



Evaluating the Influences of Fredric Wertham and *Seduction of the Innocent* to Establish Their Relation to Contemporary and Cold War Period Mass Media Regulation

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Introduction

Mass culture from postwar United States and its relation to Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) serve as the primary basis for this study. Despite significant influence throughout the twentieth century, Fredric Wertham is a largely disregarded historical figure. Wertham practiced as the psychiatrist who's insight served fundamental in the ruling of court cases including *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the espionage case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (1950-1953). Moreover, Wertham proved progressivist in the treatment of racial minorities, as he founded the LaFargue Clinic (1946), the first African American psychiatric facility located in Harlem, New York. However, the research methodology and flawed conclusions Wertham utilized in *Seduction of the Innocent* to claim comic books cause juvenile delinquency left Wertham castigated by researchers until well after his death.

Question

What social, political, and psychological factors identifiable within the published and unpublished work of Fredric Wertham can be effectively established as influences for his book, *Seduction of the Innocent*? How do these influences compare to both contemporary and Cold War methodologies of mass communication regulation?

Methods

Identified influences were compared to Denis McQuail's (2010) reasons for regulating contemporary mass media. The reasons are as follows:

- The management of what is arguably the key economic resource in the emerging 'information society', with a very high dependence on all forms of communication.
- The protection of public order and support for instruments of government and justice.
- The protection of individual and sectional rights and interests that might be harmed by unrestricted use of public means of communication.
- The promotion of the efficiency and development of the communication system, by way of technical standardization, innovation, connectivity and universal provision.
- The promotion of access, freedom to communicate, diversity and universal provision as well as securing communicative and cultural ends chosen by the people for themselves.
- Maintaining conditions for effective operation of free markets in media services, especially competition and access, protection of consumers, stimulating innovation and expansion (p. 3).

Fredric Wertham's influences were then compared to the principles of the Hutchins Commission (1947), the foundational group of the Social Responsibility Theory. The principles of how mass media should operate are as follows:

- Provide a truthfull, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in context, which gives them meaning.
- Provide a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism.
- Provide a representative picture of the constituent groups in society.
- Be responsible for the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of society.
- Provide full access to the day's intelligence (p. 113-114).

Results

The General Elimination Methodology narrowed the potential influences to nine total influences divided into the three categories of political, social, and psychological. Anecdotal data providing little to no recurrent ideas or thought processes were eliminated from consideration in the interest of determining the most accurate comparison to contemporary and Cold War era mass communication theories.

Political Influences:

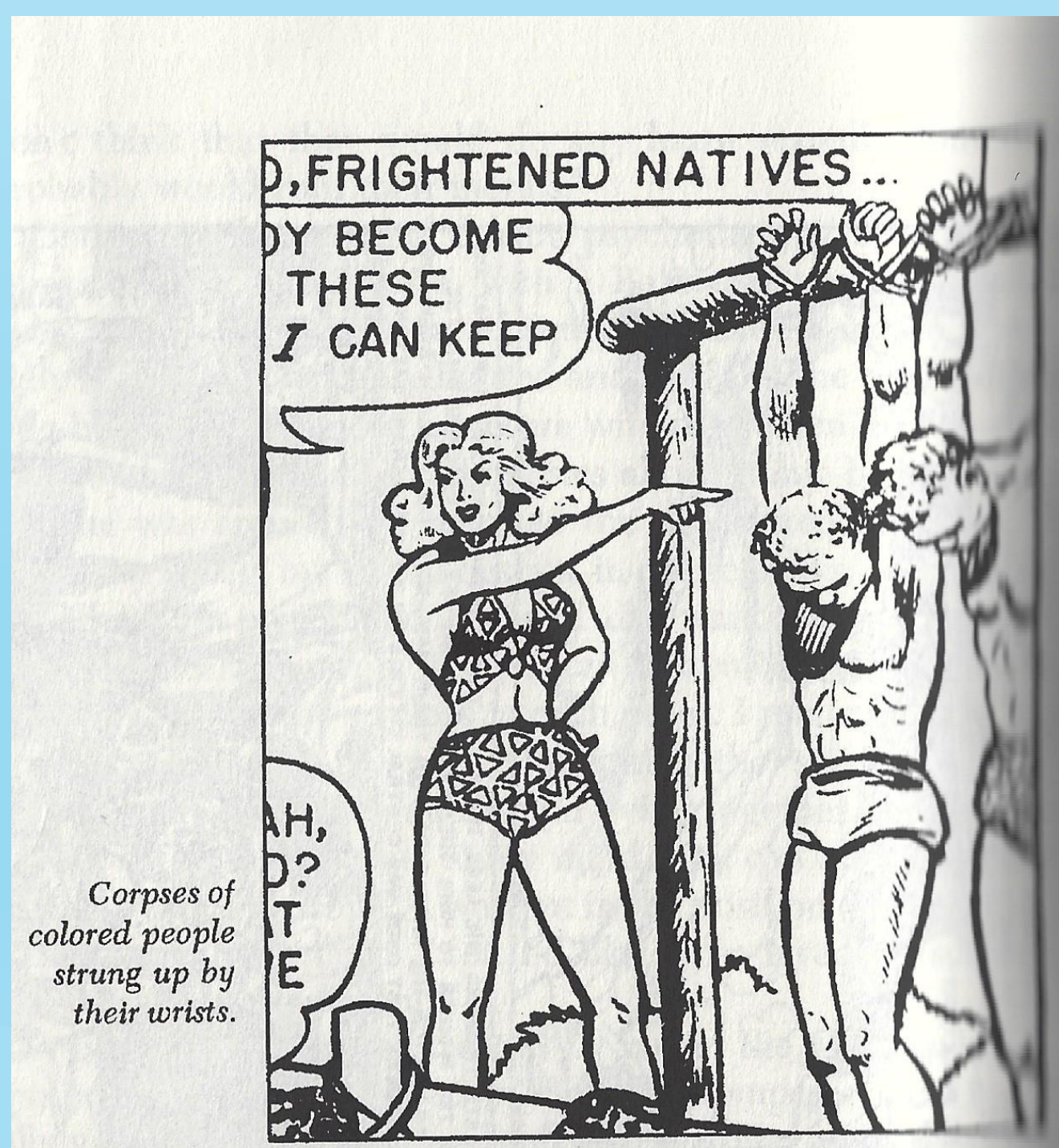
- Limited to one influence
- Wertham's Progressivist and Liberal Agenda

