
COMICS ACTIVISM, A (PARTIAL) INTRODUCTION

by Martin Lund





The medium of comics has a nearly limitless communicative potential, at least theoretically. Most, but by no means all, definitions of comics agree on this. Specifically, for this forum text, I am basing my understanding of comics on creator and theorist Scott McCloud's definition of the medium:

com·ics (kom'ics) **n.** plural in form, used with a singular verb. **1.** Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.¹

To briefly unpack this definition, comics are pictures placed in relation to one another, the "other images" being words in speech bubbles, and caption boxes, as well as various other elements of composition, such as stylized onomatopoeic sound effects. The pictures are organized in deliberate sequence to be read, most commonly (but not necessarily) in the form of a narrative. Like all forms of media, comics are produced to convey information, i. e. to carry a message, which can be of an entertaining, didactic, ideological, or, as in the case of this text, activist nature – and sometimes all these at once. Often, this message is coupled with an attempt to elicit a response from the reader.

McCloud's definition, then, introduces a medium that can be filled with different contents by writers and artists, rather than trying to limit it to specific forms or contents.² As McCloud puts it: "The artform – the *medium* – known as comics is a *vessel* which can hold any *number* of *ideas* and *images*."³ When filled, the medium often veers into political territory, whether intentionally or not. Political, ideological, and cultural hegemonies are often reproduced in comics that are not primarily about such issues, but what I am interested in discussing here is what we can label, quite simply, "activist comics" and their corollary, "comics activism." Both terms are fairly self-evident, but it is nonetheless worth unpacking what is meant by their use here, before moving on to examples.

These labels are potentially controversial, and I use them with a measure of reluctance. After all, the words "activist" and "activism" carry baggage. To a certain degree, I am sympathetic to community organizer Jonathan Smucker's criticism of "activism" as a term that says little: labels

¹ McCloud 1993, 9.

² Examples of limiting definitions include Waugh 1947, 14; Inge 1990, 3; Rhoades 2008, 2.

³ McCloud 1993, 6. Emphases in original.



are useful, he notes, but as a broad category, “activist” speaks of nothing, as opposed to labels like “suffragette,” “abolitionist,” “populist,” or “socialist,” which point to specific content; it is “an apparently ‘content-less’ label that now traverses political issues and social movements.”⁴ Further, the term “activist,” Smucker rightly points out, has the air of an individually self-selected affinity that is not all that different from any other kind of hobbyist’s. I also agree that a “fledgling movement that attempts to attract only individuals as individuals, one at a time, will never grow fast enough to effect big systemic change.”⁵ Finally, it is also probably true, as Smucker writes, that the label “activist” causes some people to shut down or at least become less receptive to the message of people so labeled, and that some see activism as a clearly delineated compartment from which they can exit when entering certain situations and contexts and re-enter later on. One need look no further than a facile slogan that has popped up sporadically since around the election of Donald Trump – “protest is the new brunch” – to see how easily political participation can be bracketed off as a thing you do every now and then.

Valid though these criticisms may be, they still do not warrant throwing the word “activism” out with the bathwater. Indeed, what Smucker sees as a weakness in practical organizing (where abandoning the “activist” label in most cases might indeed be warranted), I see as a strength in theorizing: the term makes a distinction “between the active social change participant and the society.”⁶ And while Smucker is right that it “lets everyone else off the hook,” the distinction is crucial: the reality is that there are those who are actively working for social change and – in far greater numbers – those who are not, in every realm of social and cultural life, including comics. For that reason, some labeling is necessary, and it happens here with two caveats: 1) I make no claim that the definition below captures the “essence” of the nebulous collection of phenomena and ideals and practices labeled “activism,” but use it only to clarify and frame the thinking that follows; and 2) the terms “activism” and “activist” are used as heuristic categories that include many subdivisions that are related more concretely to identifiable ideological content (“feminist activism,” “socialist activism,” “identity politics,” etc.).

Although I know it makes me guilty of making recourse to hackneyed writing tropes, I must present a dictionary definition of activism: Merriam-Webster defines “activism” as “a doctrine or

⁴ Smucker 2017, 34.

⁵ Smucker 2017, 35.

