

## The Greatest Team-Up Never Told?

### Paul Buhle Theorizes the New Left and Underground Comix

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#### **Abstract:**

In the late 1960s the writer, editor, and activist Paul Buhle imagined an ambitious political future for underground comix. Across a series of articles – but especially in the 1969 essay “Komix Kountermedia” – Buhle proposed that the comix were the latest turn in a dialectical history of US comics and they promised to provide the space in which a popular anticapitalist sensibility might be forged. Buhle was inspired by a range of critical thinkers such as C. L. R. James, Antonio Gramsci, and Theodor Adorno, and he saw his Marxist-infused analysis of comix as an American analogue to the work in cultural studies being undertaken in Britain. “The Greatest Team-Up Never Told?” provides a summary of Buhle’s theoretical coordinates and his hopes for the role that comix might play in the revolution to come.

#### **Keywords:**

underground, comix, Buhle, politics, New Left

I first discovered Paul Buhle’s essay “Komix Kountermedia” (1969) in Jack Jackson’s papers, lodged in the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas, Austin.<sup>1</sup> “Komix Kountermedia” tells a familiar story about US comics since the 1890s, but packed with explicit and implicit references to critical theory, and Buhle positioned the comix as nothing less than a cultural vanguard about to transform US society. My interest in Buhle as a comix critic was piqued, and I spent several days at New York University’s Tamiment Library and Robert F.

Wagner Labor Archives, where Buhle's papers are held. Coming out of that research, "Komix Kountermedia" was newly legible in terms of an arc of cultural criticism that Buhle produced in the late 1960s, and here I sketch out the salient theoretical features of that arc.

Leonard Rifas wrote in the *Encyclopedia of Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (2010) that Buhle was "the only academic cheerleader that the underground comix movement had during its peak years,"<sup>2</sup> but I have yet to see academics engage with Buhle's articles from the 1960s (his twenty-first-century contributions to comics studies, and the many graphic histories he has written or edited, are much better known). Buhle's early comix criticism deserves our attention, though, since his ideas were known to underground artists, many of whom were correspondents or collaborators. Just as Buhle sought out comix creators when composing his critical essays, he facilitated their creative practice, sometimes providing material support and/or recommendations to publishers.

Buhle's essays are also significant because they complicate the traditional historical narrative surrounding cultural studies. The established account is that cultural studies was started by a coterie of thinkers in Britain in the late 1950s and then, in the 1980s, "spread to [...] Australia, Canada, South Africa, [and] the United States."<sup>3</sup> With fellow travellers such as Stuart Ewen and Todd Gitlin, Buhle used newly translated Continental philosophy to yoke Marxist theory to the study of popular culture, a concerted, self-conscious attempt to 'do' British-style cultural studies in America.<sup>4</sup> Art historian Joanna Pawlik makes similar claims about the Chicago-based surrealists Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, with whom Buhle was friends; for Pawlik, the Rosemonts elaborated a "dialectical" reading practice underlining the politically emancipatory possibilities of word-image relations in comics, bringing them into proximity with "other projects that were rethinking the economic determinism of the base-superstructure model, such as the late Frankfurt

School or British cultural studies.”<sup>5</sup> Buhle differentiated his approach from British cultural studies and the Frankfurt School with reference to the writings of the left-wing thinker and activist C. L. R. James, which Buhle described as a “special prism” through which his late 1960s circle encountered “our Marxist heritage.”<sup>6</sup> Buhle was struck by the attention that James paid to black radicalism, working-class agency, and the political importance of popular cultural practices. A return to Buhle’s 1960s comix criticism, then, will help us better understand the history of comics studies *and* cultural studies.

### **Paul Buhle and Underground Comix: An Overview from the 1960s to the 1980s**

Paul Buhle founded *Radical America* in 1967 while a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and a member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The SDS was the most important New Left organization in the northern United States during the 1960s; *Radical America*, a bimonthly magazine of social and political history, was one of the SDS’s major theoretical organs.<sup>7</sup> When Buhle left Madison in 1971 he took *Radical America* with him to Boston, standing down from the editorial board in 1973.<sup>8</sup> There were two all-comics editions of the magazine, the first in 1969 (*Radical America Komiks*, an anthology edited by Gilbert Shelton) and the second in 1973 (a revisionist historical narrative by Nick Thorkelson and Jim O’Brien entitled *The Underhanded History of the USA*).

“Komix Kountermedia” describes Shelton as “the finest narrative artist” of the underground “and apparently the most ‘political,’”<sup>9</sup> and after reading Shelton’s *Feds ‘n’ Heads* in the summer of 1968 Buhle bought multiple copies to sell at the SDS Literature Table on his campus. Upon being awarded \$2000 by the “high-minded Old Left institution” the Louis M.

