The Freedom of the Press Belongs to Those who Control the Press[1]: The Emergence of Radical and Community Printshops in 1970s London
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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Analogue, alternative, participatory – Printshops in the 1970s

An exhibition last year at the London Print Studio, *AgitPop: Activist Graphics, Images and Pop Culture 1968-2008* was packed with political posters, mostly screen printed, some produced by individuals but many by now defunct London-based print collectives. The accompanying catalogue makes reference to the fact that many activist posters are un-credited to '*a single artist or designer*', intended instead as '*collective expressions of a movement*' (Taylor, 2008: 8) but offers no discussion about any of the actual collectives involved. In the last few years a number of books devoted to activist graphics and posters have been published in the UK, notably Liz McQuiston's three large volumes (1993; 1997; 2004). These surveys are important introductions and records of activist visual culture. However, they scarcely touch on a larger, more complex – and elusive – history of alternative print-media production. This absence is mirrored in alternative media studies, admittedly an emergent field; historical precedents for the democratic and participatory practices of contemporary activist media, digital or otherwise, may acknowledge some 1970s video projects, pirate radio, photocopied fanzines (of course), 'community' or activist publications where the DIY always stops short of the printing process. And it is not surprising that the *Alternative Media Handbook* (Coyer et al., 2007), which aims to bridge the scholar/activist divide and be both an academic text and a manual, barely mentions print, given that digital technologies are, for many of us, so much more accessible, distributable and – to some extent – cheap. New technologies have facilitated the citizen designer, journalist, film maker with new resources to produce alternative discourses and to reach out to a wider public, and the living power of the network is indisputable. However, little over 30 years ago direct access to printing technology

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[1] This is the text of a 1979 poster by the feminist poster collective See Red. The image consisted of a photograph of two women running presses at the offset-litho collective Women in Print. The slogan is a productivist (and feminist) rendition of A.J. Liebling's well known 'The freedom of the press belongs to the man that owns one.'

was also perceived as facilitating political, contestatory and empowering alternatives to the forms and practices of dominant media and culture.

The poster collectives referred to above were part of a broader network of 'alternative' printshops that proliferated across Britain (and elsewhere), but especially London, in the 1970s and '80s. The founding objective of all of them was to produce, provide or facilitate the cheap and safe printing of 'radical' materials. Although initially most were informed by a DIY/self-help ethos, three types of activity emerged: service printers (hereafter referred to as radical printshops) – they did it for you; community/self-help/print resource centres – you did it with their help; poster collectives – self contained groups set up to design and print political posters. (The London Print Studio mentioned above started life in 1974 as Paddington Printshop — a collectively-run community arts/self-help printing facility for activist organisations) A 1986 publication on then existing UK community printshops (*Printing is Easy…?* by Kenna et al.) lists 32 organisations, which by the authors' own admission is incomplete and does not include *'radical groups that operate wholly commercially'* (p. 7). In fact by this time in London alone, there were actually at least 30 such workshops, constituting a kind of micro-sector.

Those printshops that started in the 1970s invariably did so on a voluntary basis, often in a domestic basement or other rent-free space with home made, scrounged or donated equipment. By the 1980s almost all had become places of paid employment, in rented premises, using standard industrial printing equipment, still collectively run — usually with a flat pay structure, mostly registered as worker co-operatives and members of the national print unions. They became places of paid employment either through focussing on being service printers with primarily radical, community, or otherwise sympathetic clients or in the case of the community/self-help presses and poster collectives through arts council and local authority funding.

The 'radical printshop' itself was not a new phenomenon; radical printers have been in existence in the UK since at least the 17th century — printing (often at the cost of imprisonment) heretical texts, pornography, the pamphlets of 'proto-socialists' (Levellers, Diggers, Ranters) and so on (Brockway, 1980; McCalman, 1988; Gilmartin, 1996). In the 19th century émigré anarchists set up printshops in London (Rocker & Leftwich, 2005) and the UK Communist Party (CPGB) has always had its own printing press (Morning Litho), as did later the Socialist Workers Party (SW Litho). However the

radical and community printshops that are the object of this study came out of a different historical constellation of technological possibility and political and cultural imperatives; one(s) which constituted their relationship to both organisation, skill, participation, aesthetics, finance — and concurrent shifts in radical politics and social movements, quite differently.

