

***The Amazing Spider-Man* and the Evolution of the Comics Code:
A Case Study in Cultural Criminology**

By

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Cultural criminologists suggest that realities of crime, deviance, and criminal justice practice cannot be understood outside the context of media and criminal justice forces that act, consciously and subconsciously, to shape hegemonic definitions of “crime” and “justice.” Because the comic book medium has historically thrived on mythologies of crime and justice, comic book research can provide valuable insights into the practical implications of cultural criminology. By directly and intentionally challenging the editorial guidelines of the Comics Code Authority, Marvel Comics’ publication of issues 96, 97, and 98 of *The Amazing Spider-Man* in 1971 represented a turning point in the construction of criminal justice ideology in American comic books. This case study is relevant to the study of criminal justice in popular culture because (a) it illustrates the evolution of criminal justice ideology in the medium of comic books through the processes of cultural criminology; and (b) it confirms the hegemonic paradox of the modern superhero mythos as critical criminological discourse.

Keywords: cultural criminology, spider-man, comic books

INTRODUCTION

The object of “mainstream” cultural scorn for the better part of a half-century, American superhero comic books face an unprecedented opportunity for acceptance. Once castigated as a pox threatening to destroy the youth of America, the comic book has in the past three decades finally begun to exhibit the potential of sequential art in ways always hinted at, but never fully realized, since Superman, the last survivor of the doomed planet Krypton, first arrived on Earth in *Action Comics* 1 in 1938. Superman’s creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster probably never imagined that the heroic personification of their adolescent desires for acceptance (especially with the opposite sex) would instantly capture the national mood of Americans, young and old alike, struggling to find meaning and hope in the waning years of the Great Depression (Vollum & Adkinson, 2003). This resulted in an explosion of costumed crime fighters with abilities superior to those of normal humans and established a new genre, the American superhero comic book, dedicated to chronicling their heroic adventures.

One such hero, introduced in 1962, helped revitalize a struggling genre and bring legitimacy to the medium itself. Peter Parker, the Amazing Spider-Man, revolutionized how superhero stories were told by confronting authority and the social ills that characterized the American cultural landscape during the Civil Rights Era. The mythos developed by co-creators

Stan Lee and Steve Ditko created a universe in which “justice” depended on how characters used their power responsibly for the greater social welfare (Adkinson, 2005). In the mid-1960s Lee wove increasingly critical social commentary into the series, perhaps to cater to the sensibilities of the predominately college student audience, but certainly to preach the values of tolerance and responsibility to the general readership (Lee, 1979; Raphael & Spurgeon, 2003; Saffel, 2007).

Nyberg (1998), Adkinson (2005), and Stoddart (2006) suggest that one particular storyline within the mythos of the *The Amazing Spider-Man* is particularly relevant to the study of the intersection of popular culture and criminal justice. Published in 1971, issues 96, 97, and 98 of *The Amazing Spider-Man* directly challenged long-standing industry-wide editorial standards concerning the portrayal of crime, delinquency, law enforcement, and drugs as stipulated by the Comics Code Authority and, in doing so, questioned the foundations of mainstream criminal justice ideology. Subsequently, it would help bring about the dawn of a new and much more realistic era of comic book publishing, one that redefined how the superhero genre portrayed crime and criminal justice. This case study (a) illustrates the evolution of criminal justice ideology in the medium of comic books through the processes of Cultural Criminology; and (b) confirms the hegemonic paradox of the modern superhero mythos as critical criminological discourse.

POPULAR CULTURE, COMIC BOOKS, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE IDEOLOGY

Fear of crime, public trust of law enforcement, affirmation or rejection of the dominant criminal justice ideology, demarcation of boundaries for acceptable behavior, and understanding of individual rights are only a few of the important perceptions affected by the juxtaposition of criminal justice and popular culture. It has been suggested that the general educative function of the popular media is to legitimize the authority of the criminal justice system and the actors who fulfill its edicts (Williams, 1998). Storey (1996) argues that an important contribution of cultural studies is that it facilitates understanding of the role conflict and power play in the establishment and transmission of both dominant and subcultural values.

A primary justification for the study of popular culture results from assumptions about how various popular media interpret and transmit information to the public concerning crime and justice. Surette (1992) suggests society members gain knowledge of criminal justice through (a) personal experiences, (b) significant others, (c) groups and institutions, and (d) the mass media. Studies in popular culture and criminal justice focus on the mass media as a mode of cultural transmission to understand how societal members acquire knowledge of criminal justice and whether this knowledge accurately reflects “objective” reality. Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter (2000) describe the mass media as “mythmakers” that often distort images of crime, criminals, and law enforcement officials for the sake of dramatization. If, as several authors suggest, the popular media has significant social learning effects, the accuracy of information presented becomes a major concern in popular culture research on criminal justice because people use this knowledge to construct their perceptions of the social world (Surette, 1992; McNeely, 1998).

Ferrell and Sanders' Fundamental Themes of Cultural-Criminological Integration

Ferrell and Sanders (1995a) call explicitly for the integration of culture into the formulation of criminological theory and argue that “[t]o understand the reality of crime and criminalization...cultural criminology must account not only for the dynamics of criminal subcultures but for the dynamics of the mass media as well” (p. 6). To this end, the authors enumerate three fundamental themes that describe the shaping of the cultural-criminological nexus. First, researchers must understand “the essential role of the *media* in shaping intersections of culture and justice” (14). Postmodern life occurs within and exists as a tautological frenzy of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. Criminologists must recognize that because “criminal events, identities, and styles take place within [this] media-saturated environment,” their implications cannot be understood outside this context (p. 14).

The second fundamental theme, *style*, reflects the hegemonic implications of how power shapes “not only criminal identity but legal authority and the boundaries of social control” (p. 14). According to Ferrell and Sanders, an “aesthetics of authority” exists in which legal and moral authorities define the acceptability and desirability of stylistic expression. Those expressions deemed offensive or controversial, such as comic books, video games, graffiti, alternative and hip hop music, and unconventional styles of attire, are more likely to be criminalized because they “undermine the stylistic certainty and aesthetic precision essential to the functioning of legal authority and social control” (p. 15). Naturally, the marginalized resist through their continued aesthetic opposition to the symbolic forces mobilized against them by agents of social control. As a result, “boundaries of culture and crime” are negotiated time and again through perpetual stylistic warfare.

