

# Fredric Wertham: the man who nearly shut down the comic-book industry

by Richard Welsh

Fredric Wertham (1905-81), author of the article on page 37, was the moral and intellectual leader of a campaign, which began in 1948, to eliminate what he called “the curse of the comic book.” The campaign culminated in 1954 with hearings before the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, release of Wertham’s book *Seduction of the Innocent*, a national boycott of crime and horror comics, and the near-bankrupting of the industry. Many states and municipalities passed laws prohibiting sale and/or display of crime and horror comics to children.

To this day, publishers and devotees of this breed of comics have not forgiven Wertham, and issue diatribes against him.

Wertham had a passion and lifelong commitment to the solution of what he saw as the fundamental problem of the twentieth century: violence. In this his anchor was the Judeo-Christian conception of the sacredness of each individual human life. For Wertham, who was a psychiatrist, this had a medical dimension, in the treatment of individual patients; a political dimension, in the fight to extend the availability of treatment to the poor; and a cultural dimension, as he served as an eloquent public spokesman for these values and against those institutions, attitudes, laws, and cultural processes that assaulted them.

Wertham wrote, in the article excerpted below, that there are, of course, larger issues in the world today than the effect of comic books on children, and mightier matters to be debated. “But maybe we will lose the bigger things, if we fail to defend the nursery.”

There is much to be learned from his work, by those today who are waging a fight against the cultural degradation that is crippling a new generation of children. Whether the subject is comic books, television, rock music, video games, or “outcome-based education,” the fundamental issues are the ones he addressed. Those who today call themselves “cultural conservatives” are fond of attributing today’s ills to “1960s liberalism.” But the problems did not begin there, as Wertham makes clear. One might add that *Playboy* began, not in the liberal 1960s, but in the 1953 of “I Like Ike” and “Tailgunner” Joe McCarthy (whose own perversions, and those of his “significant other” counsel Roy Cohn played a

role in his later downfall). The Kinsey Report, which was *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner’s launching pad, was released in the “good old anti-communist days” of 1948.

Indeed *Playboy* and the comics were one and the same nested institution. The first comic books, in the mid-1930s, were put out by the same publishers as were then pioneering newsprint pornography; as Wertham notes, the distribution methods were also the same: “Display these magazines, or else.” In 1956, *Mad* magazine founder Harvey Kurtzman left the comics- and *Mad*-publisher EC to start his own new magazine, invited and bankrolled by none other than Hugh Hefner. Do you object to the casual, cynical violence and misogyny of “private eye” Mike Hammer? Micky Spillane got his start writing comics.

## The importance of the comic-books campaign

The campaign Wertham describes in his article was unique in postwar history. Outraged by the violence, sexual perversity, crime glorification, and sadism of children’s comic books—more like today’s video games “Mortal Kombat” and “Night Attack” than the comics those under 45 grew up with—parents and others rallied to a grassroots boycott campaign that cut crime and horror comic sales by 40%; scores of states, counties, and municipalities passed laws banning the display and sale of these atrocities to minors; and in 1954, a Senate subcommittee on juvenile delinquency, following in the wake of the mass-publicized Kefauver crime committee hearings, heard testimony by Wertham and by comic industry defenders on the subject. The industry’s response, as Wertham notes, was to erect a new “code,” which sacrificed a few scapegoat publishers and comic lines, while preserving the main body of the business. Most of the anti-comic laws were subsequently thrown out—some as unconstitutional, though not all.

The American Civil Liberties Union then, as now, insisted that the First Amendment was a license for pornography. Both the ACLU and its “right-wing” opponents missed the crucial distinction drawn by Wertham, that indeed the First Amendment must be carefully protected, and censorship avoided: but that children, as a uniquely vulnerable group of persons, required protection from abuse. That was *not* a First

Amendment issue.