1.2. Conditions of appearance — and (speculatively) disappearance

Firstly the availability of two particular printing technologies was instrumental to the formation of the radical and community printshops; screen printing and offset litho. Screen printing is a relatively simple technology, where at its most basic, the equipment can be made by hand. This process had been taken up by artists in the 1950s and 60s, facilitating its presence in art schools, where many members, especially of those involved in community presses and poster collectives, first encountered it. Offsetlitho — especially small offset started to become widely available in the 1960s. This process, unlike its forerunners, letterpress and gravure, didn't require a long apprenticeship, it could be learnt through a manual, was relatively cheap and allowed a huge freedom in terms of the way artwork could be generated (Fountain, 1988). Not only did it perfectly complement the new processes of phototypesetting, but for the amateur, artwork could by made by drawing in black ink and pasting typewritten copy. In his chapter on the development of offset litho in *Changing the Word, the Printing Industry in Transition*, Alan Marshall (1983: 36) describes the alternative/community press movement as an offshoot of the development of offset litho. Marshall also makes the link between the underground press of the 1960s — who didn't have their own printing presses (and continually ran into difficulties finding printers) and the emergence of the more explicitly political radical and community press scene.

Secondly, then, the emergence of the printshops needs to be understood as a constitutive part of the proliferation of post-1968 radical politics, a period which not only saw the reinvigoration of a libertarian left but also feminism, the rise of 'community activism' and the extension of political concerns to cultural ones (Marcuse, 1979: 3). The printshops did not just 'produce' radical content, but attempted to enact their politics within the printshops themselves. Although political perspectives of members shared some common left/libertarian ground; anti-capitalist and state (to varying degrees), anti-hierarchy, pro-feminist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist and so on, they were by no means unified. The

printshops were reflective of the fractured and fractious politics of the post 1968 left, in all its dimensions – political antagonisms existed between anarchists, between Trotskyites, ecologists, between feminists and queers; never mind between them all. It might be argued that the printshops made manifest in microcosm the agonistic pluralism of radical democracy (Mouffe, 2000).

By the mid 1990s however most of these printshops had either closed, been incorporated into other organisations or acquired conventional (hierarchical) management structures. At the time of writing only two collectives survive (Calverts and Aldgate Press), both London-based offset litho printing businesses. Speculative explanations for this situation points to a number of interrelated factors: print is no longer the essential media form for radical communications; an increased self-sufficiency of potential clients; a lack of necessary business acumen; a decreasing pool of individuals that considered radical printing a desirable vocation; an actual decrease in numbers of typical client groupings; cuts in local government funding and for London organisations, the closure of the Greater London Council; interpersonal and political conflicts within individual presses; finally and related to all of the above, shifting priorities within radical politics in Britain across the time period of the early 1970s to mid 1990s.

What I propose now is not, at this stage, a discussion of the demise of the printshops but rather a further exploration of the some of the specific cultural, political and operational contexts and contingencies that informed their instigation and practices. The focus is around the notion of 'cultural democracy' in order to illustrate and discuss the printshops attempts to articulate a radical democratic conception of cultural production.

2. CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

Our print shouldn't follow their conceptions/their form because our messages (content) are so different. The lies of mass media create a form directly opposed to ours (…) Elevate the language & images of everyday life into meaningful ideas (…) New forms are needed to convey new ideas. Beyond the advertiser's styles and the professionals preconceptions. And these new forms will only come as new situations arise, as real communication occurs. As

the readers become producers what they produce will be totally different (Zeitlyn, 1974: 29).

This quote comes from one of the earliest UK self-help [DIY] print manuals. It speaks the language of the 'cultural democracy' movement: the term for a significant oppositional current within various UK community arts and publishing projects of the 1970s and 80s. These projects aimed to 'democratise culture' not by providing increased access to 'official' culture ('high' art and literature) — that is by democratising consumption, but by democratising production, which in turn was not about 'freedom of expression' per se but more radically: '… *democratic agreement on the nature of public expression and democratic control over the means of public expression'* (Culture and Democracy, The Manifesto, 1986: 52). The cultural democracy movement made, in McGuigan's words, an '*uncompromising case against the "dominant culture" of both "art" and "mass media"'* (1992: 57). To quote from above manifesto again: '… *the ruling culture impose their needs, their behaviour and their values on the rest of the population, while maintaining that these values are an objective measurement of civilised behaviour…'* (p. 28). And furthermore, '*We must abolish any "standards of excellence" which presume to be universal while being arranged and implemented by the most wealthy, mobile and 'educated' within society'* (p. 53).