⁶ Smucker 2017, 32.



practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.” Following this definition, at its absolutely simplest articulation, the term “comics activism” refers here to the practice of creating comics in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue, and the term “activist comics” to comics that are created specifically and explicitly to present the creator(s)’s given politics on a specific issue. The comics discussed here do not simply allow individual readers to passively pat their own backs for feeling a certain way about an issue or make a splash only to shrink away from it by the end of the story or by the beginning of the next, status quo invisibly reinstated.

For Smucker, the goal of strategic engagement in the terrain of politics is to “contribute to the politicization of presently de-politicized everyday spaces; to weave politics and collective action into the fabric of society.”⁷ Counterintuitive though it might seem, since Smucker articulates this goal as an alternative to the “make-believe world of activism,” this is why I use the recognizable category of “activism” here, for all its faults. In the sense outlined above, “comics activism” and “activist comics” delineate and identify those within the largely de-politicized⁸ field of comics who are working towards its politicization, as creators and as critics, as makers and as readers, and the comics they produce and read.

What follows is a condensed report from an ongoing research project in the early stages. By necessity, it is incomplete. There is not enough space here to cover all the ground a term like “comics activism” frames. Nor is there room to discuss examples from more than one context. All examples are taken from the US comics field. The purpose is to offer an initial, albeit imperfect, attempt at theorizing and exemplifying a heretofore largely invisible field of comics, in the hope of sparking interest in others about the theory and practice of comics activism.

⁷ Smucker 2017, 38.

⁸ As noted, all comics are in some ways already and always politicized. “De-politicized” is used here as a reference to the frequent – but by no means total – absence of acknowledgment of this fact and of a contestation of “the cultures, beliefs, narratives, and common sense of-and from within” (Smucker 2017, 38) comics as a cultural field, industry, and institution.



A (VERY) BRIEF PRE-HISTORY

The graphic arts are no stranger to voicing political support or opposition, whether to the reigning orthodoxy or to progressive or radical critique of that orthodoxy. Woodcuts and broadsheets were used for these purposes from the very beginning of mass print, shortly after the invention of the printing press.⁹ Perhaps no story better illustrates the legacy of the cartoon arts as political tools in America than the famous, and possibly somewhat overblown, story of the corrupt New York political player “Boss” Tweed’s fall from grace in the 1870s. According to the story, cartoonist Thomas Nast supposedly played a crucial role in Tweed’s downfall. When Nast launched a campaign against Tweed, to publicize the politician’s gross malfeasance in cartoons, the boss is supposed to have responded by saying that they “need to stop them damned pictures! I don’t care much what the papers write about me—my constituents can’t read. But—dammit!—they can see pictures!” Tweed eventually had to flee the city and a lengthy jail sentence, but he was apprehended in Spain and sent back to the US; apparently, he was identified by Spanish authorities through a Nast cartoon.¹⁰

By Nast’s day, the comic strip had begun slowly taking shape, at a lumbering pace morphing and melding into a form similar to what we recognize today. Political cartoons remained a commonplace in many publications, but more and more magazines and papers added comic strips to their repertoire, some of which were of an activist bent. As the 1930s dawned the comic book, a format that had similarly been taking shape in fits and starts over a long time, finally found a form that it would continue to have, with only minor changes, until the present. While activism was not unheard of in these early comic books, it was not overly common; the form would rather focus on propaganda during the World War II years, first against the fifth column of spies, infiltrators and saboteurs that was supposedly undermining the US, and later directly in favor of the American war effort.

After the war, changes in US culture eventually led to the emergence of a counterculture, and with that, the dawn of underground comics, or comix. Many of these undergrounds were oppositional, but more to cultural mores than to political circumstances; they were long on sex, drugs, and profanity, but in general short on politics, with important exceptions, particularly

⁹ For an in-depth history, see Kunzle 1973; 1990.

¹⁰ Ellis 2005, 350, 356.



when it comes to anti-war undergrounds. As a phenomenon, the undergrounds were by no means apolitical, but their politics were, in many cases, unfocused.¹¹ That changed in the early 1970s, with the emergence of women's comix, which heralded a doubly activist turn: first, it marked the first time women were truly able to produce comics stories on their own, a prerogative that had to be actively taken;¹² and second, it is probably the first time in American comics history that any organized sense of group movement and belonging fueled comics creation in a sustained way. More feminist comics would follow in the succeeding decades, and more and more forms of comics activism would appear.

(SOME) TYPES OF COMICS ACTIVISM

This short text cannot cover all varieties and variations of comics activism, but will restrict itself to comics that deal with issues of gender, police brutality, and ethnoracial identity. As befits the historical narrative sketched above, it begins with feminist comics.