Rabinowitz Foundation, Buhle offered Shelton the grant to produce a one-off comix issue of *Radical America*.<sup>10</sup> Buhle hoped to encourage more political content in the underground by showing creators there were “Lefties” willing to buy comix and be constructive critics; simultaneously, he wanted New Left readers to realize the revolutionary potential of comix.<sup>11</sup> *Radical America Komiks* could be bought in bulk discount by SDS chapters and sold on for profit, an approach replicated by underground publisher Last Gasp Eco-Funnies in 1970, who offered feminist and environmental groups a 50% reduction on specific titles with orders of 20 or more.<sup>12</sup> Some 30,000 copies of *Radical America Komiks* had been sold by the mid-1970s,<sup>13</sup> but Buhle felt it was a failure in terms of inspiring a New Left audience for comix: “readers and some editors of RA were puzzled: was this a real issue?”<sup>14</sup>

In the mid-1970s Buhle was based in Providence, Rhode Island, and with *Radical America*’s former poetry editor, Dave Wagner, he founded another periodical.<sup>15</sup> Its title, *Cultural Correspondence* (1975–1985), paid homage to the early 1950s newspaper *Correspondence*, established by C. L. R. James’s followers in Detroit.<sup>16</sup> Buhle and Wagner’s new magazine was devoted to the analysis of popular culture, and two special issues contained extended comix content, Summer–Fall 1977 (*Underground Cartoonists: Ten Years Later*) and Spring 1979 (*Sex Roles & Humor*), the latter including a series of long interviews with female comix creators. Buhle wrote to Fredric Jameson in June 1975 to describe *Cultural Correspondence*’s project as “a kind of overturning of the philosophical notions behind the [Frankfurt School] critique, and the encouragement of serious studies of Popular Culture as expressions (however mediated and distorted) of mass yearnings for self-understanding and liberation.”<sup>17</sup>

In the early 1980s Buhle sought to gather momentum behind the revolutionary potential of humor, co-organizing two related initiatives, the Radical Humor Festival, April 22–24, 1982 at

NYU and the Manifesto of the Humor International. The festival, which attracted approximately 2,500 delegates and included roundtables, panel presentations, and comedy performances, was attended by comics creators such as the underground artist Art Spiegelman and veteran cartoonists Jules Feiffer and Harvey Kurtzman.<sup>18</sup> Buhle and Kinney's Manifesto of the Humor International asserted that humor "is the enemy of every boss and bureaucrat, every exploiter and opponent of freedom across the world." From graffiti on factory walls to political satire, jokes "rebuke our own passivity in the face of overwhelmingly intolerable conditions."<sup>19</sup> Although most of the people who signed the manifesto came from North America and Europe, there were signatories from Australia and the Middle East, and the US underground was represented by Denis Kitchen, Lee Marrs, Leonard Rifas, Paul Mavrides, and Sharon Rudahl.<sup>20</sup>

### **Theorizing "Comix' and Politix"<sup>21</sup> in the Late 1960s**

Buhle envisaged the comix as "a small facet" of "the most serious work of our generation," namely collective resistance to America's slide into "Fascism" and the creation of "a genuinely new social order" that fosters individual freedom and responsibility. Buhle thought his essays on comix had a role to play: "I am hoping to encourage, and in a very small part help create, a serious school of comix criticism which speaks to those steps [taken towards radical comix], and their opposites, by and for a larger political community."<sup>22</sup> Primarily published in the underground press, Buhle's essays began appearing in October 1968, when he wrote in the *Guardian* (the American Marxist newspaper) that "a new form of comics has been resurrected somewhere in the vicinity of the new left." Buhle claimed that Gilbert Shelton's comix, such as the superhero parody Wonder Wart-Hog, were seeking to appropriate the popular allure of the American comic book. Underground

creators were “not simply using drawn figures with balloons to appeal to people who don’t ordinarily read books, but groping for the power that the comic book has over the popular mind.”<sup>23</sup>