Social Influences:

- Five total influences
- The innocent childhood and protecting the innocence of American children
- Childhood protections outweigh the complete full expression rights of the 1st Amendment right free speech
- Herbert Gans' classic mass culture critique media harms the reader
- The poor depiction of minorities in comic books
- The American child has been subjugated to a market

Psychological Influences:

- Wertham's understanding of violence in society being inherited rather than an innate human behavior
- Wertham's desire to practice a form of psychology entitled "social psychiatry" as a result of his clinical research
- Wertham's displeasure with the flawed psychiatric research supporting the comic book publishers.



Seduction of the Innocent (1954) page 194, "Frightened Natives" Panel

Discussion

Contemporary Comparison

Through the identification of influences with the General Elimination Methodology, it was revealed Fredric Wertham had several biases pertaining to his research primarily within the influences categorized as psychological. As a result of both some considerable bias and the limited influence of psychology on contemporary mass communications, two of three psychiatric influences were not identifiable within any of McQuail's (2010) reasons for regulating mass media. In accordance with Bart Beaty (1999), the psychiatric methodology does not conform to traditional forms of mass communications. Current mass communication regulation consists of encouraging capitalist consumerism even if the target consumer is the American child. Wertham's limited political influence is not reflected within contemporary mass media regulation. Despite Wertham's bias in his overreliance of environmental factors, he effectively understood a primary concern of mass communications is the effect on the audience.

Cold War Comparison

Wertham's political liberalism and call for reform is foundational within the principles of the Social Responsibility Theory. In a sense, Wertham's political liberalism evident within *Seduction of the Innocent* is reflective of the Social Responsibility Theory, as the theory is liberal in nature. Wertham's desire to protect both children and social minorities is reflected within the Social Responsibility Theory, as the theory's primary intention is to maintain social order and stability within a society. Moreover, the Social Responsibility Theory's purpose of maintaining social order in accordance to the needs of society and the government suggests support of Wertham's belief in restricting the 1st Amendment right. Despite the Social Responsibility Theory possessing many similar intentions, it never addresses Wertham's concepts of subjugating the American child to a market as well as the mass media critique media harms the reader. The Social Responsibility Theory predominantly acts in accordance with Fredric Wertham's social influences regarding the protection of individual rights through regulation. Similarly to both Bart Beaty's findings and the comparison to contemporary mass media regulation, the three psychological influences are not present within the Social Responsibility Theory.



Seduction of the Innocent (1954) page 204, "Crime Detective Comics #9" Cover

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to establish the influences of Fredric Wertham and *Seduction of the Innocent*, and to determine their place within the scope of mass communications. The study resulted in the identification of nine influences: one political, five social, and three psychological. Upon comparison of these influences to contemporary and Cold War mass media regulations, it was determined the psychological influences are largely more reflective of personal bias than mass media practices. However, multiple foundational concepts exemplify Wertham's work to be relevant within the context of mass communications. For example, both the Social Responsibility Theory and McQuail (2010) complied with Wertham's emphasis on the protections of individual rights of children and minorities. The Social Responsibility Theory also reflected Wertham's liberalism. Furthermore, within the context of mass communication Wertham serves as an example of the ever more prevalent problem of flawed research and information. All in all, despite Wertham's research consisting of bias and flaws, both which have been researched heavily, the social influences of *Seduction of the Innocent* (1947) and their compliance with traditional mass media regulation should be noted, as Wertham's study serves as an essential study within the larger scope of mass communication.

Future Research

With limited evidence of political influence on Wertham being identified, future research could focus on the political aspects of *Seduction of the Innocent* and their relation to the study of mass communication. In an in depth analysis, the reasons the threat of Communism is omitted from Wertham's work could be identified. Another avenue of research could be a more in depth discussion of Wertham's opposition of child capitalist markets and determine how these markets are reflected within the field of mass communication.

Limitations

The primary limitations concerning this research were the limited access to the Library of Congress Fredric Wertham Collection, as access to the collection was limited to the digitized documents. Further limitation occurred with efforts to conduct interviews with contemporary scholars, as scheduling conflicts caused any additional scholarly insight from being achieved. Moreover, the study was limited to comparison of one Cold War mass communications theory, so the comparative analysis may not be reflective of the whole scope of postwar mass communications.

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