Narratives in Pencil: Using Graphic Novels to Teach Israeli-Palestinian Relations

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This article argues that using graphic novels is an effective and valuable pedagogical tool to enhance the teaching of international relations, and specifically the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Graphic novels combine the best of film and prose in delivering a cognitive and affective experience that allows students to access the subject matter in a manner that complements the use of more conventional textbooks. Three such novels—Palestine, by Joe Sacco (2001), Exit Wounds, by Rutu Modan (2007), and Waltz with Bashir, by Ari Folman and David Polonsky (2009)—raise a number of important and relevant themes such as life under occupation and the shadow of terrorism, the intractability of conflict, the sources of violence, tensions within Israeli society, and collective memory and identity. After reviewing these three novels, this article discusses the benefits and challenges associated with using graphic novels in the political science classroom.

Keywords: Israeli-Palestinian conflict, identity, narratives, graphic novels, pedagogy

Graphic novels—long-form comics sold as books—have become an important contemporary cultural phenomenon, and indeed are being heralded as enjoying a “golden age” (Allen 2006). Drawing on the importance of broadening the types of media that can be used to positive effect in the political science classroom—including film (Gregg 1998; Giglio 2005; Webber 2005), conventional novels (Neumann and Nexon 2006; Irvine 2007; Connor 2008; Ruane and James 2008), and literary non-fiction (Pressman 2008), this article outlines how graphic novels can be used to enhance the teaching of international relations, and specifically the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Recently, we taught a course on Israeli-Palestinian relations at Carleton University, and used three graphic novels to supplement the textbook and an array of other academic articles. Given that the course emphasized a “narrative approach” through which to understand Israeli-Palestinian dynamics, we found that graphic novels were an appropriate medium through which to access the stories and “versions” of each “side.”

Art Spiegelman’s Maus—his personal meditation on the Holocaust told through the prism of his relationship with his survivor parents, and which won him a 1992 Pulitzer Prize Special Award—popularized the graphic-novel genre as a way of accessing politics and history. By pairing spare text with often powerful visual imagery, graphic novels offer a highly intimate look at real-world issues. Like movies, graphic novels are sensory and immersive; but like books, they require a degree of “activeness” in the consumer’s position. In their ideal form, they thus combine the best of film and prose in delivering a cognitive and affective experience through which to access their subject matter. Since Maus, the
number of graphic novels has exploded—and indeed we are now witnessing the rediscovery of earlier works that touch on themes relevant to politics and international relations.

A narrative approach—meaning one that focuses on the experience of political actors in understanding and framing their actions—helps unpack the sometimes elusive concept of identity that is central to constructivist theorizing in international relations (Barnett 1999; Sucharov 2005a). Identity is also a central part of most, if not all, ethnic conflicts. Pedagogically, focusing on narratives can help students set aside questions of right and wrong—debates that can easily create a brittle classroom atmosphere—and instead focus on the explanatory questions essential to understanding how world politics unfold. Working with the assumption that each collective actor under analysis has a certain “version” of events—stories that that group tells about itself and about the Other—reminds students that they too might enter the classroom with particular frames, biases, or assumptions, and that it is legitimate to acknowledge subjectivity before moving into a more “objective” learning space. This is not to say that we value neutrality above all else, only that some attempt at objectivity—which probably ultimately comes down to empathy and interpretation anyway—is a key part of how we view the teaching of international politics.

In this article, we discuss in some detail the three graphic novels we used in our course on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (2001), Rutu Modan’s *Exit Wounds* (2007), and Ari Folman and David Polonsky’s *Waltz with Bashir* (2009). We identify various themes contained in these books that help illuminate the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as international relations and political science more generally. We follow with an assessment of some of the challenges of using graphic novels in the classroom, and conclude with a brief list of suggestions of other titles that could be used to teach various other political and historical topics.1

