cartoons, literary graphic fiction, and nonfiction comics such as social criticism, history, memoir, biography, and war reportage. Few of the creators discussed in these pages are the best known or most popular in their respective national markets, but many are well regarded and, in some cases, highly influential. Each book provides image reproductions, mainly, but not exclusively, black and white, which offer a welcome point of entry into divergent visual cultures. There are few funny animals or costumed superheroes in these pages, but plenty of visual-verbal references to corruption, deprivation, protest, public policy, and interpersonal conflict. Some of the reproduced cartoons and strips are didactic, others oblique. Some feature thick textures and detailed backgrounds, others use stick figures or avant-garde gestures. Recurrent themes include religion, gender, war, discrimination, and elite misbehavior. A quick perusal of any one of these titles will test the assumption that comics are inherently immature or unserious.

More to the point, the six texts can be grouped in such a way as to call attention to three very different approaches to the challenge of mapping the relationship of politics and comics. Two of the books – José Alaniz's *Komics* and John Lent's *Asian Comics* – fall squarely in the tradition of area studies, and reflect the advantages and disadvantages of the areal approach. They are the product of a scholarly tradition that values language acquisition, field research, cultural

immersion, and cross-disciplinary fertilization, and that distrusts broad generalizations. Both titles are targeted at geographically oriented audiences – specialists in Russian and Asian studies, respectively. By contrast, the books edited by Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji (*Postcolonial Comics*) and Rikke Platz Cortsen, Erin La Cour, and Anne Magnussen (*Comics and Power*) are steeped in theory with a capital T. Their contributors are indifferent to traditional area boundaries and take turns applying powerful social-theoretical concepts to selected works of graphic narrative. Their books are aimed at readers who are conversant with the writings of figures like Arjun Appadurai, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault. The third approach, as articulated by Daniel Worden (*The Comics of Joe Sacco*), and Hillary Chute (*Disaster Drawn*), is perhaps the most innovative of the three. Rather than accumulating and sorting cultural information in order to generate area-specific knowledge, or using broad theories derived from other contexts to make sense of individual graphic narratives, Worden and Chute are intrigued by the formal aspects of comics and the distinctive ways that comics engage readers. Of the three approaches, theirs most directly speaks to the question of the medium's capacities, advantages, and liabilities when it comes to presenting political material.

Area studies

The sturdy appeal of the area studies paradigm is nicely captured by José Alaniz's *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia*. Alaniz has written an engaging and well-researched monograph that is divided into two sections. The first provides a survey of Russian graphic narrative from medieval iconography to post-Soviet cartoon satires, while the second presents close readings of present-day *artkomiks*, feminist comics, and what might be described as underground comix. This second section, along with the book's numerous images, some of which are in color, highlights the distinctive quality of 20th- and early 21st-century Russian cartooning from the standpoint of line work, composition, palette, and subject matter. Its chapters make clear that distinctive local, regional, and national experiences can produce distinctive visual arts. As it turns out, comics in Russia is not simply a chapter in a larger story about western comics, and *komiksisty* (cartoonists) working before, during, and after the Soviet experiment were not merely taking cues their European and North American counterparts. Russian comic art was never entirely sealed off from other traditions, and traces of non-Russian antecedents can be discerned in some of *Komiks*' images. But important aspects of Russian cartooning, as described by the author, seem noteworthy from a comparative perspective, including the weight of religious tradition, the value placed on authenticity, the role of the avant-garde, the recurrent tendency of state officials to suppress political cartooning, and the cultural prominence of the state-sanctioned poster and billboard.