Wertham did not spare television from his campaign, or movies and other mass media; but he also made the observation that while these media had a special potency deriving from their movement and sound, a child would see a show once and it would be over. Comics were held, hoarded, returned to again and again; potent and perverse psychological images would compel repeated entrapment and burn themselves indelibly into the child's mind. This is as true now as then; today, comics also do not exist in a vacuum, but are carefully integrated into multimedia thematic assaults including film, television, home video and video games, merchandising, and theme parks. And the theme remains the same, regardless of medium: the Nietzschean theme (Superman, in the American idiom), that there are good guys and bad guys, and the job of the good guys is to kill the bad guys. Since most people feel themselves to be helpless little people, they require superhero "good guys" to rise above such hindrances as the law, to kill the bad guys for them. People

cannot change, and redemption is an impractical dream, in this Manichean world view.

### Neither 'liberal' nor 'conservative'

Wertham was a remarkable individual. He was a psychiatrist who maintained that the psychological insight of Shakespeare and the Greek tragedians was beyond that of most practicing psychologists of any persuasion; he was also an astute literary critic, who discarded the "art for art's sake" forms of literary criticism, in favor of applying the insights of great art to the social and psychological issues confronting the world today.

Born in Munich in 1905, he was educated in Munich, Vienna, London, and Paris, taking his medical degree from the University of Würzburg in 1921. He assisted Emil Kräpelin, the famous late-nineteenth-century psychiatrist who created the modern system of classification of mental disorders; corresponded with Freud and studied Freudian psychoanalysis under one of Freud's American students; and immi-

## The comics, then and now

The comic book emerged in 1934, featuring especially crime and detective storylines. The publishers and distributors of the comics were largely the same as those who produced pulp novels and pornography: organized crime. The same tactics were used as well, strong-arming corner newsstands and drug stores. The Nietzschean "Superman" appeared in 1938, a fitting counterpoint to Hitler's march across Europe. By 1939, scores of imitators had appeared, including the Gestapo-like Batman. By 1941 there were over 30 publishers, and the first psychologist-designed superhero made her debut, William Moulton Marston's lesbian dominatrix Wonder Woman.

Opposition to comics grew into 1942, but the emerging debate was swept away by the U.S. Army's policy of shipping vast numbers of comics to the troops abroad. The opposition was sufficient to induce the formation of a "code" in the industry in 1946, which was promptly ignored. With the return of the veterans to civilian life, the bottom fell out of the industry. Of the legion of superheroes, none survived but Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. But soon Westerns, teen-themes, jungle settings, and crime took up the slack; by 1948 the crime genre had nearly taken over. In March 1948, Fredric Wertham convened a symposium on the subject, and the fight was joined, leading to hearings in the Senate Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee in 1954.

The publishers' first response to Wertham's campaign

was to shift out of crime into "love" (soft porn) comics, in 1949-50; but by the end of that year, a new genre was introduced, the "weird" comics of supernatural, gothic, and science-fiction horror. Though a new package, it was the same old sadism and grisly retribution. The industry also formed its "Comics Code Authority," which proscribed certain narrowly defined images and themes, such as vampirism, while leaving the superstructure largely intact.

Though Wertham and his associates kept up the fight, the public largely lost interest, assured that things had been brought under control. The Senate committee punted, buying the industry line that only psychologically "predisposed" children were harmed by comics. The code did eliminate the worst of the gore and overt sadism, and from the late 1950s into the 1960s, the heroes were tamer and the crime less graphically brutal. However, the fundamental problems had not been solved; nor had the less obvious degeneracy of Walt Disney's "wholesome" comics ever been seriously addressed.

In the early 1970s, the code was loosened, and beginning in the 1980s, a new wave of comics surged, fueled by a booming "collection" industry financed by both children and nostalgic baby-boomers. Team superheroes, pioneered by Marvel Comics in the 1960s, rose to dominance. Today, New Age heroes wreak their carnage with a street-wise cynicism that quite surpasses the effect of their predecessors in conveying a hatred of human life. And far from being supplanted by TV and video games, comics are now an integrated component of a multimedia assault on culture, and are as avidly consumed by children as ever.

grated to the United States in 1922 by invitation of one of this country's foremost psychiatrists. He was thus intimate with all of the contending currents in mental health and medicine of the period, but was above all his own man. (In his 1949 article "Freud Now," for example, published in *Scientific American*, he observed: "With the wide acceptance of the death instinct [as a valid concept], with all its clinical and social implications, the 'deep psychology' of psychoanalysis goes off the deep end. There is an intrinsic similarity here to the position of Martin Heidegger, the existentialist who became one of the most influential Nazi philosophers.")