**Stories in the Mud: Sacco’s *Palestine***

Joe Sacco spent two months in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1991 and 1992, as the first Intifada was winding down. *Palestine* is a personal account of his conversations with Palestinians, in their homes, in hospitals, and on the streets, and of his emotions and thoughts as he witnesses the brutality of life under occupation.2 Even though his sympathy for the Palestinian cause is clear throughout the narrative, Sacco serves more as a moderator or facilitator than as a polemicist or commentator. That said, central for him is to counter the widespread Western view of Palestinians as terrorists (the 1985 PLO hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* serves as a jumping-off point of the book), and instead to provide an empathic view of life in the territories. As he weaves together the historical and

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1To provide students with a basic historical overview of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we assigned Bickerton and Klausner’s 2007 textbook. We supplemented this with Sucharov’s study of Israeli identity in the context of peacemaking (Sucharov 2005a), and with a selection of academic and media articles on various issues related to the conflict. Consistent with the narratives-based approach used in the course, we also relied significantly on the bitterlemons.org Web site which features weekly debates by Israeli and Palestinian academics and political elites on topical issues. Along with additional readings, *Waltz with Bashir* (115 text-light pages) was assigned for the week in which we discussed the Lebanon War. Students read *Palestine* (285 text-heavy pages) as part of their readings for the week on the first Intifada. And Modan’s *Exit Wounds* (168 text-light pages) was assigned for the week in which we discussed terrorism and Israeli identity.

2*Palestine* and other works by Joe Sacco have been positively reviewed in a number of mainstream media publications, including *Newsweek* (Foroohar 2005), the *Guardian* (Thompson 2003), and the *New York Times*. The latter praised Sacco as an “immense talent” who manages to provide a “mature and nuanced political and historical understanding” of the Bosnia conflict of the 1990s (Rieff 2000). Sacco has also received numerous awards for his work.
political realms with the personal one, he reveals the complexity and dynamism of Palestinian life. As we will see below, Sacco succeeds in nuancing what is sometimes portrayed as a monolithic Palestinian society. This approach also allows students to better link the more theoretical and historical aspects of the course with a more personal and humane account of the reality “on the ground.”

Throughout Palestine, Sacco explores a number of themes related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to wider debates in political science. Sacco touches upon issues of life under occupation, the sources of violence, the intractability of the conflict, and Israel’s status as the Middle East’s only democracy. A close reading of the book also reveals debates that are relevant to current controversies in political science, including the status of the external observer and the co-constitution of identity. Of course, this list is not exhaustive, and different instructors could easily identify other themes for discussion.

The first and most obvious benefit of including Palestine in a course on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to give students a fresh and direct look at living conditions in the West Bank and Gaza. It is largely on this basis that other themes can be explored. Sacco does not actively play the role of a critic of the Israeli occupation, though he is obviously sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. He contents himself with walking around the territories, describing what he sees and what people tell him. He meets Palestinians who are desperate to let their story be known, as witnessed by the old man forced by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to cut down his olive trees (62), or by the victims of nighttime settler attacks that go unpunished (67). He highlights the extremely poor and difficult living conditions of his Palestinian guests, who have no floors (151), and make do with outdoor toilets with no walls and leaky roofs (169).

The overwhelming pervasiveness of violence is inescapable. At the beginning of chapter 3, Sacco is walking around, “not looking for trouble,” but “here it comes anyway” (53)—in the form of a demonstration of women and children against recent deportation orders that meets with a violent response by the IDF. The lawlessness and violence of the territories is further evident by the fact that it is not the Geneva conventions, United Nations resolutions, or even Israeli military justice that rule the West Bank and Gaza, but rather “a couple of hooded [Palestinian], uniformed men walking in the open like they own the place” (163).

Graphic novels can emphasize certain aspects of reality that conventional prose sometimes cannot. In Palestine, the background drawings—the immediate setting in which Sacco finds himself—convey much information. Whenever Sacco is outdoors, the frames are nearly drowned in mud, while the sky is dark and cloudy. As Sacco stated at a talk he gave in 2007, the author of conventional prose can occasionally write that “there is mud everywhere,” but cannot do so in every paragraph.3 Seeing its overwhelming presence throughout the novel’s pages, however, can powerfully convey to readers the crumbling infrastructure, economic underdevelopment, and general desperation characterizing life in the West Bank and Gaza. When combined with other readings and class discussions, the graphic novel medium can therefore help students better access the narrative of a particular conflict actor.