The book's first and longer section convincingly locates these specificities in a historical context. Alaniz's account shows how, by the 17th century, sequential painted icons devoted to popular saints helped inspire the emergence of woodblock prints, or *lubok*, that depicted 'religious scenes through crude drawings and textual captions' (2010: 16). The introduction of copper printing in the 1820s was accompanied by a shift in subject matter that featured 'folk themes, fairy tales, and historical events' (2010: 16). These broadsheets were 'often the first printed materials to enter the homes of the common people' (2010: 17), and provided a template and symbol for subsequent generations of artisans who were 'eager to reject or reshape European modernism and draw inspiration from home-grown forms' (2010: 25). During the early 20th century, both the Bolsheviks and their critics in the diaspora ranked literature above folk art, and folk art above anything that smacked of consumerism and decadence. Even today, Alaniz reports, comic art operates on the periphery of respectable culture:

Marginalized from their earliest forms by a class which equated the Word with civilization and the 'people's pleasures' with trash; attacked by the Soviets for its whiff of bourgeois, American mass culture; dismissed and exiled to the net by a capitalist petro-state which saw little use for such impecunious, 'semiliterate' scribbles. Yet all along *komiks* survived. (Alaniz, 2010: 138)

As a consequence of this cultural marginalization, cartoons in Russia often assume the guise of related media, such as posters, propaganda booklets, and narrative painting, which are less likely to attract negative attention from the authorities. This historical context helps explain the repressive treatment that cartoonists have sometimes received at the hands of public agencies and the hybrid forms through which combinations of words and pictures in sequence typically reach Russian audiences. Alaniz's book does a nice job of framing its case study in a way that fits with the larger ambitions of comparative analysis.

Komiks provides an example of how the study of comics can be relevant for comparativists who continue to value the area studies approach. A more recently published book that similarly embraces the areal is John Lent's *Asian Comics*, which organizes its subject matter into three subunits: East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. The book is not quite encyclopedic – Afghanistan, Mongolia, and post-Soviet Eurasian countries like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are left out, as is Japan, on the reasonable grounds that there is an 'abundance of research already available on manga' (2015: 6; manga is a specialist term that is often used to describe Japanese comics) – but it is the most comprehensive resource on the topic available in the English language.

Asian Comics draws on extensive archival research as well as approximately 400 interviews that the author conducted with artists, writers, and publishers over a period of nearly four decades. It also features numerous illustrations, along with photographs of key creators. While Lent is interested in all kinds of comics, and often ends up writing about best-selling pulp, he is attuned to the political uses of cartooning and to the struggles that have erupted between cartoonists, publishers, and governments around the appropriate boundaries of visual expression. On the other hand, his book reproduces a well-known pitfall of the area studies approach. Although the text is stuffed with names, dates, and visuals, it dances around the question of whether there are coherent and distinctive traditions within the Asian cartooning field and, if so, what kinds of historical developments might underwrite these traditions. At most, Lent is willing to concede that more women are entering the field as writers and artists than ever before, and that digitalization is having an impact on how publishers ware their products. Otherwise, he simply says that 'there is no one Asia but a number of countries and territories that are very disparate in language, culture, and religion, as well as in political and economic systems' (Lent, 2015: 5). The contrast between Lent's cautious descriptivism and the case-sensitive historical argument laid out by Alaniz is striking.

Social theory

As comics studies has gained a toehold in the academy it has, to a significant extent, moved past the area studies approach to embrace 'theory', which sometimes even includes work by political philosophers and theorists. In the introduction to their edited collection on *Postcolonial Comics*, for example, Binita Mehta and Pi Mukherji invoke names like Talad Asad, Jürgen Habermas, Shankaran Krishna, Timothy Mitchell, and the Frankfurt school. While the emphasis in Alaniz and Lent is on recovering under-researched cartooning traditions, *Postcolonial Comics* and *Comics and Power* take up the challenge of connecting contemporary social theory to specific works of graphic fiction and nonfiction. Mehta and Mukherji are particularly interested in how 'graphic writing, particularly enabled by complex signifying resources, may be read as an effective category of "post-colonial textuality," foregrounding colonial legacies and (re)scripting missing or misrepresented identities in

their precise contexts' (2015: 2). Here the focus is the postcolonial condition and the ways in which the lingering impact of colonialism, along with the introduction of new forms of 'neocolonialism' in the aftermath of national independence, are reflected in graphic narratives produced by visual artists across the global South.