In 1932 he was invited to New York City, where he held many positions of responsibility including psychiatrist in charge of the alcoholic, children's, and prison wards at Bellevue Hospital; director of Bellevue's mental health clinic; director of psychiatric services at Queens General Hospital; and organizer and director of a psychiatric clinic attached to the New York Court of General Sessions.

From the late 1920s through the 1940s, he testified on innumerable occasions as expert psychiatric witness in criminal and other court cases (including some of the most famous and controversial cases of the day); testified in literary censorship cases (generally against the banning or denial of postal permits to various literary works); and was sought out by attorney Clarence Darrow as the only psychiatrist willing to testify in cases where the accused was African-American.

Wertham defied left-right, scientific-humanistic, and all other such misleading labels. In 1946, with the help of his friend Richard Wright, the African-American writer, he founded the first (and for years only) psychiatric clinic in Harlem. Without a cent of foundation or government agency money, with a completely volunteer staff, and operating out of a donated church basement, the Lafargue Clinic charged 25¢ to patients who could afford it. As director of the clinic, Wertham was approached by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1951, to assist in one of the organization's school desegregation suits, in Wilmington, Delaware. Wertham and his staff went to Wilmington, conducted a clinical psychological study (he detested survey questionnaires—whose results, he pointed out, were generally predetermined) on the effects of school segregation, and testified on those results as expert witness to the court. Relying in part on that testimony, the court threw out the segregation laws, the state appealed, and the case became one of the four consolidated into the 1954 landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Wilmington case had been, in the words of future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first major victory in the school desegregation campaign.

In the domain of criminal law, where he had become one of the country's foremost forensic psychiatrists (widely respected for his integrity by defense and prosecution attorneys alike), Wertham fought against the bureaucratic indifference of law enforcement officials and agencies, the prison

system, and the abuses of the insanity defense. In the last, he was unique. He staunchly defended the need for the insanity defense where appropriate (that is, for the truly mentally ill for whom the concepts of knowledge of guilt, of the consequences of their actions, and of responsibility for their actions could not apply); at the same time, he denounced the tendency of sophisticated lawyers to cop an insanity defense where all other defenses failed, and even more denounced the rapidly growing tendency of the psychiatric and psychological professions to attempt to substitute a concept of "mental disease" for the concept of personal responsibility. In warning against this trend, not just in the legal domain but in all of civic life, he coined the term "praetorian psychiatry," to characterize the ominous substitution of "expert" psychological (or other) opinion, for reasoned public discourse and democratic institutions.

### **In defense of human life**

Wertham, since he truly believed in the sacredness of human life, denounced the death penalty, unlike many of today's "cultural conservatives." He was acutely aware that justice was often perverted and the innocent were executed (particularly if they were minority defendants, and here particularly where confessions were obtained by brutal interrogation and inadequate legal representation). At the same time, he considered it absurd to say that capital punishment was not a deterrent (at least in certain economically motivated types of armed robbery); he did not want to see the fundamental argument against capital punishment diluted by anything not provably true. He also passionately defended the rights of the victims of violence, such as the bereaved families of murder victims, whose own shattered lives he saw treated with the same bureaucratic indifference as met the convicted murderers. Against incredulous opposition within both psychiatry and the legal and judicial professions, he insisted that the first priority had to be the *prevention* of crime, including scientific clinical study of those who commit it, and simultaneously, the rehabilitation, where possible, of those who have committed crimes.

Though Wertham associated mainly with "liberal" circles in some respects, he differed as profoundly with today's liberals as with today's conservatives. Thus, in his 1966 book *A Sign for Cain*, his last full statement on violence in all its aspects, he included as assaults on human life and dignity not only violent crime, and racism and colonialism, but also euthanasia—the theory and practice of which he demonstrated the Nazis to have inherited from earlier, broader social layers—and also what he termed, precisely, the malthusian "myth" of overpopulation and associated clamor for contraception and depopulation. Like few other persons in this century, apart from Lyndon LaRouche and those influenced by him, Wertham understood that at the root of all of these beliefs and practices stood the same bestial conception of man.