Sympathetic though he is to the plight of the Palestinians, Sacco never justifies the use of violence on civilians by either side, and specifies that he is against it (264). But he wants to help the reader understand why some Palestinians ultimately do choose the path of violence. He repeatedly emphasizes the daily

3The talk took place at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis. Video can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4fug0PjBoI.
humiliations suffered by the Palestinians, whether because of house demolitions (68), attacks by settlers; “what kind of feeling would you have if your door was smashed down?” (71), economic suffocation (172), or imprisonment and torture—or “moderate pressure,” as the IDF often refers to it (102–113). The underlying message is of powerlessness, as echoed by his references to Edward Said’s writings on Palestinian dispossession (177) or by the young boy forced to stand in the rain by IDF soldiers (283). In this context of desperation, Sacco gives voice to Palestinians who oppose violence, as much as to those who support it. These passages can serve as springboards for discussions on topics such as terrorism and the ethics surrounding the use of force, and ethics-based concepts such as proportionality and discrimination.

Violence and resentment, in sum, are part of everyday life and are deeply embedded in the fabric of society, as illustrated by children fighting in the background as Sacco walks through a refugee camp (224), or by the grandmother with a toddler on her knee, coolly explaining that Catholics, like Sacco, are welcome in her house but that “Jews are dogs” (76). Sacco illustrates how, on one side, Palestinian militant factions compete for the allegiance of young teenagers (196), while on the other, Israeli soldiers are trained to become “Palestinian-haters,” taught to see their enemy as sub-human (92).

In class, we discussed the concept of Israel’s “triangle dilemma,” according to which Israel can logically only be two—but not three—of a democracy, a Jewish state, and Greater Israel. As many observers (including many Israelis themselves) have long argued, by maintaining the occupation in the West Bank, Israel will soon face a combined population (inside and outside the Green Line—the pre-1967 border) where Palestinians outnumber Jews. Annexing the West Bank and granting the Palestinians citizenship would therefore mean an end to the Jewish State; annexing the territories without granting citizenship would be akin to apartheid. Many themes recurrent in Palestine can stimulate class discussion on the future of the territories in the context of Israeli identity and interests. Has Israel lost the moral high ground? Can it still claim to be “the Middle East’s only democracy,” while, for example, its security services condone “moderate physical pressure” (95), as Sacco graphically illustrates? And what is the fate of the territories given the rising population of Palestinians versus Jews in the area, with some of Israel’s critics calling for a “binational” state (one state for all Jews and Palestinians) while others push for the long-discussed “two-state solution?”

Palestine also raises a variety of issues relevant to broader political science debates. In particular, Sacco is not the dispassionate, impartial observer that Western academia or journalism often demands. He listens, giving voice to disempowered Palestinians, while regularly challenging his own assumptions as well as those of the people he meets. In fact, at a 2007 talk he gave at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis, Sacco openly rejected any pretention of impartiality. The value added of using Palestine in the classroom, however, is not for the students to read about Sacco’s views, but for the perspective of others he introduces.

Another important disciplinary theme broached by Sacco is that of the mutual constitution of identity. This is a key premise of constructivism in international relations but can be a difficult concept to grasp. Graphic novels can complement theoretical readings by providing concrete examples of abstract generalizations, and by providing an inductive basis from which to help students understand theoretical concepts. Except as growling soldiers and fanatic settlers, Israelis barely appear in Palestine. Yet it is clear to even the uninitiated reader that the identity of the Palestinians—whether the aggrieved grandmother or the violent militant—is largely determined by the Other, the Israelis. The following section suggests that a similar dynamic is at play in the case of Israeli identity-construction.
Against the stark violence and brutal description of a nation under occupation that is Sacco’s *Palestine*, the two graphic novels we used to illustrate a subset of Israeli narratives were arguably more subtle and complex, respectively. *Exit Wounds*, by Rutu Modan, an acclaimed Israeli graphic artist now living in England, provides a glimpse of life under the shadow of terrorism. By contrast, Ari Folman and David Polonsky’s *Waltz with Bashir* is a brutal and detailed meditation of war, historical memory, and collective guilt, set against the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. At the time this course was taught, the film version of *Waltz with Bashir*, an animated feature, was out in theaters. We gave students the option of seeing the film or reading the book (as it happens, the two are virtually identical, with the novel version published as an offshoot of the film). This section will discuss *Exit Wounds* and *Waltz with Bashir* in turn.