The third theme rests on the assumption that crime cannot be understood apart from the forces of power and style that shape its meaning. Implicit in the observation that authorities actively attempt to reshape public meaning in their favor is the realization that “connections between crime and culture are crafted out of social inequality” (p. 15). In a very real sense, alternative subcultures and styles confer a sense of membership, a collective identity and system of behaviors and beliefs that resist the “aesthetics of authority.” Although subcultural members have stylistic resources at their disposal, this pales in comparison to the “political-economic, legal, religious, and media forces” authorities use to “shape the campaigns to criminalize popular culture and particular subcultures and direct these campaigns at outsiders of all sorts” (p. 15). In recognition of the unfairness of this contest to those without access to such powerful forces of cultural construction, a “critical” cultural criminology would recognize “the need to take into account power, conflict, subordination, and insubordination” that characterize the process of stylistic negotiation (p. 15).

Seduction of the Innocent: The Evolution of the Comics Code Authority

These hegemonic processes and the critical leanings of Cultural Criminology can be evidenced throughout the history of comic book censorship. As Surette (1998) points out, popular culture has been described as having both criminal and criminogenic properties and therefore has been a lightning rod of controversy and calls for censorship. The American comic book's relevance to the study of criminal justice becomes clear, for it occupies a special place in the history of popular culture and criminal justice research. Critics of the comic book medium, most notably psychiatrist Frederic Wertham (1954a), have suggested that not only can comics

assert a criminogenic influence in encouraging delinquency and aggressive behavior (Lovibond, 1967; Brand, 1969; Tan & Scruggs, 1980), they can be criminal in and of themselves when they are characterized as little more than a black market where comic publishers coerce creators into producing horror and crime comics that encourage children to reject authority and associate with undesirable elements (Wright, 2001). Wertham's personal crusade against comic books culminated with *Seduction of the Innocent*, a scathing condemnation of the medium's educative effects on crime, delinquency, and sexual deviance (1954a; 1954b).

An impassioned moral entrepreneur, Wertham capitalized on growing public concern over crime and juvenile delinquency by arguing that the explicit images of semi-nude women and violence in comic books constituted a "distillation of viciousness" (p. 94) that "indoctrinated children against the accepted rules of decency, much as propaganda had done in totalitarian nations" (Wright, 2001, p. 159). Through sensationalism and a suspect methodology based on anecdotal evidence of comic books' influence on deviant behavior, Wertham tirelessly advocated legislative control over their creation and distribution. Eventually, this crusade climaxed in 1953, when mounting suspicion about possible links between mass culture and delinquency resulted in the comic medium's inclusion in the hearings of the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. Commonly known as the Kefauver Committee, after the Tennessee senator who directed the proceedings, it signified "the establishment's" recognition of the anti-hegemonic undertones of "mainstream" comics (Williams, 1998).

Several critics of the medium argue that this controversy arose from the perceived threat the increasingly independent youth culture posed for the conservative climate of post World War II America (Jones & Jacobs, 1997; Wright, 2001). Although most comic publishers and creators (and millions of fans) took the brunt of the censorship proceedings, the intense public focus on this once taken for granted medium ironically resulted in several observations that began comics on the long road to cultural and critical legitimacy: (a) for the first time, comics were recognized as a possible tool of subversion against mainstream cultural values; (b) the comic industry and comics themselves played a major role in the discourse of public censorship and the constitutional right to freedom of speech which demarcated boundaries of "acceptable" behavior; (c) comics affect and are affected by the pluralistic and economic processes that shape culture; (d) the medium of sequential art is surprisingly resistant to external social control; (e) comic books are an integral player in the social construction of crime and deviance; and (f) researchers must consider the effects of cultural context on scientific objectivity, especially when critiquing popular media (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995a).

This brief summary of the historical association of comic books with juvenile delinquency, crime, obscenity, and sexual deviance suggests that researchers, societal members, and political figures recognized the educative potential of comic books almost from their inception; however, many erred in assuming purely criminogenic effects instead of considering more socially beneficial educative outcomes, a finding many other researchers have reported in subsequent studies (Huugaard, 1973; Barton, 1991; Mitchell & Johnson, 1996; McCloud, 2001; McCloud, 2002; Jones, 2002; Klock, 2002). As the furor surrounding the comic debate suggests, perceived threats to the social order can make well-meaning politicians, parents, educators, legislators, and even social scientists forget the importance of approaching social problems critically. In fact, no less a prominent sociologist than C. Wright Mills praised Wertham's

Seduction of the Innocent as solid social commentary despite Wertham's obviously subjective and undocumented conclusions. That Mills also publicly supported censorship legislation in the absence of rigorous analysis is especially troubling (Mills, 1954).¹ The immediate effect of these developments nearly sounded the death knell for the entire industry, as moral crusaders publicly boycotted publishers and proposed legislation to greatly curtail comic book distribution.

As public and governmental pressure mounted, comic book publishers proactively searched for a means to salvage their waning industry. Borrowing from the Motion Picture Association of America's attempts at self-regulation, the comic book publishers of America established the Comics Code Authority (CCA) to guide the creation and distribution of American comic books. In its wake, most distribution outlets would refuse to sell comics without the literal stamp of approval of the CCA on their covers.² The first "Comics Code," ratified in 1948 by the short-lived Association of Comic Magazine Publishers, was subsequently amended by its replacement editorial standards board, the Comics Code Authority, in 1954, 1971, and 1989. A quick glance at their guidelines underscores the intimate relationship between criminal justice and popular culture. Comic books, like all other forms of popular media, are subject to the whims of hegemonic censorship when they are perceived to threaten the status quo, whatever form that may take at the time. What sets this particular case apart, however, is that the Code specifically delineates how comics can and cannot portray crime, criminals, and law enforcement officials (Nyberg, 1998). The popularity of "crime" and "horror" comic books, such as *Crime Does Not Pay!* and *Crime Suspense Stories*, and *Tales From The Crypt* and *Vault of Horror*, respectively, caused concern for parents, educators, and other moral entrepreneurs because they assumed a causal relationship between comic exposure and deviance. These gory and macabre stories, to mainstream 1940s and 1950s tastes, seemed almost to glorify violence and disrespect of law enforcement authority.³ In fact, this was a primary motivating factor behind the construction of the Code itself. Intentionally designed to control how creators portrayed agents of hegemonic order, the Comics Code serves as an example of how hegemonic pressure can shape popular media's construction of criminal justice ideology.