The idea that the personal is political, a phrase popularized by Carol Hanisch in 1970, was born out of a feminist response to claims by others that women's discussion groups were focusing on personal issues rather than structural ones. The phrase was meant to articulate that the oppressions suffered by women – and, by extension, by people of color, LGBTQ, and other disenfranchised groups – are not simply individual problems to be tackled by that individual alone, but patterns that are part of larger structures and that require concerted, collective action and opposition.¹³ In more recent years, notes Smucker, the phrase has been put to use to mean its opposite: that uncoordinated individual action can be and is political intervention.¹⁴ However, writes Smucker, “with its original meaning, the phrase *the personal is political* spoke to the process of fragmented and isolated individuals coming to identify as a group with common–or *political*–grievances and goals, rather than merely personal problems or shortcomings. This is the

¹¹ Sabin 2001, 92–104.

¹² Sabin 2001, 104.

¹³ Cf. Crenshaw 1991.

¹⁴ Smucker 2017, 72–73.



process of *politicization* in a nutshell.”¹⁵ When it comes to American comics, this process seems to have taken its start at the margins of the underground comix movement.

As cartoonist Trina Robbins describes the situation in the underground, “[t]he big problem, if you were one of the few cartoonists of the female persuasion, was that 98% of the cartoonists were male, and they all seemed to belong to a boy’s club that didn’t accept women.”¹⁶ Teaming up with fellow cartoonist Barbara “Willy” Mendes, Robbins co-edited the first known all-female comic book, the 1970 underground anthology *It Ain’t Me Babe Comix*. The cover, which featured a group of well-known female comics characters marching, called for “Women’s Liberation!” Its contents were similarly radical. *Babe* was quickly followed by a number of comix by women, such as the anthology *Wimmin’s Comix* (1972–1992; originally *Wimmen’s Comix*), which was designed by Robbins and her co-creators to provide a platform for new comics creators, while Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevli’s *Tits and Clits Comics* (1972–1987) was meant to “bring a sense of humor to the women’s movement.”¹⁷

Having started as a response to the misogyny and sexism of the underground and provided a forum for women to speak, explicitly and politically, about issues that affect women,¹⁸ feminist comics have kept inspiring women to make comics and to speak out even as society and the comics industry have remained mired in the same problems. Although the anthology format has become less common over the years, the spirit of the early activist feminist comics remains very much alive today and finds expression in many and varied ways. It is impossible to here chart the history of this subfield of American feminist comics, but a few examples of more recent vintage must at least be introduced briefly, in order to show the breadth of contemporary feminist comics activism.

One key recent example is Leela Corman’s *Unterzakhn* (2012). Set in New York City’s Lower East Side in the early 20th century, *Unterzakhn* follows the lives of two Jewish American twins as their paths diverge widely.¹⁹ In the comic, Corman addresses historical American attitudes towards

¹⁵ Smucker 2017, 73.

¹⁶ Robbins 2016, vii.

¹⁷ Sabin 2001, 105.

¹⁸ McAllister, Sewell, Jr., and Gordon 2001, 8–9.

¹⁹ Corman 2012.



Jews and immigrants and discusses issues of class, but perhaps the most pronounced thread deals with perceptions of the place and proprieties of female sexuality in the early 20th century. Particularly palpable are the problems attached to female sexuality, contraception, and abortion, themes that are notably similar to contemporary debates on reproductive rights and “slut-shaming” discourses, down to the still often attendant double standards connected to both. Two years after *Unterzakhn*, in December 2014, writer Kelly Sue DeConnick and artist Valentine De Landro launched their ongoing series *Bitch Planet* with Image Comics.²⁰ Set in a future where “non-compliant” women are sent to a prison colony on a different planet, *Bitch Planet* is a feminist pastiche of the “women in prison” subgenre of exploitation films with a large dose of dystopian science fiction that takes critical aim at the treatment of women and patriarchal ideas about what a woman should be and do. The relentless satire is visible on the comics page itself, as well as in satirical advertising pages and in full-page spreads such as the “Is She a Feminist” page (Figure 1) that purports to identify signs that a woman is “dangerous.” These warning signs are all-encompassing and laden with condescension, making existence in the public sphere a no-win situation for women and thus putting the satire very close to reality:

Look at how she carries herself: is she stooped over, weighted down by concerns that her female brain is not equipped to handle? Or does she stand tall, defiant, perhaps bolstered by a dangerous and incendiary temper?²¹

What all of these comics have in common, and what they share with many others not mentioned here, is that they are all rooted in a shared desire to expose and thus hopefully change ingrained cultural patterns of patriarchal oppression and the marginalization of women, to counteract violence against women in whatever form it might take, and to promote real gender equality. In other words, although they differ in many ways, and are more than “just” their politics, they are all feminist comics.