The majority of the book's chapters look at recently published graphic novels and memoirs by authors based in former colonies such as Algeria, the Congo, Egypt, Gabon, India, and Lebanon. The others resist easy categorization: one addresses the work of the Japanese artist Osamu Tezuka, while another chapter revisits old newspapers and magazines in order to investigate 'Jewish and Arab Editorial Cartoons in Palestine, 1939–48'. These are two of the strongest chapters in the book but they are also the least theoretical in their orientation. Some of the other contributions, including the introduction, place too much weight on 'postcolonial' as a main explanatory variable, and the fit between high-theory terms like 'nomad flows', 'affrontier', and 'narratology', and individual graphic works, is not always airtight. In addition, the book is stingy with image reproductions. To its credit, *Postcolonial Comics* reaches beyond English-language comics and calls attention to the work of writers and artists whose work is rarely acknowledged by Anglophone sources.

Another coedited volume that starts from a theory-driven perspective is Cortsen, La Cour, and Magnussen's *Comics and Power*. Their book grew out of a series of conferences and seminars sponsored by the Nordic Network for Comics Research, and is organized around the theme of 'how in strikingly varied and intricate ways comics is both the result of societal and cultural processes, and is a critical contributor in modifying these processes'. The editors define power as 'a dynamic concept in which comics takes part, whether through potentially challenging specific power relations or participating in the reproduction of them', and they 'consider these processes to be complex societal and cultural networks involving text genres, readings, social practices, institutions, and relationships of power' (2015: xviii). In spotlighting 'the role of power in different and inter-related ways, and through various genres, from superhero comics and manga to newspaper strips and thematically more challenging graphic narratives', the editors hope to point the way forward to a 'new generation of comics research' (2015: xxi). The elasticity of their editorial framework comfortably accommodates essays on Senegalese comics, evangelical comics, web comics, experimental comics, and Superman. A couple of the chapters are directly concerned with questions of political power: Gunhild Borggreen's chapter on 'Drawing Disaster: Manga Response to the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake', for example, explores the ways in which commercial artists used comics to tell politically charged stories about local activism that print journalists shied away from. But a majority of the essays are focused on the reception accorded individual graphic novels and the changing status of comics in the cultural arena. Several of the authors flat-out assume that comics really are – as the editors claim – a 'critical contributor', and that the issue of cultural reception represents an inherently momentous battleground of political contestation.

If there is a major league cartoonist whose work recommends itself to members of our discipline, it is Joe Sacco. His name pops up again and again in the books under review, and there are chapters devoted to his work in *Postcolonial Comics*, *Comics and Power*, and *Disaster Drawn*. Born in Malta, raised in Australia and on the west coast of the United States, Sacco has produced a string of beautifully crafted graphic short stories and books on such weighty topics as 'the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Bosnian War, the Iraq War, African immigration to Malta, the poverty faced by Native Americans on the Pine Ridge Reservation, and coal miners in Appalachia' (Worden, 2015: 3). His comics are thoroughly researched, cleverly rendered, and sensitive to multiple points of view. A characteristic three-panel strip of Sacco's is reproduced in Øyvind Vågnes's contribution to *Comics and Power*, in which a young Palestinian flees soldiers in Khan Younis in 1956, the site of a massacre that Sacco writes and draws about in *Footnotes to Gaza* (2009). The reader learns about this event from the perspective of a now-elderly man named Abdulla Horani whom we

encounter earlier in Sacco's book. The low-rise buildings that Horani runs past to escape the confines of the village frame the first of the three panels. In the second, borderless panel, we see Horani as if a camera has been placed on the ground looking up. It's an unconventional perspective that nicely captures the subject's terrible sense of uncertainty and fear. In the final panel the rifles of two soldiers dominate the panel in a reminder of what's at stake in the scene. The strip has a kind of immersive clarity that gives the reader a strong sense of how Horani felt both as a young man and as an older man looking backwards in time. It fuses documentary detail and emotional experience to an extent that is unique to the comics medium.