One metaphor sits at the heart of Buhle’s theories: he urged the American Left to create a “New Culture as we prepare for Revolution[.] [...] We have begun to appear in a thousand guises across the world from the Red Guard to the American Underground. WE ARE THE TROJAN HORSE OF OUR TIME.”<sup>24</sup> The symbolism of the Trojan Horse encapsulated Buhle’s thinking, that by working within popular genres and everyday material objects the comix would allow the masses to recognize their conditions of oppression.<sup>25</sup> This was espoused in “Komix Kountermedia” in July–August 1969, an essay that shared the spirit of C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee’s publication *The Invading Socialist Society* (1947). *The Invading Socialist Society* took its theme from Frederick Engels’s notion that, in Buhle’s words, “the nucleus of a real socialist society [...] already existed under capitalism” and revolutionary hope rests on the “concept that a new society exists within the shell of the old.”<sup>26</sup> What James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee said about the US proletariat in the late 1940s, Buhle translated into American comics in the late 1960s. *The Invading Socialist Society* asserted that the “proletariat in the advanced countries has now given notice that it is ready to [...] abolish labor as ‘labor,’” replacing it with “a meaningful creative activity with a social aim as the end,”<sup>27</sup> and “Komix Kountermedia” offered a history of American comics where creators had previously strained to realize their personal visions within commercial contexts. Now, with the emergence of underground comix, creators had seized control of the production process and were “grasping an alternative [...] medium for uncensored expression.”<sup>28</sup>

Buhle rhapsodized over the revolutionary potential of underground comix as a result of their migration into comic book-style periodicals. Easily reproduced, widely circulating, and quick to read, the political importance of “distinct komix books” stemmed from the existing ubiquity of

periodical comics in everyday life. The portability and cheapness of these periodicals would see them “spreading into high schools and junior highs, colleges, the army and other places where Left ‘politics’ in its narrower forms is only beginning to have access.” Comic books were familiar material texts, commonplace objects already lurking under beds or on waiting room tables, and by adopting the comic book format underground comix were poised to follow their predecessors into the nooks and crannies of US society, taking a “subversive” anti-capitalist message with them.<sup>29</sup>

Extending this line of thought, Buhle believed comix represented a singular opportunity to reconstitute autonomous spaces of working-class cultural production. He contended that, in the 1920s and 1930s, the commodification of popular culture and capitalist rationalization of society had undercut the traditional spaces in which activism might ferment, such as union halls. By joining freedom of representation to a popular cultural form, the underground comix offered a counter-space for oppositional organization. Borrowing the terms of *The Invading Socialist Society*, which concluded that “the democratic instincts and needs of hundreds of millions of people are crying out for an expression,”<sup>30</sup> underground creators were supposedly free to reflect the democratic stirrings of their readers. As Buhle saw it, by providing “a means of self-expression for the artist’s inner compulsions” the comix could articulate “attitudes” that “correspond to the needs of the larger movement,” through which the “masses” might “see their own lives” anew.<sup>31</sup>

Buhle did not want to see “humorless attempts to put a Left message in palatable terms,” and he noted approvingly that many creators refused “traditional” narrative forms that would “offer the easiest road to an overtly political message,”<sup>32</sup> but he never outlined programmatically what *kinds* of comix would allow the masses to recognize their authentic needs. One method might be visual iconoclasm, shocking readers out of their habits of looking and reading: in January 1969 Buhle described the comix tabloid *Yellow Dog* as “a hand grenade thrown into the living room of

America's visual sensibility."<sup>33</sup> Some of the creators Buhle recommended most strongly (John Thompson, Andy Martin, and Buckwheat Florida, Jr.) were unapologetically psychedelic, occupying the outer edges of narrative storytelling.

Buhle also praised comix that depicted the unfulfilling, routinized nature of American society, and he singled out Crumb's "City of the Future" (1968) as a telling dystopia of rationalized bodily functions and bankrupt sexual practices.<sup>34</sup> Other leftists were unimpressed by Crumb and his peers, dismissing the comix as distractions, or sexist, or just plain disgusting.<sup>35</sup> In the late 1960s Buhle was uneasy with Crumb's politics of representation and thought the artist used "women as mere symbols,"<sup>36</sup> though his doubts didn't make their way into his published essays. In 1975 he continued this train of thought, writing "Crumb is guilty of using Blacks and Women as literary conventions: he assumes his incapacity to get inside their consciousness, and therefore uses them as objects off which to bounce his conceptions" of a moribund white American civilization. Further, Crumb "does not have much hope for any change."<sup>37</sup> Buhle noticed this back in 1969, when he wrote that Crumb was ruthless in depicting the "grim conclusion concerning America's future, ridden to oblivion"; the artist, however, did not "really have a solution to the dilemmas" that the country faced. And yet Buhle recuperated this politically by reading the *lack* of any obvious "revolutionary message" in Crumb's work as a refusal to flatter the progressive ideology of Enlightenment humanism which had been co-opted by American capitalism. Channelling Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno, Buhle felt that, by abnegating the potential of social transformation through revolution, Crumb refused even the "partial acceptance of 'Progress' in the West."<sup>38</sup> Intriguingly, Buhle sent C. L. R. James a copy of Crumb's *Despair* (1969) as "an example of the leading cultural criticism of the time."<sup>39</sup>