Set in Tel Aviv in 2002, *Exit Wounds* centers on discovering the identity of an unidentified victim from a suicide bombing. A young, mildly depressed taxi driver is notified by a female soldier that the body might be that of his estranged father, Gabriel. Moving quietly but quickly toward the climax, the story traces the relationship between the two hapless characters as they attempt to solve the mystery of Gabriel’s whereabouts. Romance and personal struggle alternate between background and foreground. Modan was apparently inspired by actual events captured in David Ofek’s 2003 documentary *No. 17* which tells the story of an unidentified victim of a bus bombing—a link she articulates in an interview published at the book’s end (180).

Unlike *Palestine*, which attempts to portray the spectrum of actors and perspectives within Palestinian society, *Exit Wounds* applies a narrower and less overtly political lens. But there are at least four themes that, through our reading at least, can help students understand certain Israeli perspectives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These include life under the shadow of terrorism, the tension between individualism and collectivism in Israeli society, the fatigue of protracted conflict, and the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora.

The threat of terror against which the characters go about their daily life is central to the novel and indeed to contemporary Israeli-Palestinian relations. The first encounter between the two protagonists has Numi asking Koby, “Remember that suicide bombing in Hadera 3 weeks ago?” “Hadera? You mean Haifa.” “No, not the one at the restaurant. The one in the bus station cafeteria” (17). The implication is that suicide bombings in Israel have been—to greater or lesser degrees at different times in the conflict—frequent and nearly interchangeable within the national consciousness as Israelis have come to take violence as a given. There is also a related element of desensitization to the violence. Two workers are performing autopsies on bombing victims at the forensics clinic. As guts spill onto the page, one asks the other, “Any thoughts on lunch?” To which the other replies dryly, “How about Chinese?” (45).

The stark loneliness pervading the novel can be seen to represent the tension in Israeli society between individualism and collectivism that others have pointed to as helping to define Israel’s approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Yaron Ezrahi (1997) has argued, Israel’s founding myth of collectivism has given way in the last generation to a more individualist outlook that sees the need to challenge dominant assumptions, including Israel’s occupation policies. A rise in conscientious objection during Israel’s first Intifada was evidence of this.

The tension between communalism and individualism is developed in the novel through reference to loneliness and interconnectedness. The characters are isolated from each other. Numi is tall and awkward and exhibits low self-esteem. In addition to his 2-year estrangement from his father, Koby has lost his mother, his
sister lives in New York, and his cousin was killed in the 1982 Lebanon War. As a taxi driver, Koby’s days and nights are devoted to taking other people to their destinations; it’s as if he is a passive witness to his own life. The two are unlikely romantic partners, especially since Numi had had an affair with Gabriel, Koby’s father, but a mutual affection develops between them nonetheless.

As in Sacco’s depiction of life in the West Bank and Gaza, a sense of protracted conflict is pervasive in the story. Upon thinking that his father has died, Koby says, “I thought I would never want to see him again as long as I lived. But now I realized that I was always sure we would meet again, sometime in the distant future. We’d finish the fight we’d been having our whole lives and then he would finally apologize” (98). Perhaps Modan is allowing for the possibility of Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, but either way, she is likely suggesting that the conflict between these two peoples is a long and angry—though intimate and tired—one.