In his chapter on Sacco in *Postcolonial Comics*, Sam Knowles acknowledges Sacco's carefully constructed panels and pages, and his storytelling devices, and praises Sacco's work for being 'politically incisive', and 'socially relevant'. But he cautions against the 'degree of ethical equivocation' that has 'long been a feature of Sacco's work' (Knowles, 2015: 47). Knowles' main complaint seems to be that Sacco's work tries to convey how controversial historical episodes might have felt from multiple perspectives. In contrast, Øyvind Vågnes offers a more sympathetic reading of Sacco's long-form political cartooning, usefully identifying points of connection between Sacco's graphic nonfiction and the films of Errol Morris. Morris's documentaries are also known for their ability to allow different voices and perspectives to make themselves heard while retaining a strong moral core. Vågnes is particularly impressed by the ways in which past and present often intersect in Sacco's comics, and how 'many of the book's most memorable scenes depict how an individual remembers a traumatic event by describing it in markedly performative manner' (2015: 155). It is 'not difficult to recognize', he says, 'the haunting properties of this moment' (2015: 159).

It is suggestive of the tonal and perhaps programmatic differences between the two projects that Knowles is concerned with tracing and evaluating the political status of Sacco's work, whereas Vågnes is struck by the degree to which 'Sacco invites the reader to make up her own mind about what insights are particular to documentary comics' (2015: 165). *Postcolonial Comics* and *Comics and Power* share an interest in contemporary social theory, and a disdain for conventional areal and disciplinary boundaries, but the former is more assertive and more consistent in its methodological and ideological ambitions. The approach taken by *Comics and Power* is diffuse at times, especially in comparison with the consistent line developed by the contributions to *Postcolonial Comics*. But on the other hand it could just be that the editors of *Comics and Power* have deployed a lighter touch.

None of the books mentioned thus far engage the question of whether and to what extent comics enjoys a special capacity to communicate political themes. Alaniz's work on Russian comics does a convincing job of laying out the particularities of Russian cartooning, the roots of these distinct patterns in historical developments, and some of the differences between comics as they emerged in Western Europe and North America and how they functioned in the Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet contexts. His book helps us appreciate the mutability of the comics form and the lasting impact that historical conditions can have on the commercial arts. Lent's work on Asian comics is less attentive to the connections between historical trajectories and the forms that contemporary cultural expression can take. But his book provides plenty of evidence for the notion that comics are often deployed – by official and unofficial actors alike – for political purposes. His book is very good at suggesting the diversity of comics production in Asia and the way in which visual political expression can show up in children's puzzle magazines as well as more familiar formats such as the editorial cartoon. *Postcolonial Comics* and *Comics and Power* are hardly indifferent to political themes, but the former tends to reduce politics to cultural struggles over representation while the latter tends to reduce politics to cultural struggles over reception. Neither book is particularly concerned with the question of why graphic narrative has become an increasingly popular medium for creators and readers interested in producing and consuming complex nonfiction.

Formal considerations

Daniel Worden's edited collection *The Comics of Joe Sacco* examines the output of a single well-regarded creator, while Hillary Chute's *Disaster Drawn* is about comics as a 'documentary form'. Taken together, they offer a fresh perspective on the ability of comics to make sense of political and historical topics. Sacco's nonfiction comics are obviously the primary focus of Worden's book, but Sacco also receives sustained attention in Chute's monograph. Both books are informed by the question of how Sacco's comics seem to command the power to dig deeply into the lived experience of war and violence. As Worden writes in his introduction, Sacco's dense pages 'neither romanticize suffering nor legitimate violence'. 'To read Sacco's work', he says, 'is to enter into the messy complexity of history' (2015: 3).