Like misogyny, racist formations and stereotypes of blackness have been part and parcel of American comics since their beginnings, and attempts to counter them, or to create comics free from them, have been made since at least the 1940s, but they have come to wider attention only more recently. From 1947’s *All-Negro Comics*, a one-shot small-print comic book that is the first

²⁰ DeConnick and De Landro 2015; 2017.

²¹ DeConnick and De Landro 2017, np.



known comic written and illustrated exclusively by black creators, to *Black* (Sept. 2016–), a superhero series by Kwanza Osajyefo, Tim Smith 3, and Jamal Igle about a world in which only black people have superpowers, black comics creators have carved out spaces in the historically overwhelmingly white field of American comics and highlighted the realities of being black in a nation founded on white supremacy.

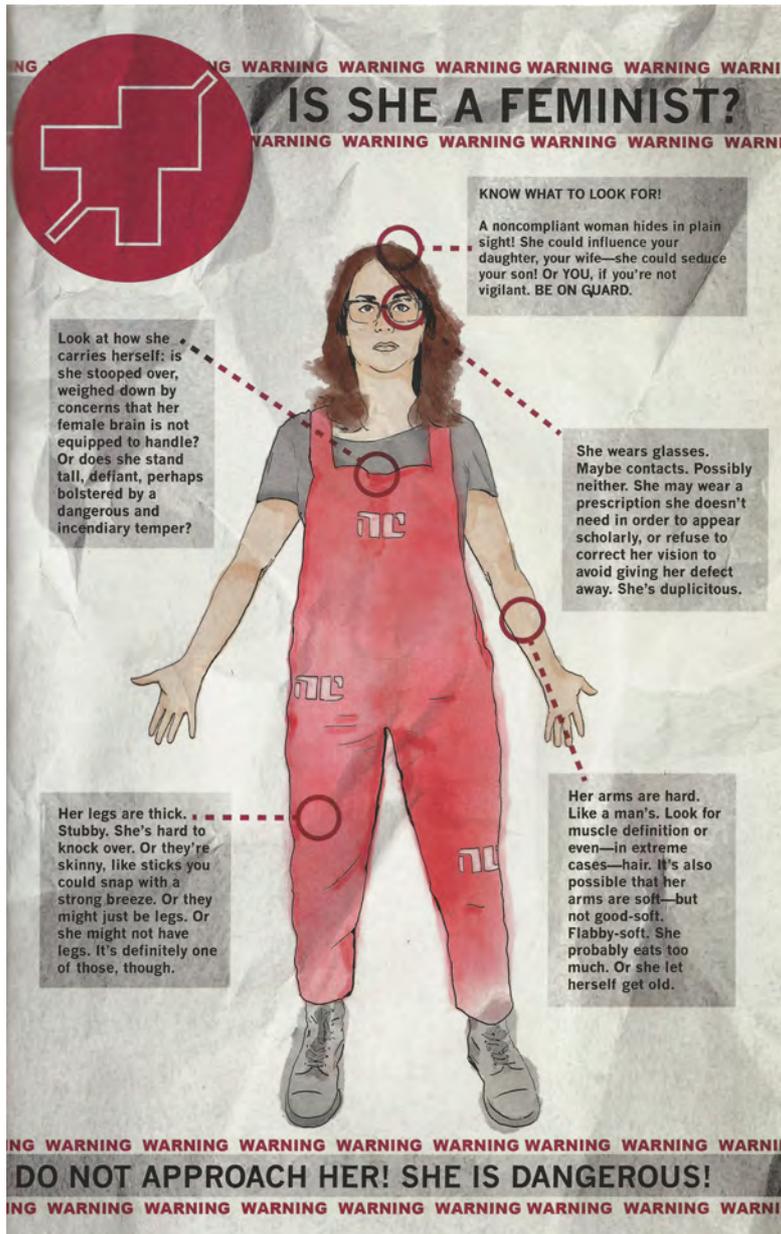


Figure 1. De Landro, Valentine, *Bitch Planet: President Bitch*, Image Comics, 2017, np. © Image Comics.