A final theme that emerges which can be tapped into politically is the complex relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. In his father’s newly inhabited apartment, Koby finds a snow globe that he gave his mother years ago, containing a red-roofed house framed by the words “there’s no place like home” (156). Koby’s sister has moved to New York, and shows little interest in her father’s disappearance. Numi was raised in a luxurious compound filled with servants. Her mother had tried to “turn her into an American teenager,” in Numi’s words (34). With Israel intended to be the collective home of the Jewish people, but with more Jews living in the Diaspora than in the State of Israel itself, it is often unclear where the Jewish home is meant to be. Moments of Israel-Diaspora political tension have reared their head surrounding events such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee’s suspected links with then-opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu to undermine the 1993 Israel-PLO Oslo agreement (Bloomfield 2009), and Israeli Justice Minister Yossi Beilin notably telling the annual conference of North American Jewish communities in 2004 that “we don’t need your money” (Barkat 2004)—not to mention the Jonathan Pollard espionage affair of the 1980s.

While there are many evocative themes related to politics and identity, we still need to ask whether Exit Wounds is purely art, or is also a work of politics. In a 2007 BBC interview, Modan was careful to distance herself from the idea that she is “representing” Israel or that this is a necessarily “political” novel. Being aware of this question enables students to engage in the important question of the relationship between art and politics from a political science perspective, a question that is less often tackled in the social sciences. We therefore discussed in class the connection between authoritative art and national expression. That said, given that the novel is not explicitly political in the way Palestine is, there was more room for students to develop their own relationship to the story. This open-ended approach parallels the important shift from “consumer” to “producer” that we hope our students will undergo as they proceed through their university years.

Nevertheless, Modan is more forthcoming about the novel’s political themes in an interview conducted—coincidentally—by Joe Sacco, and which appears at the back of the book. Modan describes the story as “the basic conflict between our desire to be in touch with other people and our desire or capacity to think only about ourselves” (183). The Palestinians are actually never mentioned in the novel—a conceit that perhaps echoes the sense of national invisibility that the

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4The interview can be viewed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A24033926.

5Another way we attempted this was through Israeli and Palestinian poetry, particularly poets such as Natan Alterman and Mahmoud Darwish.
occupation suggests. About the conflict, Modan says, “It is difficult for us to stop seeing ourselves as the innocent victims, a role that we love so much and are such experts at being….We would have to see that we have responsibility, and then we would feel that we should—God forbid—do something about it!” (182).

Waltz with Bashir is less subtle but arguably more politically complex than Exit Wounds, dealing as it does with Israeli historical memory surrounding the 1982 Israeli-PLO war in Lebanon. The film received rave reviews in Israel and internationally, and was nominated for an Oscar for best foreign-language film. The movie—and book version, which almost identically follows the film’s narrative—tells of a 45-year-old Israeli man—in the guise of Folman himself—who is struggling to come to terms with his experiences in the war. The film culminates with a series of intense flashbacks surrounding the Christian Phalangist massacre of some 800 Palestinians at Sabra and Shatilla for which the IDF was found to be indirectly responsible. Through a series of visits with friends from his army days, Folman is able to piece together a coherent narrative which serves to expose the terror of war—for those on both sides of the divide.

Both books employ a degree of sexual imagery in their narratives that serves to humanize the conflict and to show its banal, carnal side. One of the characters in Waltz with Bashir recalls trying to develop a militaristic identity so as to compensate for his self-perceived lack of sexual experience. In one powerful scene, he recounts an episode on a commando boat en route to Lebanon up the Mediterranean coast, where he passed out from seasickness. He dreamt that a giant, naked woman emerged out of the water to take him away from the war and make love to him. When he looked back (still in the dream), his comrades’ boat had gone up in flames (23). Another scene shows an officer glued catatonically to a low-grade porn video, while holed up with his recruits in an opulent Beirut villa (69). Sex and violence often appear as common motifs in film and literature, and there is much to be explored regarding the relationship between sexuality and war (Adams 1990).