## Conclusion

Before 1969 was over Buhle was backing away from the optimism of “Komix Kountermedia,” seeing the underground comix as essentially stagnant. New regional titles were struggling to emerge as quickly as he had hoped, and existing, big-selling titles seemed content to recycle tired “anti-censorship antics.” Initially poor sales of *Radical America Komiks* did not help his estimation of the prospects for left-wing comix.<sup>40</sup> Buhle’s comix criticism dwindled away, only really resuming in the mid-1970s with *Cultural Correspondence*, though in the intervening period he published his longest essay on the underground. “The New Comics and American Culture” (1972) was a forty-five-page article in the *Literature in Revolution* issue of *TriQuarterly* journal, where it sat alongside work by left-wing critics Raymond Williams and Noam Chomsky.<sup>41</sup> Buhle complained to Jameson the essay had been “badly cut and deprived of a conclusion,”<sup>42</sup> and, despite appearing in a more formal academic setting, the piece is more synoptic than analytical. In 1978 Buhle wrote that insufficient “credit” had been given to women comix artists, who “at their best” were “politically revolutionary [...] without being heavy-handed,”<sup>43</sup> but “The New Comics and American Culture” rehearsed the standard canon of male creators.

Although the 1970s would see a flowering of progressive grassroots movements, the SDS decisively splintered at the end of the 1960s, with some former members embracing Maoism or turning to terrorism.<sup>44</sup> In November 1969 Buhle wrote that comix artists worked “in the face of a hundred deadened Leftist Sects who each proclaim they are practicing the Essence of Politics with the proper understanding of Youth Culture.” He thought underground comix faced the same dangers threatening other forms of countercultural creative practice, namely commercialization and reification. The more the comix were treated as a separate, self-contained ‘thing,’ the more

they withdrew “from any live (i.e., dialectical) relationship” with US culture as a whole, and in so doing the comix “sign the death warrant” of the revolutionary “possibilities of that culture.” Buhle’s fear was that comix would settle into ossified patterns that disrupted nothing, abandoning the possibility that popular culture and society were in a relationship of dynamic change and capable of new configurations.<sup>45</sup> In this way and others, his comix criticism prefigures the analytical moves made in Charles Hatfield’s *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (2005), with its seminal account of the politics of the underground.<sup>46</sup> Ironically, Buhle’s Marxist critique *itself* could not resist the commodifying drive of the market serving comics collectors, and in 1977 a Michigan dealer advertised the *TriQuarterly* special issue for \$4, with “The New Comics and American Culture” the main selling point: “45 page article on Underground comix. Lots of info. ZOWIE!”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jackson’s copy of “Komix Kountermedia” can be found in the Jack Jackson Papers (Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin), Box 3R185b, Folder 2.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Rifas, “Educational Comics,” in *Encyclopedia of Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, ed. M. Keith Booker, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood–ABC–CLIO, 2010), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Richard E. Lee, *Life and Times of Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press; Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 144.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Buhle, “Essay on *Radical America*,” 1974–76, Paul Buhle Papers (Tamiment Library, Bobst Library, New York University), Box 13, Folder 24, 10–11; hereafter referred to as the ‘Buhle Papers.’ See also Todd Gitlin, “Fourteen Notes on Television and the Movement,” *Leviathan* 1.4 (July–August 1969): 3.

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<sup>5</sup> Joanna Pawlik, “Cartooning the Marvelous: Word and Image in Chicago Surrealism,” in *Mixed Messages: American Correspondences in Visual and Verbal Practices*, ed. Catherine Gander and Sarah Garland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 70, 81.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Buhle, “Essay on Television,” 1975, Buhle Papers, Box 13, Folder 29, 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left*, 3rd ed. (London: Verso, 2013), ix; Paul Buhle, “Radicalism Renewed,” c.1982, Buhle Papers, Box 14, Folder 33, 8–9.

<sup>8</sup> James Green, ed., *Workers’ Struggles, Past and Present: A ‘Radical America’ Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 5, 408.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Buhle, “Komix Kountermedia,” *Leviathan* 1.4 (July–August 1969): 16.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Buhle, *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture* (London: Verso, 2004), 248–9. See also Buhle, “Essay on *Radical America*,” 18–19; Paul Buhle, writer, and Gary Dumm, artist, “The SDS Magazine,” in *Students for a Democratic Society: A Graphic History*, ed. Paul Buhle (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 158.

<sup>11</sup> Buhle, “Essay on *Radical America*,” 19–20.