The other unmistakable presence in Zeitlyn's quote (and the rhetoric of the 'cultural democracy' movement generally) is Enzensberger's (1970) essay; *Constituents of a Theory of the Media*, which perhaps unsurprisingly — amongst the guides to typography, ink and Soviet design— is recommended in the back section (along with Walter Benjamin's (1936) *Author as Producer* and Paulo Friere's (1970) *Pedagogy of Oppressed*, texts that – including Enzensberger's — still continue to appear as touchstones for contemporary alternative media studies). Although Enzensberger's focus is the radical potential of electronic media, he makes numerous points that resonate with the formative aspirations of the printshops. I will touch on only a few. Critiquing the New Left's reductive attitude towards mass media forms (agents of manipulation and pacification) Enzensberger writes of their potential instead to mobilize, '*to make men* (sic) … *[a]s free as dancers, as aware as football players, as surprising as guerrillas'* (p. 18). Or as Hesmondhalgh (2000: 117) more prosaically puts it '*as initiators of action'.* As for media manipulation, Enzensberger returns to its etymology of 'handling' — '*a technical treatment with a particular goal in mind'* and in this case a political goal, therefore '*A revolutionary plan should not require the manipulators to disappear; on the contrary; it must make everyone a manipulator'* (i.e. 'a producer') (Enzensberger, 1970: 20). Enzensberger also lists a number of

desirable features for an emancipatory use of media, all of which connect (within the limitations of print) with the early aims and practices of the radical and community printshops; decentralised, mobilizing, receivers as transmitters (readers as producers), interaction and feedback, political learning, collective production and self-organisation (ibid. p. 26). He also gave a clear directive to the artist/author: they must work towards their *'own redundancy as a specialist'* by becoming *'an agent of the masses'*, and can only become lost in them, *'when they themselves become authors, the authors of history'* (ibid. p. 36). I do not know how widely read this essay of Enzensberger's was at the time, not do I wish to give him some foundational authority, however, despite the focus on electronic media, it is a near manifesto for the early radical and community printshops.

3. LOST ARTISTS

The problematisation of the role of the artist, and its attendant cultural baggage was a clear concern of the community printshops and the poster collectives, as the following two quotes, from different organisations indicate:

> *In most respects we have rejected the traditional cultural role of the artist. The artist is a kind of emblem of freedom, someone who is negatively free to do anything in the name of art. The manner in which an alternative practice is constructed and developed is problematic. There is no easy answer; the question can only be resolved over a protracted period and in conjunction with the unfolding of the class struggle* (Poster Film Collective, 1986: 18).

> *It's taken us several years to get over the ideas drummed into us at art school – like the idea of an artist having some magical quality – the creator. Deciding to work collectively is a way of challenging the idea of the artist as a self engrossed individualist* (See Red, 1980: 53).

The See Red quote also needs to be seen in the context of the emergent feminist art-historical critique of both the figure and function of the artist *and* the category of art (Ricketts & Phelan, 2001). The relationship of the 'old' British left to art is also of importance and while not entirely distinct from Enzensberger's Marxist critique (individualist, elitist, bourgeois distraction), resonated with a

particularly British strain of anti-intellectualism. These were attitudes that would become recharged in the 1980s by rise of identity politics — which in itself had a profound effect on some of the printshops. However it was not just the historic figure of the artist that needed to be undermined, the new community artist also began to be perceived as suspect, as the following quote from one of the printshops forcefully expresses:

> *For printshops [there is] a tension between knocking out cheap jobs for people with fuck all money and a lot to say, and churning out the turgid work of community artists who seek to gain some authenticity by latching on to some bureaucratic scheme to sponsor the representation of the dispossessed. Self-expression only has a value in itself for those with nothing worth expressing* (Union Place, 1986: 22).

4. FOUND FORMS

As regards 'new forms for new ideas'; this notion has its seeds in the aborted trajectory of the discussions and experiments of the socialist avant-gardes in 1920s Europe and Russia/USSR. So prior to Brecht, Benjamin — although of course referred to by them —(and Enzensberger), there was a belief that radical aesthetic forms not only represented a radically new way of perceiving the world but that they could also create it. (Along with concomitant evaluation of the role of the artist and art — provoking a turn by some towards 'technology' and 'industrial production', a move that has more specific affinity with the radical service printers than the community/poster workshops.[2]) However the experimental forms of the Russian avant-garde especially were subject to fierce criticism from workers for their *'distortions of reality'* and formalism; Alexander Rodchenko – a Russian avant-garde artist – was expelled from the October group for *'propagating a taste alien to that of the proletariat'* (Burgin, 1980: 50). This was the contradiction of modernist or avant-garde aesthetics; in liberating itself from bourgeois conscription it became utterly removed from popular taste, only to return (in Bourdieusian terms) as a sign of distinction for the cultured; a point the printshops were no doubt more than aware of. In actuality the *'new forms for new ideas'* – in terms of graphics, tended to either draw on particular vernaculars: montage, comic strips, 'folk-art', satirical engravings and/or reflect radical 'pop' aesthetics from the posters of the Cuban revolution, to 60s psychedelia and the cut-and-paste of punk

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[2] Enzensberger (1970: 19) critically notes that students in the May '68 uprising in Paris ran to the old hand presses of the art school to print their posters, rather than 'carrying out their agitation among the workers in a modern offset press'.