Relatedly, the book raises questions about whether Israel is a militaristic society, and how the IDF conceives of its “security ethic.” Debate exists on the former point. One view contends that while the military represents a pervasive institution within Israeli political culture, Israel is not actually a militaristic society in terms of the cultural trappings that typically go along with that sort of value orientation (Sucharov 2005b). Another perspective suggests that Israeli society is fundamentally militaristic, preferring force above diplomacy for solving the Arab-Israeli conflict (Ben-Eliezer 1998). This is a debate that can be fleshed out in the classroom in the context of themes on civil-military relations. Similarly, the way that the IDF conceives of its use of force—what has been referred to as Israel’s “security ethic” (Sucharov 2005b)—may not always reflect given operations. While the IDF sees itself as fighting only wars of “no alternative” and using “purity of arms,” observers—or soldiers themselves—might challenge the robustness of those commitments in particular cases.

These security-related themes are important to examine in light of subsequent Israeli actions, such as the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War in Lebanon, and the 2008-09 Gaza War. We found that students are particularly keen to examine these questions, as they bring their own moral and ethical compass to the classroom. The drawing on central works in military ethics, such as writings on just war theory and its rules surrounding proportionality and discrimination (Coates 1997; Johnson 1999; Walzer 2006) can be paired with the topic of collective identity to yield a fuller picture. Certainly, Waltz with Bashir is quite explicit about the role of individual soldiers questioning the ethics surrounding particular missions. The narrator searches for moral clarity by tapping into the private memories of his co-recruits, helping to suggest an important link between government policy, societal moral identity, and collective memory.
While it is easy for students to believe that each side is monolithic in viewing itself as righteous and the Other as enemy, Waltz with Bashir shows that nations sometimes undergo intense collective scrutiny. While the book doesn’t make clear the political implications following from such collective questioning, some have argued that this process of cognitive dissonance can, under certain circumstances, lead to policy change (Sucharov 2005a). Waltz with Bashir also gives a human face to the horrors of war, which serves as a useful antidote to the detached, technical approach that by necessity characterizes much teaching in the area of international security—although some in Israel have criticized the film for not going far enough (Levy 2009). In sum, Waltz with Bashir and Exit Wounds complement each other by tapping various aspects of the Israeli narrative to include not only life in the shadow of terrorism, but also the Israeli struggle with historical memory and the ways in which identity is shaped from moments of collective, cognitive dissonance.

Discussion

Graphic novels are a valuable educational tool for a number of reasons. They are interesting and often entertaining, they engage students intellectually and aesthetically, and they show aspects of the subject matter that more conventional tools sometimes cannot. They can also, in some cases, impart substantial historical information.

Because contemporary graphic novels emerged largely from the mid-twentieth-century superhero comic-book tradition, some might be prone to assume that their treatments of conflict and morality are uniformly Manichean, or that they serve to romanticize conflict. Yet, in our reading of them, contemporary graphic novels—and particularly the three discussed in this article—share little with their superhero-imbued forebears, beyond a certain stylized aesthetic. Rather, one of the chief contributions of this new generation of graphic novels to the political science classroom is their brutal and down-to-earth accounts of complex issues, including a strong tone of social critique. We find that their spare prose style coupled with typically minimalist-style drawing lends itself to immersing the reader in the narrative of alternately the author and/or the political actors. Sacco’s treatments are more journalistic, while Folman presents the outlook of a soldier reflecting on his experience in war, and Modan’s work suggests the perspective of a nation under threat.

In the context of Israeli-Palestinian relations, and along with traditional books and articles and classroom lectures and discussions, graphic novels can thus provide an additional entree into competing narratives surrounding sensitive issues such as the wall/fence/security barrier, the settlements, and the refugee question. Graphic novels allow students to better understand where each “side” comes from, and thus to contextualize, problematize, and challenge assertions and assumptions. By being immersed in the kind of storytelling that graphic novels present, and being forced to confront the “frame” of the narrator, students are also helped to set aside whatever political biases they may hold. While not devaluing students’ personal perspectives, graphic novels suggest that an empathic, interpretive approach may help in providing insights about conflict situations. Ultimately, students may “become more able decoders of political messages, as well as more sophisticated consumers of political information,” as Lieberfeld (2007:571) argues can be the case when instructors use film and literature in the classroom.