While Sacco did not come up with the idea of fusing reportage and cartooning, he is almost certainly the world's most prominent comics journalist. In a 2005 interview with *Mother Jones*, Sacco explained why he works within the comics medium: 'It's a visual world and people respond to visuals', he explained.

With comics you can put interesting and solid information in a format that's pretty palatable. For me, one advantage of comic journalism is that I can depict the past, which is hard to do if you're a photographer or filmmaker. History can make you realize that the present is just one layer of a story. What seems to be the immediate and vital story now will one day be another layer in this geology of bummers. (Quoted in Worden, 2015: 7)

While the contributors to *The Comics of Joe Sacco* are mainly drawn from departments of literature, language, and cultural studies, the emphasis is on political and historical issues rather than aesthetic or literary ones. Both Isabel Macdonald and Marc Singer, for example, are interested in Sacco's nuanced relationship to journalistic standards of objectivity, and how, as Macdonald points out, his work 'implicitly addresses the shortcomings of the traditional journalistic model' (2015: 55). Richard Todd Stafford writes about 'the politics of space' in Sacco's Appalachian comics journalism, and the ways in which Sacco's 'illustrated landscapes' of 'mountain-top removal sites' and other 'sacrifice zones' are intended to 'call on the reader to act' (2015: 123). Jared Gardner's focus, by contrast, is on chronology rather than geography. Gardner thoughtfully suggests that 'one of the most powerfully and potentially transformative contributions of Joe Sacco's work' has been

its dedication to exploring the politics of time and the very different ways in which it moves and is experienced in different places and by different peoples. If part of being a cartoonist is...to be Rip van Winkle, Sacco dedicates his comic art not so much to the achronicity of the artist but to the rendering of the temporal experiences of those who find themselves outside of 'absolute' time. (2015: 22)

Sacco's comics, Gardner says, 'denaturalize the universal claims of networked time' by depicting both 'the flow of "universal" time and time's stutter-stop motion in worlds under siege' (2015: 36). In constructing this ambitious argument, Gardner cites not only the work of comics scholars, but also researchers like Mary Kaldor, Niklas Luhmann, and the political philosopher John Keane.

Perhaps the biggest insight to be gleaned from the Worden volume has to do with the issue of reflexivity in comics journalism. Sacco is often described as a pioneer when it comes to creating long-form nonfiction comics that combine 'witness testimony, historical research, and military mapping', as Worden writes in his introduction. Worden goes on to argue that 'the major accomplishment and the major challenge of Sacco's work' has to do with the way in which it synthesizes 'the personal and the structural'. At a time when many people find it difficult to 'understand the violent world that we live in and how that violent world persists', Sacco's journalistic comics make

‘the world legible and visible, in all of its complexity...drawing lines from individual experiences to the larger structures that determine them’. His work presents ‘a curious blend of the objective – the size of this image, the presence of the buildings on the page, the fine detailing of their cracks and ruination – and the subjective’ (Worden, 2015: 11).

The larger point here is that popular confidence in what used to be regarded as hard evidence – photography, statistics, official reports, and so on – is eroding or even breaking down. We know too much about Photoshop, for example, to be confident about photographic truth-claims that earlier generations might have taken for granted. Ironically, the subjectivity that is inherent in the act of drawing – Sacco’s pages are clearly his own concoctions, and could never be mistaken for anything more – works to the cartoonist’s advantage. As Øyvind Vågnes points out, ‘comics documentarism draws attention to the subjective nature of its handwriteness’. The result, he says, ‘is a form of what Charles Hatfield calls “ironic authentication,” a way of “graphically asserting truthfulness through the admission of artifice”’ (2015: 159). Sacco is in no position to insist that what he’s showing us constitutes a ‘hard truth’, and for this reason our deconstructionist blows can never quite reach their target. Indeed, Sacco is already aware that his version of events is incomplete and is the product of his own limitations and biases, as well as those of his informants. In this respect, comics journalism has a certain advantage over conventional news journalism, which is the sense that we are looking at something that can never mask its partiality and incompleteness.