An important structural element of American life, culture, and society is the distinction between whiteness and blackness, and especially the construction of the latter as inferior. This idea was crucial to the maintenance of the institution of slavery; to the emergence of the Jim Crow system of racial oppression that replaced slavery after its abolition; and to the racially oriented system of mass incarceration and militarized policing of black bodies in the wake of the initial decade of the Civil Rights movement. Today, this form of systemic racism manifests in many ways, including in police brutality and in the increasingly more visible killing of unarmed black Americans by police.²²

It is this last feature of racial formation in American life that I want to focus on here. It is at the heart of *Black*, the first issue of which reveals the existence of superpowers when the protagonist Kareem Jenkins is racially profiled and shot by police, only to discover that he has survived the encounter.²³ As such, *Black* starts off as a power fantasy in more than one way, tied intimately to present realities. But, although it is one of the most recent accountings in American comics of the skewed racial power dynamics of the US and of the oppression and violence that continue to result from them, it is far from the only one. For example, Keith Knight's weekly comic strip *The K Chronicles* (1993–) that blends observational and often autobiographical humor with social commentary, and his *(th)ink* series of political cartoons, have repeatedly broached the topic of police brutality. In 2015, Knight self-published a 38-page collection of his strips and cartoons on the topic, titled *They Shoot Black People, Don't They?*²⁴ On the dedication page – “to the countless victims of brutality at the hands of those hired to serve and protect” – the cartoonist explained the origin of the collection:

As I was drawing a cartoon about the goings-on in Ferguson, Missouri, this past summer, I realized I'd been drawing cartoons about police brutality of black and brown people for damn near 20 years. Here's what I've been churning out, from the Rodney King beating on....

The collection provides a look back at the recent history of racialized police brutality in the US, the message of which is clear: nothing will change unless police face real consequences for their

²² See, for example, Roediger 1999; Painter 2011; Alexander 2010.

²³ Osajyefo, Smith 3, and Igle 2016.

²⁴ Knight 2015; a comprehensive collection of Knight's strips from 1993 to 2004 can be found in *Complete K Chronicles* (Knight 2008).



actions. Connecting Knight's comics activism to other realms of protest and struggle, his police brutality collection includes links to the ACLU, Black Lives Matter, and Cop Watch, and comes with an insert containing contextual and sometimes humorous notes about the strips and cartoons included, as well as a text by journalist and cultural critic Chuck "Jigsaw" Creekmur about "15 Ways To Stop Police Brutality."²⁵ Further, Knight offers a slideshow and lecture on the topic.



After this **(th)ink** panel ran, a few editors called me and to say that people were calling and complaining that it was a racist cartoon. I always ask editors if they could tell what race the callers were. As far as they could tell, they were white people. Black people are too busy experiencing this shit to complain about a cartoon. The cartoon isn't racist—the act that it is portraying is racist. I told my editors that if white people complained as much about profiling and brutality as this cartoon, there might be something done about it.

Figure 2. Knight, Keith. *They Shoot Black People, Don't They?*, self-published, 2015, p. 5. © Keith Knight.

²⁵ Creekmur 2014.



Similarly connecting comics activism with other forms of activism and advocacy is Rosarium Publishing's *APB – Artists Against Police Brutality* (2015), edited by Bill Campbell, Jason Rodriguez, and John Jennings. Born out of anger at the “utter predictability”²⁶ of the court’s decision to not put the officers responsible for the death of Eric Garner on trial, and the history of oppression that preceded it and made it, and countless deaths like it, possible, the anthology contains short comics in a wide variety of styles, from the brutally realistic to the caustically humorous, as well as cartoons, pin-ups, prose pieces, and essays. While the contributions express many things – anger, fear, sorrow, despair, hope – a common thread winds throughout the anthology, a desire to highlight “the human cost of the police brutality in a way that statistics cannot.”²⁷ Still, *APB* ends with a three-page list in miniscule font containing every person killed by police in the US (881) between the day the book was announced (Dec. 15, 2014) and the day it went to print (Sept. 11, 2015). Combined with the specific and personal narratives, the statistics attain even more force. The proceeds from *APB* went to the Innocence Project, a non-profit dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted people.