That said, teaching with graphic novels also presents obvious challenges. Yet most of these challenges in fact create opportunities for considering important issues surrounding art, politics, identity, and interpretation. What is, for example, a “group’s” version of events? In the Palestinian case, is it that of the
grandmother in the refugee camp, the stone-throwing teenager, or the Hamas militant? And who represents the Israeli version: the hard-line settler, the politically indifferent taxi driver, or the Peace Now activist? Favoring any single voice on either side risks reifying that side by attributing a single narrative to the entire group. By no means is this a fatal problem, however. Sacco, for example, largely avoids this pitfall by steering clear of a single, overarching Palestinian narrative. Instead, he gives voices to multiple viewpoints and factions, having no pretention whatsoever that any one of them represents a dominant or mainstream version, or that it is possible or even desirable to add up the voices.

Indeed, the multiplicity of points of view succeeds in reflecting the diversity and dynamism of debates within the Palestinian territories, where peaceful Islamic fundamentalists, supporters of violence, and others constantly debate political matters. His meetings with groups of women are a case in point (133–140). While some feminist activists debate whether the Qur’an calls for women to wear the hijab (138), others examine the relationship between the Palestinian national movement and the status of women (136). Again, the value added is to expose students to different arguments, which can serve as springboards for class discussion.

Second, what is the relationship between the author-as-artist and the author-as-political-voice—or conversely, as dispassionate observer? Much has been written about journalistic objectivity, and the question of how a given news story is “framed” (Cohen and Wollsfeld 1993; Schon and Rein 1995; Sotirovic 2003). Students generally seem to be quite savvy about these sorts of journalistic questions, especially in the age of the explosion of new media. But less clear is the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in a graphic novel. Is this art or politics or journalism or history, or some fusion of these? How is the narrative to be evaluated? This question will certainly be addressed differently, depending on whether the author of the work is an “insider” or an external observer. Sacco, for his part, rejects the idea of journalistic impartiality. Rather, he makes plain that what the reader sees is his experience, viewed through his own eyes. Emphasizing the role of graphic novel as narrative can help students cope with this potential ambiguity between art and politics. Raising these questions in the classroom also primes students for making intellectual and political judgments about the many forms of politically inspired art and entertainment they have and will encounter in their lives (and perhaps even create)—in media ranging from film, television, and videogames to fine art and literature.

Finally, graphic novels sometimes contain violent or sexually explicit imagery—though by no means do they always. Rather than ignore these passages, a skilled instructor will hopefully help students evaluate them on the basis of whether, or how, they add to the narrative—or whether they are gratuitous. And while teens and young adults are stereotypically thought of as the proverbial “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll” generation, different cultural or religious sensitivities brought to the classroom may provide an opportunity and challenge for the instructor to deal constructively with this sort of material. It goes without saying that instructors cannot (nor should they) assume particular moral outlooks based on a student’s religion or ethnicity. But a sensitive instructor can help students grapple with these questions. Doing so can potentially defuse these sensitivities as students are forced to think about their personal morality in the context of art, politics, and academia.

One of the ways we sought to address these multiple challenges was to have the students be authors of their own creative interpretation of the conflict issues covered in the course. To further tie the reading of graphic novels to the learning experience, we assigned a “creative project.” This task helped students shift from being consumers to producers. It also underscored the subjective nature of artistic renderings of political themes. We suggested a range of media that would
be appropriate for such projects, including graphic novellas, blogs, slide shows, screenplays, paintings, digital art, etc. Students were free to select the medium of their choice; they were also free to work individually or in small groups. To accompany the creative project, students were required to hand in a short paper outlining the themes contained in their project, and tying it to the academic literature on the topics examined. Examples of projects submitted included short stories about the importance of identity in understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a fictional edition of a newspaper on the morning after a peace deal, a song about the refugee issue, and, not surprisingly, graphic novellas.