This ability of comics to speak to what Worden refers to as the postmodern condition is a key theme in Hillary Chute’s new study, which ‘explores the ways graphic narratives by diverse artists, including Jacques Callot, Francisco Goya, Keiji Nakazawa, Art Spiegelman, and Joe Sacco, document the disasters of war’ (2016: 5). ‘Why’, she asks, ‘after the rise and reign of photography, do people yet understand pen and paper to be among the best instruments of witness?’ (2016: 2). While her emphasis is on the ability of comics to document the ‘trauma of war’, her question directly connects to the politics–comics nexus that is our concern here. Starting with 17th-century prints and paintings, and moving to 20th-century cartoon art, Chute makes clear that visual artists have played a major role in recording and memorializing wars and civil unrest in modern Europe and beyond. For Chute, one important reason why comics have been used to capture the experience of war has to do with the distinctive way in which comics ‘engage history’. The ‘essential form of comics’, she says, is ‘its collection of frames...In its succession of replete frames, comics calls attention to itself, specifically, as evidence. Comics makes a reader access the unfolding of evidence in the movement of its basic grammar, by aggregating and accumulating frames of information’ (2016: 2). While Worden’s account emphasizes the self-effacing power of the hand-drawn image, Chute stresses the fact that, in comics, handcrafted drawings are arranged sequentially and in boxes. As she writes in her introduction,

the print medium of comics offers a unique spatial grammar of gutters, grids, and panels...[T]hrough its spatial syntax, comics offers opportunities to place pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality – as well as on the idea that ‘history’ can ever be a closed discourse, or a simply progressive one. (Chute, 2016: 4)

The structure of the medium helps the storytelling artist make her case in a way that is in tune with contemporary understandings of history and epistemology.

There are additional aspects of the comics medium that might help explain its ability to handle historical and political themes. For example, comics tend to comfortably accommodate abrupt shifts in chronological and spatial location. Filmmakers and novelists often rely on clumsy devices such as sepia lens and dissolves (in film) or the use of all-italics (in novels) to suggest flashbacks to earlier time periods. With comics, readers tend to accept these kinds of rapid temporal shifts with the simple use of narrator boxes. And in comics, unlike film, elaborate set pieces such as medieval

castles or invading armadas are as inexpensive to recreate as a conversation between talking heads. The term 'special effects' does not even apply to a medium in which everything is sketched by hand. It is also worth noting that comics are an exceptionally democratic medium with few, if any, barriers of entry. Anyone with access to paper, ink, and either a photocopy machine or a website can create their own cartoons and comics. The gatekeeping role of publishers and distributors is weaker in the comics industry than in the case of film or literary fiction, and the opportunities for self-published and small-press material to reach an audience is greater, in part, because comics reviewers and comics retailers are far more likely to make room for self-published and small-press work than would be the case for book critics, bookstores, and movie theatre chains. Especially in recent years this has worked to the advantage of younger creators, female creators, and non-white creators, many of whom have built up their audiences via web comics and self-publishing rather than waiting for conventional comics publishers to notice their work.

Of all of the books under review, Chute's digs most deeply into the relationship between individual creativity, nonfictional narrative, and the underlying logic of the medium. While her book has been mainly advertised to humanists, it has a great deal to offer social scientists with an interest in how issues of interstate war, internal war, and large-scale violence get represented and remembered. It also offers compelling reasons why comics are uniquely positioned to push past any reservations that readers might have about the status of different kinds of truth claims. In general, the predominance of humanists in comics studies means that political issues tend to be framed in terms that speak to the interests of these kinds of scholars. This has resulted in a greater emphasis, for example, on questions of ideology and identity than political leadership and party competition. When humanists study political issues they often focus on individual experience rather than institutional dynamics. Chute's book, with its emphasis on visual accounts of large-scale warfare, is an outlier in terms of the present state of comics studies. But, as her valuable study reminds us, it would be a mistake to assume that the new comics scholarship is indifferent to the material basis of politics.

