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Book Review

The Detroit Printing Co-op: The Politics and the Joy of Printing

By Danielle Aubert
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Between 1970 and 1980, anarchist and ultra leftist students in English-speaking countries devoured texts by European and American thinkers like Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem, Cornelius Castoriadis[1], Jean Barrot and Fredy Perlman; writers who produced elegant, turbocharged and wildly exciting critiques of contemporary capitalist social relations. Dog-eared copies of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life*, Barrot and Martin's *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement,* and Perlman's *On the Poverty of Student Life* circulated on UK campuses. Most of them were printed by Detroit Printing Co-op, and exported by Black & Red, Fredy and Lorraine Perlman's publishing project.

Starting in 1970 and over the next ten years, Detroit Printing Co-op produced dozens of book titles and millions of pamphlets, journals and posters for diverse social and political currents in Detroit, the Great Lakes area and internationally. Legendary co-operatives often have competing and murky origin stories. Danielle Aubert interviewed some of the key participants, as well as going to secondary sources to show how the co-operative stood in a tradition of propaganda, education and organising by anarchist and socialist printers in America going back to the early nineteenth century. Fredy Perlman wasn't a tramp printer, but arrived in Detroit in 1969, having spent some time in Yugoslavia and much of 1968 as a witness to the political upheavals in Europe. In the 1950s, he had spent two years in Los Angeles where he became a UCLA student and joined the *Daily Bruin* (UCLA's independent, student-run newspaper) before meeting Lorraine in 1957 at Columbia University. They arrived in Detroit just after the 1967 Detroit riots and Fredy quickly made contact with political groups and activists (Perlman, 1989).

Reflecting the politics of the place and time, the printing co-operative came out of an ecosystem of earlier radical publishing and production platforms that collaborated and co-evolved, including The Community Print Shop, Radical Education Project (REP) and Black Star Productions, the publishing wing of the League of Black Workers. When they first arrived in Detroit, the Perlmans — already publishing as Black & Red — joined forces with people from REP, the underground newspaper *Fifth Estate*, Community Print Shop and a printing co-operative in nearby Ann Arbor, to form the Revolutionary Printing Collective. The Collective's mark or 'bug' featured the red and black flag of anarchist communism. Later, the Collective and then Detroit Printing co-operative itself incorporated the formal mark of the revolutionary syndicalist union Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), to create a new bug that included the slogan

> Abolish the Wage System, Abolish the State, All Power to the Workers!

Most of Detroit Printing Co-op's printed outputs were simple by professional graphical standards, but although the Perlmans were largely self-taught printers, their work was of a higher quality than you'd see from the generality of samizdat printshops. Coarse screen rulings for halftone pictures, with reasonably crisp reproduction in black line and usually one other printing colour, meant student punk printers could later cut up and re-paste images and chunks of content from Black and Red pamphlets, collage them with our own texts done on golfball typewriters, then scan them to create stencils for the Gestetner rotary duplicators in the student union office — creating fantastically crude, and often rude, situationist-inspired leaflets, pamphlets and posters.

In 1976, I followed in the footsteps of the legendary Glasgow anarchist publisher and printer Stuart Christie, by making a pilgrimage to Barcelona. My host, a veteran of the 1936 revolution — still recovering from decades in Francoist prisons — invited me to help set up an underground press, with the purpose of forging travellers' cheques to bankroll the movement. Instead, I went to London, to learn the trade and get involved in its radical publishing, printing and political scene. By the end of the 1970s, London and other UK cities had diverse networks of typesetting, printing, publishing and distribution collectives and co-operatives, set up to serve feminist, anti-racist, ecological, gay liberation and autonomist political causes. Community groups, the radical arts milieu and small leftist parties were also setting up their own presses. Like Detroit, London was a magnet for young working class radicals from smaller towns, as well as ex-students looking for action and a different kind of life. Inner London boroughs had empty houses and underpopulated blocks of flats that could be squatted or turned into 'short life' housing co-operatives. Unemployment and social security benefits helped subsidise the lifestyle, giving us time to 'learn on the job' in low-rent, low-tech start-up enterprises. There were opportunities to get down with black urban culture and link up with rebellious youth in the working-class neighbourhoods. One such arrival was Jess Baines, who arrived in London in 1976 aged 17. Already with community printing experience and looking to do more, she worked at Women in Print and See Red poster collective, then later Calverts North Star Press, before going into education. She recently wrote a definitive study of the scene, finding that "the heterogeneity of printshop memberships kept them open to diverse movement struggles and internal self-criticism, but … this could also be a source of internal instability and conflicts about aims". (Baines, 2016, p.4)

