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Social Sciences/Comics: A Commentary on Sociologica's Exploration of Comics

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Abstract

The writings collected in issue 15(1) of *Sociologica* take diverse approaches to the relationships between social sciences and comics. This commentary identifies several of the themes that bring these pieces together and make some suggestions for how the ideas and approaches sketched out in these pieces might be developed further in the future. The commentary explores how the ideas set forth in the articles overlap with concerns found in the field of Comics Studies and what the lessons learned by Comics Studies might have to offer to the field of social sciences.

Keywords: Comics Studies; Social Science; Accessibility; Dissemination; Translation; Adaptation; Impact; Institutions.

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The writings collected in this issue of *Sociologica* take diverse approaches to the relationships between social sciences and comics. In this commentary, I identify several of the themes that bring these pieces together and make some suggestions for how the ideas and approaches sketched out in these pieces might be developed further in the future. I write not as a social scientist and lay no claim to expertise in that field (I leave that to the authors of the articles); rather my perspective here is that of a comics scholar. I am therefore interested, in reading these articles, in how the ideas they set forth overlap with concerns found in the field of Comics Studies and what the lessons learned by Comics Studies might have to offer to the field of social sciences.

1 Accessibility and Dissemination

Perhaps the most obvious theme unifying the work collected here is that of accessibility. All of the articles touch on this theme to some extent, with most framing the accessibility of comics as one of the form's primary benefits for social scientists since it allows theory to connect with new audiences. This is a common idea around the use of comics as a mode of communication, and it makes sense in an academic context because it allows us to make claims around widening the dissemination of academic works. Kuipers and Ghedini (2021) sum up the broad thrust of such claims in their assertion that: "Traditional forms of academic publishing — papers, articles, books, talks — are ill-suited for sharing research insights with the people who care most about the topic" (p. 144). Framed in this way, comics become the solution to a problem: the impenetrability or incommunicability of academic discourses, particularly in terms of non-academic stakeholders. It is notable, however, that this argument tends to be used in a relatively broad way: comics are accessible, and therefore using comics will make the subject matter communicated therein accessible. Yet this position elides numerous other complexities. It assumes, for example, that comics *are* accessible: as the reader of more complex or difficult works like abstract comics or even continuity-heavy superhero comics can attest, this is not universally true. Here we might draw a comparison to other media and ask whether we can really substantiate this type of claim therein. For example, Kuipers and Ghedini note that "Academia is a world of words" (p. 152), but if we turn our attention to the literary we can see that there are some written modes that we consider "accessible", from children's and young adult literature to tabloid newspaper reporting, and others that are regarded as difficult, whether that is a post-modern novel, a piece of government policy or, perhaps, traditional academic writing. It is not the form itself that makes these modes (in)accessible, it is the way in which its practitioners use it. Comics *can* be accessible, and thanks to a longstanding cultural association with childhood it is assumed that they will be, but this is not an automatic rationale for the use of the medium.

Moreover, the idea that comics will broaden the dissemination of a work assumes that comics do have large audiences, or that they will appeal to audiences. While it is certainly true that in the Japanese and Franco-Belgian contexts there are substantial readerships for graphic literatures including comics, it is less clear how true this is in the English speaking world, where (with some notable exceptions) comics are often understood as something to be grown out of, or as a particular genre that one reads or doesn't (as opposed to, for example, the novel, where the assumption is that they are read and the question is which genre one reads, not whether one reads them at all). Even where comics *are* widely read, however, there is complexity around how these works will find their audiences: if readers prefer a thriller to the latest piece of academic research, by what logic would that readership prefer an academic comic to the latest thriller comic? There may be a case that producing research in the form of comics can help that re-

search appeal to comics readers, and perhaps to those that would have read the social science theory anyway (whether by choice or by instruction), but beyond that the idea becomes a little murkier. Just as comics are not automatically accessible, they do not offer automatic dissemination, as Berthaut, Bidet and Thura's article (2021) makes clear in its acknowledgment that it was *Sociorama*'s sales figures that led to its cancellation by Casterman in 2019.

This is not to say that comics cannot offer accessibility or dissemination to social science research and theory. It is only an observation that, if the starting position is the need or desire to make social science research more accessible or boost its readership, comics do not represent an automatic response. Instead, it becomes necessary to ask what specific affordances and features of comics are particularly well suited to the dissemination of social science research, and which of those affordances are required in a given case. Schiemer, Duffer and Ayers start to get to this type of consideration in their piece when they ask "how theory can be visualized." (2021a & 2021b).

2 Translation and Adaptation

This brings us to the second key theme emerging out of the pieces in the collection: the related notions of translation and adaptation. Several of the articles describe the work undertaken as a process of translating social science research into the language of comics, or as one of adapting a specific work or set of works into comics form (as we see in the discussion of *Sociorama*, for example). The articles by Kuipers & Ghedini and Berthaut, Bidet, & Thura seem to work well as a pair in this regard, since each presents slightly different aspects of the problem of translation: the former places more emphasis on the philosophical problems of translating ideas into images and addressing a different sensory modality, while the latter discusses some of the broader elements of working processes across teams of researchers and creators. Ultimately, though, the articles in the collection seem rather pessimistic in their assessments of these translations/adaptations. Berthaut, Bidet, and Thura declare that the works in *Sociorama* did not succeed economically, but also that they did "not entirely [fulfil] their dual objective of scientific dissemination and editorial success." More tellingly, there are a number of articles that emphasise the incompleteness or lack evident in the works: comics seem here to be positioned not as social science *work*, but as a gateway to *real* social science. Berthaut, Bidet, and Thura assert, for example, that the texts in the *Sociorama* series "were not intended to replace more academic literature but simply to arouse enough curiosity in readers that they might, one day, perhaps, read 'real' sociology books" (p. 288), while Brad Evans (2021) concedes that his work with Sean Michael Wilson in *Portraits of Violence* (2016) has produced "an accompaniment and not a replacement for the original texts" and voices his hope that "upon reading the book, students then turn to the original sources." Ultimately, I would suggest that such assessments position the comic not as translation or adaptation, but as *advertisement* for social science research, that seeks to convert a tentative enquiry into a serious engagement.