For many social scientists, the notion that cartoonists have the tools, skillsets, and, increasingly, the inclination to address serious political and historical themes may seem fanciful. These colleagues may assume that, with the singular exception of newspaper editorial cartoons, comics are vehicles for all-too-predictable adventure, funny animal, and romance stories. The emergence of long-form graphic narratives on nonfiction topics, which are usually and confusingly referred to as 'graphic novels', has not only overturned a century's worth of assumptions about what kind of subject matter belongs in which kind of cartoon format, but has also provided cartoonists with a larger canvas to work with. Traditional one- or two-panel editorial cartoons can be witty and incisive, but their impact is constrained by their compactness. They can encapsulate, dramatize, and even mock political viewpoints but their ability to explore the world of ideas, and the relationship between past and present, is limited. In the hands of a thoughtful writer-artist like Joe Sacco, the new genre of long-form graphic nonfiction can dig much deeper than any of us might have guessed. In a world brimming with images, and sustained graphic narratives, it may be time to take comics and comics studies seriously.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

Alaniz, José (2010) *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

- Chute, Hillary L (2016) *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cortsen, Rikke Platz, Erin La Cour and Anne Magnussen (eds) (2015) *Comics and Power: Representing and Questioning Culture, Subjects and Communities*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Delisle, Guy (2007) *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.
- Evans, Kate (2015) *Red Rosa: A Graphic Biography of Rosa Luxemburg*. London: Verso Books.
- Gardner, Jared (2015) Time Under Siege. In Daniel Worden (ed.) *The Comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism in a Visual World*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi: 21-38.
- Knowles, Sam (2015) Joe Sacco's 'Prying Outsiders: Marginalization, Graphic Novel Form, and the Ethics of Postcolonial Representation. In Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji (eds) *Postcolonial Comics: Texts, Events, Identities*. New York: Routledge: 44-58.
- Lent, John A (2015) *Asian Comics*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Lewis, John and Nate Powell (2013) *March: Book One*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf.
- Lutes, Jason (2000) *Berlin: City of Stones: Book One*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.
- MacDonald, Isabel (2015) Drawing on the Facts: Comics Journalism and the Critique of Objectivity. In Daniel Worden (ed.) *The Comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism in a Visual World*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi: 54-66.
- Mehta, Binita and Pia Mukherji (eds) (2015) *Postcolonial Comics: Texts, Events, Identities*. New York: Routledge.
- Nakazawa, Keiji (2004) *Barefoot Gen, Vol. One: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*. San Francisco, CA: Last Gasp.
- Papadatos, Alecos and Annie Di Donna (2015) *Democracy*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Sacco, Joe (2009) *Footnotes in Gaza*. New York: Metropolitan.
- Satrapi, Marjane (2007) *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon.
- Seldes, Gilbert ([1924] 2001) *The Seven Lively Arts*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Spiegelman, Art (1996) *The Complete Maus*. New York: Pantheon.
- Stafford, Richard Todd (2015) The Politics of Space in Joe Sacco's Representations of the Appalachian Coalfields. In Daniel Worden (ed.) *The Comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism in a Visual World*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi: 123-139.
- Tezuka, Osamu (2014) *Buddha Graphic Books Set*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Vågnes, Øyvind (2015) Comics Reenactment: Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*. In Rikke Platz Cortsen, Erin La Cour and Anne Magnussen (eds) *Comics and Power: Representing and Questioning Culture, Subjects and Communities*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 154-172.
- Worden, Daniel (ed.) (2015) *The Comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism in a Visual World*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Author biography

Kent Worcester is a Professor of Political Science at Marymount Manhattan College. He is the author, editor, or co-editor of 10 books, including *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography* (1996), *The Social Science Research Council, 1923–1998* (2001), and *A Comics Studies Reader* (2009).