1 It should be noted that Wertham, for the most part, was a respected psychiatrist whose intentions were decidedly well meaning. His interest in understanding how sociocultural factors influence personality development arose from his treatment of disadvantaged African Americans and juvenile delinquents; however, he erred in assuming a causal relationship between delinquency and comic book reading. Wertham based his conclusions on his observation that most of his patients read comic books (in an example of "selection bias" that seems tailor-made for an introductory social science research methods text, he seemed surprisingly unconcerned or unaware that the same could be said for most non delinquent children as well). As comic critic Bradford W. Wright explains, much of Wertham's "crusade" could better be explained as "conspiracy rhetoric" because of Wertham's outright refusal to adhere to rigorous standards of scientific inquiry. Not only were his conclusions based solely on anecdotal observations, but he also "failed to document any of his evidence, and he provided no footnotes or bibliography to verify his research. He simply expected readers to trust his evidence and conclusions on the basis of his own expert credentials" (Wright, 2001, p. 158).

2 Some publishers slyly circumvented the code by switching from comic book to magazine format, the most notable example of which was EC Comics' *Mad Magazine*, probably one of the most overtly satirical and subversive "comic books" ever published. For an in-depth discussion of the history of the CCA and its impact on the comic industry, please see Nyberg's (1998) superb *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*.

3 In actuality, most of these stories were sharp O. Henry-esque social commentaries that condemned immoral and antisocial behavior.

And control the content of comic books it did, for the familiar “stamp” of the Comics Code Authority determined life or death for individual comic issues and eventually many publishers themselves. The process works in the following manner: individual issues are submitted to the CCA, where they are then compared to the Comics Code. An individual comic book that the CCA determines does not meet the Comics Code requirements does not receive the stamp, a veritable guarantee that (a) distributors would choose not to sell the book, and (b) adults would not allow children to read it. This amounted, in effect, to a cavalcade of watered-down, benign stories that unambiguously differentiated “good” and “evil,” always implying, of course, that those who support the criminal justice system’s attempts to control crime are the “good guys.”

THE COMIC CODE AUTHORITY’S EDITORIAL STANDARDS CONCERNING THE PORTRAYAL OF “CRIME”

Prior to 1971, the Code’s stance on portrayals of crime, criminals, and law enforcement was clear. The Code’s first six “General Standards” for “Editorial Matter” defended the legitimacy of the criminal justice system by explicitly condemning content that in any way, shape, or form could be interpreted as inspiring criminal behavior and/or disrespect of legal-based authority. According to these guidelines,

- 1) Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals;
- 2) No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime;
- 3) Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority;
- 4) If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity;
- 5) Criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates the desire for emulation; and
- 6) In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.

These provisions delineated the proper portrayal of police and forced creators to respect and promulgate notions of their hegemonic legitimacy. As a result, the Code effectively censored comic book portrayals of crime, law enforcement, and drugs, ostensibly for the sake of the public welfare, but as cultural tastes evolved and societal members seemed more accepting of the portrayal of harsh reality in popular media, the Comics Code began to lose some of its authority.

A New Breed of Superhero Challenges the Comics Code

Despite the fact that the Comics Code greatly restricted the content and subsequent distribution of comic books, this compromise allowed the medium to survive, although it never again enjoyed the success it had in the late 1930s and throughout the war-ridden years of the 1940s, when the likes of Superman and Batman captured the Nation’s attention and consistently sold millions of copies per month (Vollum & Adkinson, 2003). Barely a decade after the medium enjoyed its greatest successes in the 1940s behind characters such as Batman,

Superman, Captain America, the Human Torch, and the Sub-Mariner, the superhero genre waned as negative publicity and reader apathy brought an end to the Golden Age of Comics. The Code's restrictions on depictions of "crime" and "law enforcement" which greatly curtailed the essence of the superhero narrative itself certainly did not help sales figures (Wright, 2001). However, like Campbell's (1973) archetypal hero who is defined by "The Road of Trials," the superhero genre itself evolved and succeeded in the face of adversity.

In a testament to the universal and timeless tenacity of Campbell's heroic myth, superhero comic books experienced a renaissance with the introduction of Barry Allen, the new Flash, in *Showcase* number 4, published by DC Comics in 1956. By this time, crime and horror comics had succumbed to the restrictions of the Comics Code, paving the way for the revitalization of superhero titles. In the wake of DC Comics' success with the Flash other classic DC heroes, such as the Atom and Green Lantern, were updated for contemporary sensibilities. Inevitably, this new generation of heroes found itself allied with Golden Age DC legends Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman (and "second tier" heroes Green Arrow and J'onn J'onzz, the Martian Manhunter) in the *Justice League of America*, DC Comics' preeminent Silver Age team book. Competitor Marvel Comics soon followed suit, introducing its own team of superhero adventurers, *The Fantastic Four*, in 1961. With the 1962 introduction of another unlikely Marvel Comics hero, an awkward fifteen year-old science student with the proportionate strength and agility of a spider, the superhero genre would eventually challenge the very status quo that had once shaken it to its foundation.

Martin Goodman, publisher of Marvel Comics at the time, feared that a hero with the powers of a spider would be too macabre for the sensibilities of early 1960s comic readers, and approved the concept only on the condition that Spider-Man's first appearance and origin be published as the back-up story in the final issue of the floundering horror/science fiction anthology series *Amazing Fantasy* (*Amazing Fantasy* 15, Aug. 1962; Daniels, 1991). To Goodman's surprise, fans barraged the offices of Marvel Comics demanding more of the flawed, teenage "anti-hero." Seven short months after the cancellation of *Amazing Fantasy*, this "throwaway" character became the star of his own title, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, one of the most popular comic series ever produced (Jones & Jacobs, 1997; Wright, 2001).

In their insightful account of Spider-Man's influence and continuing popularity, Jones and Jacobs (1997) conclude that Spider-Man's co-creators, writer Stan Lee and artist/co-plotter Steve Ditko, brought "a structural innovation to superhero comics that would change the genre fundamentally and forever" (p. 62). For the first time in superhero comic book history, "[h]ere was a solo hero, not a kid sidekick or a team member, who was really a teenager, and a teenager who wasn't happy-go-lucky or goofily cute but truly complex and tormented," one who "must find his own morality through the agony of subjective experience" (p. 60). Wright (2001) suggests Spider-Man's immediate and unprecedented popularity resulted from the way these themes resonated with baby boomers struggling to find moral certitudes within an increasingly ambivalent and tumultuous historical period. As Stan Lee himself proclaimed to the reader, Spider-Man is "the hero who could be you!!!" (*ASM* 9, Feb. 1964; Jones & Jacobs, 1997; Wright, 2001) because he suffers the same mundane and existential problems faced by "real" people (Palumbo, 1983). Spider-Man's alter ego, Peter Parker, struggled to balance school and work, dealt with sickness, death, and relationship problems, and even routinely faced ordinary

hassles like doing laundry.⁴ The juxtaposition of Peter's amazing abilities with his daily frustrations personifies not only the readers' dreams of being more than average, but also their reality of being average. Thus, in a particularly convenient convergence of cultural supply and demand, Spider-Man literally revolutionized the way superhero stories were told, with "[t]he young, flawed, and brooding anti-hero [becoming] the most widely imitated archetype in the superhero genre since the appearance of Superman" (Wright, 2001, p. 212). Danny Fingeroth (2004), former editor of the Spider-Man comic book line and consultant to the Fox Kids Network Spider-Man animated series, argues that because of this reason, "Spider-Man can be seen as the apex of the superhero genre" (p. 146). Benton (1989) echoes Fingeroth's assessment, citing Spider-Man as one of the seven "most historically important" superheroes ever created.