By introducing students to the graphic novels earlier in the term, we primed them to think about political themes through a wide array of media. One question we struggled with was whether to require students to present the narratives of “both sides” in their given project, or whether one narrative would suffice. These are questions that instructors may want to give further thought to, perhaps in consultation with the class. Sometimes raising the possibility—without requiring it—can itself serve as the “teaching moment” reminding students that both sides in a protracted conflict have distinct narratives that may need to be reconciled for conflicts to be resolved.

Students seemed generally impressed with the graphic novel as an additional medium through which to explore course themes. In an anonymous survey students said, “As a lens into the conflict, it provides insight that a textbook or article cannot.” And “I was skeptical at first, but then comics turned out to be an interesting medium to see both sides.” One student expressed concern that if not skilfully presented, graphic novels could serve as a “form for propaganda and to mislead.” Students seemed more responsive to Palestine than to Exit Wounds; many seemed to think that the latter wasn’t explicit enough about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This suggests a challenge to instructors to make sure they tease out conceptual themes that might otherwise be less visible in a novel that is relatively subtle.

About Palestine, some said that it “acts as a ‘crash course’ in understanding the impact of this conflict on the people who live there,” it “provides a perspective of conflict that is often left out in more mainstream media,” and that the book showed that “Westerners can actually become aware…and be able to see Palestinians as real…people rather than simply suicide bombers and terrorists.” It is true that in wanting to present graphic novels that presented “both sides,” we were constrained in what the market offers. However, the nuance of Exit Wounds as compared to the brutality of Palestine can be used to explore the themes of occupation and living under the shadow of terrorism, including the compartmentalization that can result in different ways in the two settings. One student also summarized the three graphic novels by stating, “Most people just want to live without being in constant fear.”

Conclusion

Using graphic novels in the political science classroom can be an effective and valuable pedagogical tool. Though not without their challenges, graphic novels provide students with a unique perspective on sensitive topics such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and help them develop empathic and critical-thinking skills. Good graphic novels touch upon a variety of topics relevant to important debates in political science and international relations, help unpack ideas surrounding identity and narratives, and as such, can serve as useful springboards for classroom discussion. When read alongside conventional textbooks and articles, graphic novels can therefore contribute, to a more complete understanding of complex topics—and hopefully entertain as they enlighten.
To gain more insight into the art of comics, instructors might wish to consult Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993). There are also a number of other graphic-novel treatments of political issue-areas that may be of interest. We already briefly mentioned *Maus*, Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer-prize-winning and artistically beautiful attempt to come to terms with his parents’ experience in the Holocaust (Spiegelman 1986, 1991). Spiegelman later published *In the Shadow of No Towers*, his personal account and political critique of the events surrounding 9/11 (Spiegelman 2004). *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi’s award-winning 2007 account of her childhood before, during, and after the Iranian Revolution vividly illustrates the massive disruptions wrought upon people’s lives by the momentous events of 1979, and can be used to introduce concepts such as identity, revolution, and political Islam. (*Persepolis* was also released in 2007 as an excellent animated film.) Joe Sacco’s *Safe Area Gorazde* (Sacco 2000; see also Sacco 2003, 2005), his account of the war in Bosnia in the early 1990s, in addition to describing living conditions during the war, brings up issues of ethnic conflict, genocide, and humanitarian intervention.

Other topics and titles of interest include life in North Korea (Delisle 2005), China (Delisle 2006), Burma (Delisle 2008), nuclear war (Briggs 1982) and Hiroshima in particular (Nakazawa and Spiegelman 2004), the history of atomic policy (Ottaviani 2001), the Warsaw Ghetto uprising (Kubert 2005), other 9/11 treatments (including Jacobson and Colon 2006), immigration (Kiyama 1999), totalitarianism (Moore and Lloyd 2008), the life of Malcolm X (Helfer 2006), postcolonial Africa (About 2007), and the social and political aspects of Hurricane Katrina (Neufeld 2009). Finally, a valuable resource is Gene Kannenberg, Jr.’s excellent guide to 500 graphic novels (Kannenberg 2008).

**References**