Yet I would also argue that such positions underestimate the possibilities inherent in comics themselves. Before expanding on this, I should note that I am very wary of taking an evangelical approach to the study of the form or aligning myself to the notion that one should be uncritically supportive of comics (this is an attitude I have observed in some commentators). In fact, despite being a scholar of comics I am quite comfortable with the idea that like any form or medium, comics are limited in their capacities and are not always the most effective mode of communication for ideas. Comics cannot do or be everything. That said, comics undoubtedly *do* have certain capacities that are not well recognised in some of the articles presented here. For

example, when Brad Evans asks "Could an illustrated version of *Othello* [...] really capture the drama and intensity a more literal reading of Shakespeare might offer as the reader is sat alone with its words?" (pp. 242–243), he seems to be neglecting the fact that Shakespeare did not write books to be read alone, he wrote plays to be performed in a social context, and a comics presentation of *Othello* could therefore lay a reasonable claim to being a more fully realised performance than sitting alone with the text would be, since it can at least cast "actors" and set a "stage" before its readers. While comics' potential is not infinite, it is certainly broader than Evans acknowledges here.

It is Cancellieri and Peterle (2021) that come closest to realising this potential in their assertion that "comics represent a prolific research tool that go beyond dissemination, helping us to contribute in different ways to contemporary debates on assemblage thinking, agency and the spatial, affective and material turn" (p. 230). Although the authors do outline processes of translation elsewhere in their article, it is notable that they do not generally frame their argument around what is missing (i.e., the "real" social science) and instead assess how comics might be able to answer social science questions in new ways. The notion of "hybrid products that take seriously the encounter between images and words as well as between comics and ethnographic methods" (p. 215) leads them to outline innovative approaches to cartography, for example, that not only engage with the questions social sciences ask, but also interrogate the parameters of those disciplines. In so doing, they open up new spaces for knowledges and knowledge production at the same time, moving beyond research disseminated through practice, and into the realm of practice-based research in earnest.

3 Institutions and Impact

This approach seems to me to be the one most likely to answer some of the difficult questions presented in the interview with Hamdy and Nye, but which reflect anxieties to be found across the collection. When Barberis and Grüning (2021) ask, for example, "how much are scholars interested in publishing a graphic novel — in the frame of this 'publish or perish' game, that may rank publishing a graphic novel quite low in academia" (pp. 295–296), we see institutional and formal constraints on academic career progressions coming into play. Hamdy replies that:

> [...] it definitely puts people in a difficult position, I think, especially for young scholars because there's just a big question mark of what is the weight and what is the value of a graphic novel in academic metrics and so [...] I think it's easier for senior established scholars to be able to pull something like this off, but you know I hope we continue to get submissions from everybody (p. 296).

Nye similarly speaks to this point later in the interview, noting: "I have a student right now who's defending her dissertation and the entire dissertation is a comic. But I don't know what's gonna happen in the academic job market for her, but I'm feeling hopeful" (p. 296).

There are, I would suggest, at least two possible responses to this problem, but both require a more concerted engagement with the principles of comics than is afforded by a dissemination-based approach. The first is to consider the age-old doctoral viva question: what is the contribution to knowledge coming from the research? Although, in theory, this question is relatively straightforward, at least at the post-doctoral level and beyond, it bears consideration in order to explicate the way in which a contribution might be made. The second response would be to consider the research in terms of impact. While this is a rather nebulous term it has been used

(at the very least in the UK Higher Education context) as a way of thinking about (and measuring) the contributions that research makes to wider communities of stakeholders. This goes beyond simple dissemination: it is not enough to show that people are aware of the research, it must also be demonstrated that the research has in some way affected at least the contexts to which it relates. In both responses, we can consider the role of the comics form: either the contribution/impact comes from the form the research takes (in which case there is an intrinsic justification for producing the work in that form), or it does not (in which case there is no reason *not* to produce it in that form). In either case there is a solid rationale for producing research in comics.

In closing, I encourage sociologists to avoid the entanglements that have slowed the development of Comics Studies as a discipline. Rather than justifying the use of comics by reference to "serious" or "real" forms of work, engaging concertedly with the form has the potential to produce important new insights into the discipline and its practices. The articles in this collection reflect insightfully on some of the challenges posed by the visualisation of theory and research, and they also begin to point towards some of the ways in which theory and research might be *produced* through visualisation. In building on this work, it will be interesting to see how social sciences might follow in the footsteps of the now increasingly visible and developed fields of Graphic Medicine and Graphic Justice to produce new knowledge and insights through the particular modes of practice afforded by comics.

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