The Nexus of Power and Responsibility

Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that Spider-Man would come to challenge the Comics Code so directly, for the very mythos of the Spider-Man narrative was fashioned from recognizing the power of individual citizens and media and criminal justice forces to shape American life (Adkinson, 2005). Endowed with these fantastic abilities, the young protagonist immediately becomes a media sensation, only to see his fame shattered by his hubris after he fails to apprehend a burglar escaping from the television studio where Spider-Man has just finished a performance. No longer willing to be "pushed around," Peter Parker is content to bask in his newfound popularity. Upon returning home, however, he learns that the very burglar he had a chance to stop has killed his beloved Uncle Ben, and so he discovers "...that with great power must also come—great responsibility" (*Amazing Fantasy* 15, Aug. 1962, p. 13).

This awesome responsibility becomes the lynchpin of the Spider-Man mythos and forms the core of what Adkinson (2005) terms "The Nexus of Power and Responsibility" (Wolk, 2007). This Nexus consists of three prongs, that of the characterization of Peter Parker/Spider-Man, and that of the portrayal of media and law enforcement themes, respectively. Because in an ideal democracy "great power" should be tempered with "great responsibility," the Spider-Man mythos consistently portrays socially conscious decisions and responsible use of discretion in a positive light. Media figures, such as Daily Bugle publisher J. Jonah Jameson, who tarnish Spider-Man's image to sell newspapers, are portrayed as antagonists. On the other hand, law enforcement officials and other representatives of the criminal justice system typically enjoy positive portrayals that suggest the creators of the mythos (a) support the mainstream criminal justice ideology, (b) realize the importance of the responsible use of criminal justice system power, and (c) generally abide by the proscriptions for acceptable portrayals of law enforcement outlined by the Comics Code.

Because this theme of power and responsibility pervades the Spider-Man mythos, the social criticism of the creators was not limited to the storylines themselves, but extended to the

4 On more than one occasion, Peter has found himself relegated to wearing a paper bag on his head in the aftermath of a wardrobe malfunction. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* 82 (March 1970), for example, a run-in with the wrong end of an industrial smokestack necessitates a trip to a local laundry mat. To conceal his identity, Peter covers his head with a "paper bag mask" and suffers the stares of gaping onlookers while his costume is being cleaned. A similar scenario unfolds in issue 258 (Nov. 1985). After the Fantastic Four help Spider-Man rid himself from the symbiote costume that would one day become Venom, Peter swings home in an extra Fantastic Four uniform, complete with stirrups leggings and paper bag mask. Adding to his indignity is the obligatory "Kick Me" sign taped to his back, courtesy of his pal and friendly rival, the Human Torch.

actual intentional publication of the title without the formal approval of the Comics Code Authority. When the opportunity presented itself, Stan Lee felt a responsibility to use Spider-Man's popularity as a vehicle for educating young people about the dangers of drugs despite the rejection of this storyline by the Authority (Lee, 1979). Eventually, the social commentary within *The Amazing Spider-Man* would violate the borders of the page to directly challenge the CCA's conservative criminal justice ideology and "real world" criminal justice practice. And it would do so by encouraging the Comics Code Authority to revise its editorial policy.

THE HEGEMONIC PARADOX OF THE SUPER HERO

It is no coincidence that superhero comics like *The Amazing Spider-Man* have been at the center of many ideological crossroads in American history. As a mainstream cultural production, superhero comics have typically protected against perceived threats to the American status quo, as in World War II when they offered escapist fantasy and patriotic propaganda to the millions of U.S. troops and children who read them daily (Wright, 2001), or in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s when they reflected the rise of conservative crime control philosophy by portraying the "grim and gritty" side of urban life (Jones & Jacobs, 1997). This is especially true post-9/11, where the superhero symbolizes the dominant class's response to the challenges, both external and internal, that threaten the "American way of life" like never before. Paradoxically, however, superhero comic books have also been progressively subversive, confronting social inequality and human rights violations during the Civil Rights and Viet Nam eras (Mondello, 1976), and addressing issues of imperialism, terrorism, and the further erosion of due process after 9/11 (Adkinson, 2005). Mondello (1976) argues that Spider-Man, as conceptualized in the 1960s and early 1970s, is a "hero in the liberal tradition." He cites examples of storylines from *The Amazing Spider-Man* that raise concerns of social justice, ranging from political corruption to civil rights. Williams (1998) studied 14 issues of Spider-Man comics (ranging across several titles) and came to similar conclusions. He argues that Spider-Man represents a "non-subversive, slightly counter-hegemonic" hero.

Williams' assertion echoes those of Reynolds (1992) and Jones and Jacobs (1997), who raise intriguing questions in their discussions of the ideological contributions of the superhero genre. They suggest that the typical superhero narrative represents a "hegemonic paradox" in that the protagonist almost universally operates outside legally recognized forces of social control yet risks his or her life regularly to uphold the legitimacy of formal criminal justice institutions. Superheroes are simultaneously extra-legal vigilantes and symbols of the dominant cultural ethos. The social problems created by the dominant cultural ethos are incapable of being resolved by the hegemony's own agents and institutions of social control. Only the superhero, whose vigilantism is counter-hegemonic by definition, has the power to uphold and protect the dominant class's interests when its own institutions fail to do so.