Disregarding party-managed printshops like People's Press (Communist Party) and East End Offset (International Socialists), there were dozens of radical presses in London alone, ranging from 'community' printshops with a mission to educate, to typesetting collectives, screen poster printers and back-alley 'underground' presses. While most of them were organised democratically, a minority identified as co-operatives. An even smaller number incorporated under co-operative rules or joined the Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM, the UK federation of worker co-operatives). Most of these formal worker co-operatives were what Baines calls 'service' presses; they had a mission to create decent jobs by trading with and serving customers in the social movements, but also commercial and private clients. They tended to become the most professional outfits. By the early 1980s, there were enough of them to form a co-buying group called London Co-operative Printers Association, whose members included Calverts, Blackrose Press, Lithosphere and Spiderweb. Two of them — Calverts (https://www.calverts.coop) and Aldgate Press (http://www.aldgatepress.co.uk) — are still in business, having weathered the long 1990s when the easy development grant money, trade union and local authority work dried up. Significantly, while both these co-operatives invested heavily in technology and skills over the years — and as a result are among the few ink-on-paper printing businesses left in inner London — they are both still 'social movement' businesses, providing subsidised print for social and political causes.

Danielle Aubert's book illustrates both the political ethos and the joyful aesthetic of the Detroit Printing Co-op. She also describes how falling entry costs, fuelled by technological innovations, enabled the growth of the co-operative printshops. Entry-level tech in 1970s was an IBM Selectric setting machine, a basic darkroom and a Multilith press; nowadays it's basic Adobe software and a Risograph. Design and print worker co-operatives and collectives are still very much around — the RedGrafica network in Argentina includes more than 25 of them. But the terrain of public communication technology, and the battle over ownership of its ways and means of production, has shifted, and so have the co-operatives.

There are parallels — as well as important differences — between the development of the printshops and the growth of digital technology co-ops over the last ten years. In 2020, local and global networks of worker co-operatives in digital tech, are just as diverse in politics, composition and production, but united in their commitment to free and open source technology, and creating digital products for the social movement. For instance, Co-operative Technology

Network (CoTech — https://www.coops.tech) launched in the UK in 2015 now brings together 45 primary worker co-operatives.

The political, social and economic backdrop for the new generation of worker co-operators, and their co-operatives, couldn't be more different to the 1970s. They have to be better organised than we were, and they waste little time on political infighting. But one commonality is that starting, or being, worker co-operatives is not an aim in itself. Now as in the past, once the model is discovered, it quickly becomes the default way to organise an enterprise, in keeping with what their members want to do. The founders of the Detroit's Revolutionary Printing Collective expressed this in their own maximalist way:

> The printing coop is not its own goal…its activity is restricted by the laws of capitalist commodity production. But survival within capitalism is not its aim…Its aim is to contribute to the junking of the capitalist carcass ....

Aubert's book is lyrical about the sensory and aesthetic aspects of print. It's true, print is a medium you can smell, touch and hear as well as read. There's even printing you can eat. If it's no longer the people's number one communication tool, print is still very much around — and maybe due for a recall, should we eventually lose the war of the internet. Meanwhile, someone should be thinking about writing a book called *CoTech: The Joy of the Politics of Code*.

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Note

1 For more information on Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997) — see Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy — https://iep.utm.edu/castoria/

Reviewer

Siôn Whellens joined the printing co-operative Little A in 1981, then Calverts in 1984. He is also a worker co-operative organiser, and he represents the UK at CECOP and CICOPA, the European and world federations of co-operatives in industry and services. A longer, illustrated version of this review appeared on Siôn's blog page, Bethnal Bling — 'The Co-op Bug' — https://bethnalbling.blogspot.com/2020/06/the-co-op-bug.html