<sup>12</sup> The back pages of *Slow Death 2* (1970) offered environmental groups twenty copies of *Slow Death 1* (1970) at half price; the same offer was made to women’s groups for *It Ain’t Me Babe* (1970).

<sup>13</sup> Buhle, “Essay on *Radical America*,” 21.

<sup>14</sup> Buhle, “Essay on *Radical America*,” 19–20.

<sup>15</sup> *Cultural Correspondence* was edited by Buhle and Wagner (1975–1981) and then Jim Murray (1982–1985).

<sup>16</sup> Buhle, “Essay on Television,” 6.

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- <sup>17</sup> Paul Buhle, Letter to Fredric Jameson, June 5, 1975, Buhle Papers, Box 1, Folder 6.
- <sup>18</sup> Paul Buhle, “Not Humanism – Humorism! Serious Words on Funny Pictures,” *Cultural Correspondence* 2.1 (April 1982): 5 and “Radical Humor: A New Movement,” *Cultural Correspondence* 2.2 (Winter 1983): 38–42.
- <sup>19</sup> Paul Buhle and Jay Kinney, “Call for an International Humor Movement,” February 1980, Buhle Papers, Box 9, Folder 10 and “Manifesto of the Humor International,” c.1982, Buhle Papers, Box 15, Folder 16.
- <sup>20</sup> Signatories to the “Manifesto of the Humor International” are listed in the Buhle Papers, Box 2, Folder 8.
- <sup>21</sup> Paul Buhle, “Little Mags – ‘Comix’ and Politix,” *Guardian*, January 25, 1969, 21.
- <sup>22</sup> Paul Buhle, “Funny Bizness,” *Madison Kaleidoscope*, November 1, 1969, 14.
- <sup>23</sup> Paul Buhle, “Radical Comics Zap the Mind,” *Guardian*, October 12, 1968, 18.
- <sup>24</sup> Paul Buhle, “Manifesto: Toward a New Culture,” *Madison Kaleidoscope*, June 23, 1969, 5.
- <sup>25</sup> Buhle, “Komix Kountermedia,” 17.
- <sup>26</sup> Buhle, “Essay on Television,” 5.
- <sup>27</sup> J. R. Johnson, F. Forest, and Ria Stone [C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee], *The Invading Socialist Society* (Detroit: Johnson-Forest Tendency, 1947), 13.
- <sup>28</sup> Buhle, “Komix Kountermedia,” 14–15.
- <sup>29</sup> Buhle, “Komix Kountermedia,” 13–17.
- <sup>30</sup> [James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee], *Invading Socialist Society*, 59.
- <sup>31</sup> Buhle, “Komix Kountermedia,” 14–17.
- <sup>32</sup> Buhle, “Komix Kountermedia,” 15–17.
- <sup>33</sup> Buhle, “Little Mags,” 21.

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<sup>34</sup> Buhle, “Komix Kountermedia,” 15–16.

<sup>35</sup> John McMillan, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of the Alternative Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 126–7.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Buhle, *Radical America* notebooks, 1969, Buhle Papers, Box 13, Folder 4.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Buhle, Letter to Jack Moore, May 28, 1975, Buhle Papers, Box 1, Folder 6.

<sup>38</sup> Buhle, *Radical America* notebooks, 1969. Buhle associated a scare-quoted ‘Progress’ with Adorno’s critique of Enlightenment rationalism: “the Melancholy which Adorno correctly saw as the mood which pervades all of Western society, hidden beneath false faces of confidence and mythical ‘Progress.’” Paul Buhle, “Resynthesis,” Fall 1970, Buhle Papers, Box 13, Folder 5, 3–4.

<sup>39</sup> Buhle, “Essay on *Radical America*,” 28.

<sup>40</sup> Buhle, “Funny Bizness,” 13.

<sup>41</sup> It was reprinted as Paul Buhle, “The New Comics and American Culture,” in *Literature in Revolution*, ed. George Abbott White and Charles Newman (New York: Triquarterly–Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 367–411.

<sup>42</sup> Buhle, Letter to F. Jameson, June 5, 1975.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Buhle, Letter to Nick Thorkelson, December 31, 1978, Buhle Papers, Box 2, Folder 6.

<sup>44</sup> Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*, new ed. (London: Verso, 2006); Bryan Burrough, *Days of Rage: America’s Radical Underground, the FBI, and the Forgotten Age of Revolutionary Violence* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> Buhle, “Funny Bizness,” 13–14.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 6–20.

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<sup>47</sup> David Edward Taesch, Advertisement, *The Buyer's Guide for Comic Fandom* 180, April 29, 1977, 98.