Vigilantism, Power, and Hegemony

The relationship of vigilantism to legitimate criminal justice ideology can be better understood by revisiting Packer's (1968) classic treatise on the limits of criminal sanction, as embodied by opposing ideological models of "crime control" and "due process." Is the purpose of criminal justice to make and enforce laws designed to limit criminal behavior, or is it to reinforce constitutional safeguards against governmental intrusion into private affairs? The due process model is necessary to counter the potential abuses arising from institutional power. Such

an approach carries with it several hegemonic implications. By balancing the potential for abuse with the adherence to principles of due process, the government essentially performs self-regulation. This balancing of powers, enumerated within the American Constitution and implicit within the philosophy of democracy, constructs an ideology of responsibility to bridle unchecked potential forces of tyranny.

A brief recall of the Bill of Rights supports the notion that the U.S. hegemony can best be characterized as self-regulatory because it allows continuous debate over the boundary between individual and institutional rights. Freedom of speech and the press, due protection safeguards guiding arrest and court processes, guarantees of privacy and equitable treatment, and proscriptions against tyrannical punishment recognize the potential problems arising from unequal distribution of power. Therefore, it is somewhat confusing to characterize Spider-Man as “slightly counter-hegemonic” because, by definition, the ability to criticize and improve the “hegemony” is integral to the American hegemonic ideology. The American political system was designed to hold itself accountable and to allow dissident voices of freedom to speak out against injustice.

However, there is one important aspect of the mythos that does imply a strongly counter-hegemonic message. According to Packer, “the most modest-seeking but potentially far-reaching mechanism by which the Due Process Model implements these antiauthoritarian values is the doctrine of legal guilt” (p. 22). To combat potential abuse, the U.S. criminal justice system has been founded on the presupposition of “innocent until proven guilty.” The complex and often lengthy procedures associated with American jurisprudence testify to the importance of each accused person receiving his or her “due” during the criminal justice “process.” Ideally, this strikes a balance between societal needs for crime control and individual needs to be safe from unwarranted government intrusion. The problems with this approach, however, arise from the limitations it places on ferreting out criminal activity, apprehending offenders, and applying proper measures of punishment and rehabilitation. In short, crime control proponents argue that overindulgence on the due process model ensures that many crimes will go unpunished as law enforcement and court officials often have their hands tied by “rules and regulations” guiding “proper” conduct.

According to Madison (1973), this void of enforcement may encourage the development of individual and societal attitudes in support of informal, or “vigilante,” justice, as citizens, unsatisfied with formal responses to crime, literally take the law into their own hands to ensure justice is done. Despite its foundation on formal legalistic principles, the American system of criminal justice has also been historically associated with vigilantism because of the failure of these principles to completely eradicate the crime problem. Lane (1976) argues that “vigilantism” is a “specifically American form of social violence” that is “woven deeply into our history, bound up in the westward movement, the gun culture, and slavery,” and “in its wider sense was an important form of political expression” (p. 1).

Spider-Man, most certainly, is a vigilante, for his primary method of supplementing law and order is extralegal physical violence. It should be noted, however, that a core element of the Spider-Man mythos is that of the sanctity of life. Marvel Comics’ official editorial policy prohibits any creator from ever allowing Spider-Man to intentionally seriously harm or kill

another living being, even the murderous super-villains he faces so frequently. But his vigilantism, like DC Comics' Batman, originates from a personal tragedy that indirectly results from the failure of the system to protect someone he loves. Peter Parker directly experiences the fear, anguish, and frustration of violent crime and concludes that his amazing abilities are indeed a great "power" that bestows upon (or perhaps burdens) him with the "responsibility" to begin his crusade against crime at the exact point where the powers of the formal legal system end. Through his tragedy, he realizes the limitations of the criminal justice system and dedicates his life to bringing justice to those the system cannot or will not reach.

The relationship between Spider-Man's vigilantism and due process can be partially explained by Skitka and Houston (2002), who conclude that "people may be concerned with justice because they strive to be authentic moral beings by acting on the basis of values closely tied to their personal identity" (p. 305). They apply this model of "moral mandates" to due process concerns, namely, how people determine their personal conceptions of fairness. They found that "moral mandates appear to legitimize any procedure so long as the mandated end is achieved" (p. 323). Peter's responsibility stems directly from his moral value system and justifies his "own behavior to achieve just ends outside the procedures designed to maintain civil society" (p. 323), like Skitka and Houston suggest.

Throughout the series, the public, recurring characters, and even law enforcement officials often openly support Spider-Man as a welcome ally in the "fight" against crime. Gabor (1994) suggests that "there is a growing recognition, acknowledged by many major police departments, that crime prevention and law enforcement can no longer be handled exclusively by the police" (p. 207). He cites several "high profile" cases that "show the fragility of public order and the readiness of ordinary citizens to mobilize and engage in violent behavior in order to protect themselves" (p. 208). Again, the Nexus of Power and Responsibility becomes relevant because the willingness to (a) resort to vigilantism and/or (b) implicitly or explicitly support vigilantism as a necessary extralegal response to crime has serious implications for understanding American criminal justice ideology. Further research is necessary to fully uncover the complex factors influencing social acceptance of vigilantism, but it can be concluded that *The Amazing Spider-Man* assumes that, paradoxically, hegemonic interests of law and order can only be protected by the public taking the law into its own hands when legal responses fail to reduce public fear of criminal victimization and offenders escaping "justice."

In sum, counter-hegemonic themes suggest where lines should be drawn between governmental and individual rights. They define acceptable limits of infringement into our private lives and individual senses of morality and responsibility. Visiting the concept of power, it seems as though the ideology of "great power and great responsibility" as defined by the Spider-Man mythos embodies Scott's (1996) assertion that power can be understood as both political and individual "domination and resistance to domination" (p. 135). He couches his discussion in terms of the hegemonic relationships that define the dominant class's interests and how the status quo is accepted and/or challenged by subaltern forces. In *The Amazing Spider-Man*, law and order, science and education, and pressure on the individual to accept the legitimacy of the American political, economic, and criminal justice systems all reaffirm the status quo; however, there also runs deeply throughout the mythos a steadfast individualism, an unwillingness to accept the hegemony at face value, that defines the "slightly counter-

hegemonic” nature of this series (Williams, 1998; Adkinson, 2005). According to Scott (1996), such informal “interpersonal” power represents the individual’s only true source of challenge to the ever-churning gears of hegemonic progress. “Responsible” vigilantism, existential questioning, teaching and practicing critical thinking, and having the courage to defend what one perceives to be “right” or “moral,” despite hegemonic claims to the contrary, all originate from individuals’ recognition of their “power” to (a) influence the hegemony directly and/or (b) refuse to internalize hegemonic values with which they disagree.