One final example: *#BlackLivesMatter: The Comic Book 2015*, is a comic of much smaller scale than the previous examples, but an important one nonetheless. Produced in 2015 as part of The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem’s Junior Scholars Program, it recognizes the ability of comics “to convey a large amount of information in a short time” and the medium’s “power to connect humanity.”²⁸ The comic, which focuses on police targeting people of color and, in echo of the social movement from which it takes its title, offers a call to understand an indisputable but under-acknowledged fact: that black lives matter. It also serves an important dual purpose: on the one hand, it helps bring attention to a gross miscarriage of justice and a structural inequality in American society; on the other hand, it teaches children that they can oppose these structures and that there are many different ways of doing so.

Finally, comics autoethnographies are texts in which the marginalized (in the original usage colonized) represent themselves “in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s own terms.”²⁹ The concept regards ethnography as one group’s representations of its Others to itself, and frames

²⁶ Campbell 2015, 16.

²⁷ Chambliss 2016, 95.

²⁸ Abdullah et al. 2015, 2.

²⁹ Pratt 1992, 7. Emphasis in original.



autoethnography as a way for those represented as Other to respond to or enter into dialogue with ethnographic representations. Thus, autoethnography involves a grappling with and partial appropriation of the majority's idiom for speaking about the minority while also transcending it. In short, autoethnography as the term is used here is a way for members of marginalized and minority groups to challenge stereotypes and faulty representations of the group and to offer a counter-representation, whether collective or individual.

The past fifteen years or so have seen a flood of comics autoethnography, the range and variety of which is breathtaking. The category, broadly defined, includes such works as Will Eisner's *Fagin the Jew* (2003), in which the author challenges anti-Semitic representations by giving the eponymous protagonist Fagin, a character from *Oliver Twist*, a past and a life of his own that was denied by his original author, and then having him challenge Charles Dickens directly for his representations of Jews.³⁰ It includes Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006), which combines three seemingly unconnected narratives – one about the mythological Monkey King, one about a second-generation Chinese American teenager, and one about a white teenager and his walking stereotype cousin from China – into a single, highly reflective narrative about Chinese American identity formation in the US.³¹ And it includes Toufic el Rassi's *Arab in America* (2007), in which the author tells about a life lived in the shadow of anti-Arab and Islamophobic sentiment, propaganda, and foreign policy.³² Although these comics could not be much more different from each other in tone and style, they all serve to challenge representations and prejudices about social, cultural, and ethnoracial groups that are regarded as different from the implicit white norm of who is (and is not) an American.

³⁰ Eisner 2003.

³¹ Yang and Pien, 2006.

³² El Rassi 2007.



ACTIVIST COMICS WILL NOT CHANGE THE WORLD – BUT COMICS ACTIVISTS SHOULD NOT STOP TRYING TO

No comic will ever spark a revolution. No comic will ever single-handedly change the world. That is not how the world works, and it is not how comics work, no matter how immediately or with how much force they communicate. Rosarium's founder Bill Campbell writes eloquently about this fact and why, in the long run, it does not matter:

Like the Vietnam protestors back in the day, nobody involved in this project thinks that when *APB* is released, the justice machine will suddenly see the error of its ways, things will be reformed, and we will all live happily ever after. This ain't no Tom Cruise movie.

However, what we desire is to simply further the dialogue, make some people see this debate in a different light, perhaps change a mind or two, and, most importantly, exercise our freedom of speech in honor of all those who have had their voices silenced.³³

There is a realistic sense of pessimism here, but also hope. The central ideas speak to what Mikko Poutanen notes in his text in this issue, that orthodoxy dies hard, but that it can be challenged, and that only through challenge will there ever be hope for change. Put differently, there cannot be a revolution before there is what organizer Saul Alinsky called a "reformation": "Any revolutionary change must be preceded by a passive, affirmative, non-challenging attitude toward change among the mass of our people. They must feel so frustrated, so defeated, so lost, so futureless in the prevailing system that they are willing to let go of the past and chance the future. This acceptance is the reformation essential to any revolution."³⁴ Whether you call it a "reformation," or heresy, or consciousness-raising, or a hope to "change a mind or two," the basic understanding is the same: new ideas take time to introduce and find acceptance. And for that to happen, they must be spoken about, often, and in ways that people can understand intellectually, morally, and emotionally. Comics is uniquely well suited for that task.

³³ Campbell 2015, 7.

³⁴ Alinsky 1989, xix-xx.



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