listed among them). As Kalberg points out, these associations are not merely interest based but carry extensive ethical codes for professional conduct and obligations with them, and membership in them might be a necessary though not sufficient condition for attaining substantial leverage in the civic sphere. Apart from the fact that ethical codes might at times be blithely disregarded, it seems doubtful, however, that a political culture can lastingly rest on such a small, and arguably elite, foundation, even if such codes and the association members applying them were capable of informing the larger culture in a meaningful and lasting way.

In sum, Kalberg accomplishes a rare feat: to infuse a long-standing and seemingly stale debate on the content of Weber's thought and its merits with startling new insights that show how, in novel ways, to bring back to life the ideas of a man who died almost 100 years ago. These insights beg for a more extensive exploration in an in-depth, book-length treatise, to which this volume, this reviewer hopes, is only a prolegomenon. At that, it is astoundingly expensive (at close to $1 per page of text) but the core issues it delineates deserve to be discussed widely. Weberians and non-Weberians alike, take notice.

Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way. By Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobel. New York: New York University Press, 2013. Pp. viii+289. $75.00 (cloth); $24.00 (paper).

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Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobel's work is a study in cultural criminology that focuses on depictions of crime in comic books. Its analytical perspective suggests that the cultural meanings attached to comic book depictions of crime tend to reflect and reinforce attitudes about retribution and justice in social life. Translating that perspective into a research inquiry, *Comic Book Crime*'s methodology entails three activities: focus group interviews of the comic book readers, content analysis of 200 of the most popular crime comic books from 2001 to 2010, and field work—which involved exploring the social world of crime comic book fandom. Significantly, the study was begun shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Consisting of 10 chapters that include such topics as terrorism and comic books after 9/11; heroes, deathworthiness, and paths to justice; and race, ethnicity, and crime fighting, this study aims to present a comprehensive sociological analysis of criminality in comic books.

The book's sociological significance can be best conveyed by highlighting several of its key themes: (1) retribution and justice, (2) the social and psychological functions of comic books, and (3) the crime comic book subculture. The first theme, retribution and justice, is linked to some of the study's most intriguing findings. Significantly, despite the readers' strong interest in

retribution and justice, they typically devalued nonviolent conflict resolution and preferred "retribution brinkmanship," namely swift and harsh retaliation. Yet this expectation of retaliation usually amounted to little more than hyperbolic rhetoric. As the authors observe, "In essence our sample of comic books frequently talked tough, looked bloody, but ultimately confined threats of retribution rather than fully executed it" (p. 220).

A closely related finding linked to this retribution-justice theme was evidenced in the readers' skewed conception of justice, what the authors termed "contextualized justice," in which the readers' view of the legitimacy of the action depended not on the nature of the crime but on the character traits of the hero. Is this term just a fancy phrase for prejudice? It seems eerily reminiscent of the racial and class biases of jury trials in the American justice system associated with the names of many all-too-real victims of contextualized justice (e.g., Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, Rodney King, and Trayvon Martin).The peculiar disparity between the hyperbolic rhetoric and the actual acts of retribution in the comic books is illuminated by the second theme: the social and psychological functions of this literature. Why, we might ask, do some adults read books that most people associate with childhood? The authors argue that comic books give readers a means of processing "existential dilemmas," which entails vicarious emotional engagement with make-believe retribution—though readers typically reject that behavior at the cognitive level in their own lives. Comic books matter, both psychologically and sociologically, because they engage the readers in "ritual moral exercises," creating hypothetical scenarios that help them "to decide what types of behavior they may be willing to accept in the quest for justice" (p. 220).

In addition to providing occasions for these moral exercises, the comic books also have the important social function of connecting the reader to other readers, which brings into focus the third—and most sociologically compelling—theme: the superhero comic book subculture. Observe the authors: "There remains a tendency for comic book characters' race and sex orientation to reflect those of their creators—primarily straight white males" (p. 225). Simply put, these comic books reflect and sustain the worldview of a conservative white male subculture. By exploring the social world of this subculture, the study moves beyond customary cultural analysis of the text to analysis of its audience, examining the literature's link to an actual social group.

The fact that the crime comic books industry lags behind other areas of popular culture in presenting what the authors terms "heroes of diversity" is hardly accidental. The authors surmise that the "lack of diversity could make these books more comfortable for [white male] readers who remain in privileged positions within white hegemony and patriarchy" (p. 225). For example, they cite a case in which a comic book with a half-Latino and half-black superhero was published only to encounter controversy and negative reactions. Especially noteworthy were the criticisms from the conservative talk show pundit Glenn Beck, who, while denying that he was racially prej-

udiced, claimed that he was opposed because the change had been devised by Michelle Obama "to change the traditions of the country" (pp. 224–25). The predominant attitude of the comic book subculture toward diversity remains cautiously ambivalent—if not overtly hostile.

This study has several shortcomings that should be noted. First is its ambiguous conception of subculture. It would have benefited from a more nuanced conception of subculture as a social formation that emerges among individuals sharing problems of adjustment. This choice would have obliged the authors to focus on the social location and shared predicament of the readers that attracted them to the subculture and its dystopic worldview. As conservative white males in an American society that is becoming increasingly diverse and nonwhite, social alienation seems to be a key factor behind their motivations. The study would have benefited from a closer examination of the group's political and social anxieties.

Related to this ambiguous conception of comic book subculture, the study fails to specify the relationship of the subculture to mainstream American society. For example, it describes the superhero comics as "mainstream comics"—but this is a confusing way of referring to subcultural products. Instead, the term "dominant pattern" should have been used, because this would have been logically consistent with the authors' reference to the subculture as "a sleeper cell," a term suggesting its marginality as a cultural sanctuary for socially alienated white males. Though the authors are careful to avoid characterizing the subculture politically, it seems to resonate with a conservative Republican world view that idealizes a pre-1960s—or even pre–New Deal—historical era when American society existed as the virtually unchallenged domain of white, male, heteronormative hegemony.

What, then, are we to make of this subculture that the authors describe as having "a relatively closeted pride" in the medium's conservative orientation (p. 226)? Is it a rearguard cultural force that is swimming futilely against the tide of American history? Or is it a potentially dynamic cultural force ("a sleeper cell") that portends broad conservative social changes in American society? I think it is the former, but these are questions the study failed to pose.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, this study is a solid achievement that makes a significant contribution to both cultural criminology and the sociology of culture. Carefully researched, clearly organized, and lucidly written, this book would be an excellent work for classroom use in both fields as well as introductory sociology courses for which the instructor wants to provide a fresh and insightful demonstration of sociological analysis of popular culture.