The Hegemonic Paradox of the Superhero as Critical Discourse

Reynolds (1992) suggests that the roots of the hegemonic paradox of the superhero are inextricable from the superhero genre. Two points bear particularly on the superhero’s dual hegemonic implications. On the one hand, “[t]he hero’s devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law,” while on the other, “[a]lthough ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws” (p. 16). Reynolds’ definition implies that the superhero narrative can simultaneously override and reaffirm the legitimacy of dominant institutions, but he does not provide an in depth discussion in his analysis, leaving the reader to wonder about this apparent paradox.

This interpretation of the superhero narrative establishes the political nature of the superhero as typically patriotic yet aware of the susceptibility of modern government to corruption and fascism, hence the superhero’s “devotion to justice” rather than blind acceptance of hegemonic doctrine. Williams’ (1998) argues that superhero comics can be defined as “non-subversive” because they uphold “the values and world view of the current hegemony” (p. 133), although they may contain “slight counter-hegemonic tendencies” (p. 132) in the form of social criticism. Most comic scholars have addressed the hegemonic paradox of the superhero only tangentially when discussing ideology. They tend to focus on how superheroes symbolize such general themes as nationalism and social justice. Furthermore, the research is biased towards iconographic superheroes, those who have achieved recognition in the national, or even global, conscious. The most popular superheroes dominate the discussion with Superman, the first superhero, leading the way. Eco (1979) proposes that the Superman mythos is in fact a closed text that dictates the reader’s acceptance of the hegemony, while Reynolds (1992) and Vollum and Adkinson (2003) offer a more open interpretation of both the Superman and Batman mythologies by suggesting that they provide a narrative template that allows readers to draw conclusions about the ideological implications of the superhero.

According to Lang and Trimble (1988), the superhero represents the public’s desire for individualism and social justice, although superheroes, particularly inherently patriotic ones like Captain America and Superman, can become co-opted as agents of hegemonic reification.⁵

⁵ In Marvel Comic’s controversial *Civil War*, the heroes of the Marvel Universe take up arms against each other following the passage of the “Superhero Registration Act.” This federal legislation required all superpowered beings to register as agents of the United States’ government. In keeping with Reynolds’ argument that superheroes are more agents of justice than agents of the law, Captain America leads the anti-registration forces during this conflict against his friend and fellow Avenger Iron Man, stalwart of the pro-registration hegemony. As the inevitable destruction mounts, however, Captain America relents, surrenders, and turns himself over to the authorities. Despite his arrest, ideologically he remains committed to the protection of civil liberties until his

Skidmore and Skidmore (1983) come to similar conclusions in their examination of Captain America, Howard the Duck, Green Lantern and Green Arrow, and Spider-Man, superheroes they define as particularly political and socially conscious. They cite examples of social commentary directed toward racism, capitalism, religion, political corruption, and drug use to argue that the superhero narrative is “more than fantasy” in its depiction and transmission of political ideology.

Although criticism of the failure of the status quo to maintain order in the face of social change is necessary and found within the pages of Spider-Man comic books, both Spider-Man and his alter ego Peter Parker are attuned to matters of justice and supportive of the government’s need to maintain order through the workings of the criminal justice system. Spider-Man’s unique brand of “slightly counter-hegemonic” vigilante justice, therefore, can be seen as an allegory of critical criminological discourse because it holds individuals and the criminal justice system responsible for the proper disposition of power and authority. In an example of life imitating art, this allowed the creators of *The Amazing Spider-Man* to use the title to challenge real world censorship guidelines that essentially prohibited comic books from debating the ideology and practice of the American criminal justice system. This is consistent with the critical bent of Cultural Criminology, which Ferrell (1998) and Barak (1994) suggest must actively question the hegemonic implications of the interplay of criminal justice and popular culture.

SPIDER-MAN, THE COMICS CODE, AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE IDEOLOGY

Despite the inherent counter-hegemonic tendencies of the modern American superhero, for over two and a half decades, the Comics Code Authority stubbornly adhered to what were now becoming unrealistic and archaic restrictions against the objective portrayal of modern urban life, especially considering superhero comic books, the backbone of the industry, focused almost exclusively on subject matter regulated by the Code. These constraints were beginning to be too much to bear as creators, influenced by the activism of the times, yearned to address the civil rights issues that had come to light in America during the 1960s and early 1970s. Interestingly, however, the first successful challenge to the Code came not from the comic book industry, but from a most unexpected source: the hegemony itself.

Spurred on by the explosion of the drug culture in the 1960s, the Nixon Administration, under the auspices of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, approached Marvel Comics directly to request that they produce a story on the “dangers” of drugs to be published in one of Marvel’s “leading titles” (Lee, 1979; Nyberg, 1998; Wright, 2001). Martin Goodman’s and Stan Lee’s choice of venue speaks to Spider-Man’s popularity and cultural relevance. It is significant that other Marvel Comics icons such as the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, and Captain America were not chosen for this “honor.” It is possible that it was Spider-Man’s “everyman” status and slightly counter-hegemonic appeal (especially among college-age readers) that convinced Stan Lee that *The Amazing Spider-Man* offered the most appropriate vehicle for the Nixon Administration’s anti-drug message.⁶ Lee then penned the three-issue

assassination in *Captain America* 25 (March 2007). This storyline, which fundamentally challenged the status quo of the Marvel Universe, could be interpreted as a commentary on the United States’ “War on Terrorism.”

⁶ The popularity of comic books and psychedelic drugs on college campuses nationwide during the 1960s, made *The Amazing Spider-Man* the most logical outlet for an “anti-drug” message. Spider-Man’s particularly intense

storyline chronicling the drug addiction of Harry Osborn, Peter's best friend and son of Norman Osborn, the Green Goblin, Spider-Man's archenemy (*ASM* 96, May 1971; *ASM* 97, June, 1971; *ASM* 98, July 1971).

The cover to *The Amazing Spider-Man* 96 (May 1971) shows three police officers tending to an unconscious youth, with Spider-Man apparently "escaping" in the background. It portends a scene wherein a young African-American male, obviously suffering from a "bad trip," attempts to fly from the top of a building. Arriving in the nick of time, Spider-Man saves the boy and hands him over to the police. It is significant to note that it is a police officer, not Spider-Man, who saves the youth by using mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, which could be interpreted as implicit support of law enforcement's efforts to alleviate the drug problem. Compared to popular portrayals of police that depict officers primarily as agents of hegemonic domination and social control, the police in this issue seem much more humanitarian in their approach to drug offenders. The police, two Caucasians and one African-American, flatly ignore the fugitive Spider-Man and focus their attention solely on saving the young addict's life. The police, despite recent events that have suggested Spider-Man is a murderer, show an impressive willingness to judge Spider-Man based on their rational analysis of his actions. As Spider-Man scampers off, one officer tells the others, "Spider-Man saved him—now he's taking off." Another officer muses, "I thought he was wanted," to which the first officer replies, "Maybe so—but I'd turn in my badge before I'd bust 'im—after this" (p. 13). That an officer of the law would lay down his hegemonic responsibility standing up for a vigilante, and one wanted for murder at that, speaks volumes about the creators' willingness to challenge their youth-oriented audience to consider police as compassionate human beings and not racist, baton-wielding Gestapo. In addition, it also subtly challenges the legitimacy of the hegemony itself because the officer's implicit support of a "vigilante" flies in the face of strict interpretations of both due process and crime control philosophies (Packer, 1968).

In the meantime, the Osborn family suffers from its own problems. Harry has become addicted to an unnamed drug (his hallucinations imply it is a psychedelic) as he succumbs to the pressures of college, romantic relationships, and his father's wilting demands. Norman, however, struggles, quite literally, with his own demon, as the Goblin side of his personality begins to reassert itself. In typical melodramatic fashion, Peter is torn between his responsibility to help Harry and waging a life-or-death struggle against his greatest enemy. As Peter Parker, he confronts the "pusher" who sold Harry drugs and promptly trounces him and his cronies under the guise of using "karate" so as not to reveal his secret identity. The story ends with the Goblin reverting back to his civilian persona when Spider-Man forces him to confront Harry's recent overdose.

When Marvel Comics submitted this story to the Comics Code Authority, it was promptly rejected because it openly violated the Code's proscriptions against the portrayal of narcotics, despite the fact that the request for this storyline came directly from the Office of the President of the United States and Lee and artists Gil Kane and John Romita obviously emphasized the destructive potential of narcotics. Published without the Code's approval, issues

popularity on college campuses can be explained by his "outsider" status. An *Esquire* magazine poll found that self-described "college radicals" ranked Spider-Man among the likes of Che Guevara and Bob Dylan as "counterculture icons." (Wright, 2001)

96, 97, and 98 nonetheless sold well and to considerable public acclaim (Nyberg, 1998; Saffel, 2007). Faced with mounting pressure to amend its outdated restrictions, the Code was subsequently revised in 1971 as a direct result of this now-classic storyline.

THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY RESPONDS TO THE REALITIES OF MODERN CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Portrayals of Drug Use

In general these revisions could be interpreted as evidence of the growing necessity for American comic books to confront the reality of modern urban life. *The Amazing Spider-Man* literally revolutionized the portrayal of crime, law enforcement, and drugs because Martin Goodman, Stan Lee, and Marvel Comics willingly defied the Comics Code.⁷ As a result, the 1971 amendments to the code specifically outlined the “proper” portrayal of narcotics and drug addiction and significantly revised the original guidelines dictating appropriate depictions of law enforcement and criminal behavior. According to the revised Code, “Drug addiction shall not be presented except as a vicious habit,” and “Narcotics or Drug addiction or the illicit traffic in addiction-producing narcotics or drugs shall not be shown or described if the presentation:

- a) tends in any manner to encourage, stimulate or justify the use of such narcotics or drugs; or
- b) stresses, visually, by text or dialogue, their temporarily attractive effects; or
- c) suggests that the narcotics or drug habit may be quickly or easily broken; or
- d) shows or describes details of narcotics or drug procurement, or the implements or devices used in taking narcotics or drugs, or of the taking of narcotics or drugs in any manner; or
- e) emphasizes the profits of the narcotics or drug traffic; or
- f) involves children who are shown knowingly to use or traffic in narcotics or drugs; or
- g) shows or implies a casual attitude towards the taking of narcotics or drugs; or
- h) emphasizes the taking of narcotics or drugs throughout, or in a major part, of the story, and leaves the denouement to the final panels.” (General Standards—Part B, Section 6

Both pre- and post 1971 versions of the Code and the aforementioned portrayals of drug users and drug dealers within issues 96 – 98 of *The Amazing Spider-Man* support Stoddart’s (2006) observation that

[D]rug users were not constructed through a discourse of criminalization. From the 1970s to the present, users were depicted primarily as the victims of predation by

7 Although historically, Marvel Comics’ decision to publish an anti-drug storyline is generally regarded in a positive light, according to Saul Braun in the May 2nd, 1971, issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, such sentiments were far from universal. Understandably, Comics Code President and Archie Comics’ publisher John Goldwater was nonplussed, accusing Marvel Comics of unnecessary sensationalism, while DC Editorial Director Carmine Infantino questioned Marvel’s sense of editorial responsibility. Braun’s piece is recounted by Spider-Man historian Steve Saffel (2007) who further argues that the “ground-breaking story” immortalized in issues 96 – 98 of *The Amazing Spider-Man* “forever changed comics, brought a major issue to the attention of their readers, and paved the way for publishers such as Goldwater and Infantino to create their own relevant stories without threat of punishment.” (p. 62)

villainous drug dealers. This dichotomy legitimized the differential treatment prescribed to each character type by the hero. Where drug dealers were bad guys deserving of justified violence and criminalization, drug users were the subject of pity and aid... While junkies were depicted as morally and physically degraded, they remained pitiable and subject to aid from heroic characters. They were not subject to the same process of criminalization as drug dealers. (p. 77)

As Stoddart's findings suggest, comic books became an obvious and willing vessel for the transmission of mainstream "anti-drug" ideology that sympathized the "victim" drug addicts and criminalized the "villain" drug dealers. Although exaggerated, this does seem consistent with drug laws and enforcement policy that generally reserves harsher punishments for narcotic distribution than for simple "possession" and personal use.

Portrayals of Crime and Law Enforcement

Although the Code tightened the reigns on the portrayal of drugs, the 1971 version allowed more realistic portrayals of the ambiguity of crime and justice and law enforcement practice. For example, in 1954, Section 3 of General Standards Part A read, "Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority"; however, the 1971 version was amended to include, "If any of these is depicted committing an illegal act, it must be declared as an exceptional case and that the culprit pay the legal price." This caveat allows creators to explore the potential abuses of authority that undermine hegemonic "law and order," but only with the understanding that such abuses must be summarily punished. Once again, the hegemony is preserved. It seems reasonable to suggest that the Code, as a codified interpretation of hegemonic values, must evolve as the hegemony evolves. Therefore, revising the Code to keep pace with contemporary values ensures the Code continues to represent the "powers that be." If it does not, it risks becoming counter-hegemonic itself.

The Aftermath of the 1971 Revisions

Although previous storylines reflected growing awareness of social ills such as intolerance and racism (*ASM* 58, March 1968; *ASM* 62, July 1968; *ASM* 68, Jan. 1969), political corruption (*ASM* 91, Dec. 1970; *ASM* 92, Jan. 1971), and terrorism (*ASM* 95, April 1971), post-Code revision issues would tackle themes that directly questioned contemporary criminal justice ideology (Adkinson, 2005). The very next issue published after the conclusion of the drug use storyline, subtitled "Panic in the Prison," confronts problems of prison overcrowding, riots, and dehumanization of the incarcerated (*ASM* 99, Aug. 1971). Spider-Man himself appears on a nationally televised broadcast to decry the "antiquated system that makes prisons breeding grounds for crime" (p. 18-19).

Less than a year later, in a storyline running from February to March of 1972, the series questions the proper limits of police power. These issues revolve around New York City Police efforts to monitor the city through the use of rooftop mounted surveillance cameras. The creators illustrate a scene of civil protest by citizens who recognize the Orwellian implications of such pervasive surveillance technology. Carrying signs such as "No Big Brother," the protesters eventually pressure the city council to abandon this plan. Although law enforcement is not portrayed in an overwhelmingly cynical light, the message is clear. In the wake of the Code

revisions, the creators seem more willing to challenge the hegemonic authority on which the powers of the criminal justice system rest. Framed through the lens of the Nexus of Power and Responsibility, it is an explicit commentary that there is such a thing as too much power, and that citizens must vigilantly protect their privacy against unwarranted police intrusion.

Perhaps the most culturally significant event to come out of the post-Code revision years of *The Amazing Spider-Man* was the introduction of the murderous vigilante the Punisher in the pages of issue 129 (Feb. 1974). This character serves as a right-wing foil for Spider-Man; whereas Spider-Man cherishes life at all costs, the Punisher willingly serves as judge, jury, and executioner. The popularity of the Punisher would have a tremendous influence on the superhero genre and help give rise to the “grim and gritty” era in comic history. As a result, the next three decades would see a dramatic proliferation of stories highlighting the crime-ridden stereotypes of urban life (Jones & Jacobs, 1997). Although further research is needed to clarify the importance of the “grim and gritty” era to both comic book history and American criminal justice ideology, this era does seem to be a direct result of the rampant fears about violence and drugs that dominated criminal justice-related news during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Lovel (2002) cites survey research that indicates citizens lack confidence in police and the court system because of the “violence-saturated media market that ultimately alters social reality and generates public fear” and concludes that “in the world of contemporary comics, one can not depend upon the state for protection. Rather, one must turn toward a rogue civilian named the Punisher” (p. 344). The Punisher’s introduction in *The Amazing Spider-Man* after the revision of the Comics Code three years earlier shows how these concerns were beginning to creep into even the patently moderate criminal justice ideology represented by the Spider-Man mythos. Other mainstream heroes were also greatly affected by this trend. The Dark Knight himself returned to his roots during the 1980s, shunning the campy 1960s day-glow portrayals in favor of the moody blacks and grays more suitable for the Batman’s harsh brand of justice (Newman, 1993; Vollum & Adkinson, 2003).

CONCLUSION

If cultural criminology is to be understood as a process whereby the media and criminal justice inform, cajole, coerce, question, and reaffirm each other (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995a, 1995b; Barak, 1994), then the present case study offers a unique glimpse into how these forces socially construct the realities of criminal justice. As the ideological dust settled in the aftermath of the skirmish between Marvel Comics and the Comics Code Authority over portrayals of drugs in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, a new editorial standard arose that opened the door for more realistic portrayals of crime and justice on the American cultural landscape. Given the significance of the Nexus of Power and Responsibility and the hegemonic paradox of the superhero to the Spider-Man mythos, it is unsurprising that storylines would increasingly reflect the creators’ willingness to question the social ills that plague modern life and undermine democratic ideals of justice. As Finley’s (2002) analysis of *Rage Against the Machine* lyrics illustrates, popular culture can be a willing and effective vehicle of critical criminological thought. Issues 96, 97, and 98 of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, by intentionally opposing industry-regulated censorship guidelines as established by the Comics Code Authority, helped legitimize the comic book medium as a mode of critical discourse as worthy of scientific study as books, movies, news media, music, video games, etc.

It is not too much to suggest that the evolution of the Comics Code was an economic necessity for the survival of the medium. As readership skewed from children to a more sophisticated and discerning college-age audience, creators simply had to keep pace with growing demands for realism and literary merit. Because superhero stories dealt primarily with crime, law enforcement, and other social issues, the Code was forced to evolve to keep pace with audience demands for realism. Being unable to portray subtle moral shades would forever condemn comics to the realm of children's entertainment; however, their economic viability rested solely on attracting a more mature audience willing to divert some of its disposable income to four-color stories of escapist fantasy. Ironically, although the Code initially decided the fate of the comic book industry, now its survival depends on its willingness to adapt to audience tastes, leading many, including Marvel Comics, to openly question and directly challenge its contemporary usefulness. This evolution reached its fruition in 2001, as Marvel Comics adopted a new editorial policy, complete with its own ratings system, and withdrew completely from the Comics Code Authority (Dean, 2001).⁸

In conclusion, the introduction of *The Amazing Spider-Man* to the annals of American cultural lore signified much more than a major turning point in the traditional superhero narrative; it illustrated the potential of the medium to question and shape ideology. *The Amazing Spider-Man* took a much bolder stand when it openly defied censorship legislation by portraying drug use and its effects in issues 96, 97, and 98. The subsequent amendment of the Comics Code illustrates how popular culture, even the lowly comic book, can and does have dramatic effects on criminal justice ideology and policy, just as the fundamental themes of cultural-criminological integration suggest (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995a). In the direct aftermath of this storyline, criminologists, then, could learn much from Peter Parker's example, for with the great power that comes from our education and academic status must also come the great responsibility to explore how important cultural artifacts such as *The Amazing Spider-Man* shape our knowledge and beliefs about crime and justice.

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⁸ Marvel Comics took its cue from the rationale behind the Motion Picture Association of America and developed similar guidelines. In June 2005, these guidelines were finalized into the following appropriate reader categories: (a) All Ages; (b) T + Suggested for Teen and Up; (c) Parental Advisory; and (d) Max: Explicit Content

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