(McQuiston, 1993; Taylor, 2008). There was no 'standard' in either sense of the word; much depended on the tastes, skills and background of the makers — and available technology.

However, initially at least, there was some consistency in terms of an ideological resistance to 'slickness'. In a 1980 interview in the UK feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, (p. 55) the See Red collective were asked if they hadn't used photographs in their early posters because of a prevailing radical climate against *'slick or professional'* aesthetics. (Six years later See Red commented that *'the political poster … become less popular in recent years'* and there had been a move to *'more subtle images that are nicer to live with'* (Kenna et al., 1986: 33). In the same volume (p. 57) the Docklands Community Poster Project state that: *'We believe it is not enough for a socialist cultural practice to be a crude mirror image of its capitalist counterparts, a kind of left advertising agency, using easy slogans that gloss over the complexity of issues'*. What this meant in practice was that many posters contained large amounts of 'explanatory' text — a practice of much UK 'critical' art photography of the late 1970s and 80s (Walker, 2002).

The challenge to dominant cultural forms was perhaps the most apparent – and contentious, both internally and externally, in relation to the commitment of community presses to the 'ordinary' voice and its self-expression in print. When the Arts Council (UK) began to be a potential source of financial support for community arts and publishing projects, the issue of 'standards' or 'quality' came to the fore. Richard Hoggart (1980), pitting himself against the proponents of the cultural democracy movement, described their attack on 'universal standards of excellence' as prompting a 'crisis of relativism'. It was all very well for the 'culturally excluded' to express themselves, but was it any 'good'? Rejected for an Arts Council grant on grounds of 'quality', one of the members of the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) wrote this to the general secretary in 1980:

> *We want the chance to develop our own standards possible and intelligible to people who work long un-intellectual, ill paid hours; to people whose intelligence cannot simply be high jacked from the circumstances – the scope and the limitation – they share with most of the un-literary public. These circumstances may not favour the codes and constructs of conventional literature, but they evoke new forms fitted to a content that literature largely*

ignores (or older forms) that the literature of today has overlaid (Morley & Warpole, 1982: 134).

Bourdieu (1990: 155) makes the point that in the fields of production the 'legitimate competence' of the professional is undermined by the 'peoples' attempts to 'do it' for themselves. (Which was Hoggart's concern – and part of the radical intention of 'cultural democracy'). Bourdieu warns however that upholding and valorising 'the popular' (the illegitimate) cannot deny that the very conceptualisation as such is an *'effect of domination'*; and that ultimately this logic *'leads stigmatised people to claim the stigma as the sign of their identity'* – and that is an *'insoluble contradiction'*. As is evidenced in Morley & Warpole's (1980) *The Republic of Letters: Working Class Writing and Local Publishing* this contradiction was indeed of concern amongst worker-writer groups and the community presses that supported them.

5. WHERE ARE 'WE'?

At this juncture, I want to return again briefly to Zeitlyn's quote and address the explicit claim (via 'our') to the 'we', *i.e.* 'we the people'. (Enzensberger's 'masses' have disappeared — and their agent apparently among them.) By the time of the instigation of the radical and community printshops, traditional leftist notions of 'the people' as 'the working class' had become somewhat more complicated. Although the 'we' is still invoked as an identity of resistance (Burke, 1998) the then emergent range of political identifications and interests mentioned in the previous section meant for a much more differentiated sense of its constitution. So for example an entry for a self-help press in the 1975 edition of *Print: How You Can Do It* (Zeitlyn: 51) states:

> *The sort of things that really need printing are squatters posters and handbooks, community papers, stuff for black groups, for school kids and for women and men fighting in the workplace (particularly where they are not in the union or have been sold out by the union).*

'The people' invoked are heterogeneous, what is in common is marginalisation – and 'resistance'. The fact that the 'we' (or the 'our') continued to be used in the communications of left/libertarian/community politics was, one could argue, an attempted performative or plea *for* unity

given the emergence of multiple agendas — some of which, particularly anti-racism and feminism, were highly critical of universalistic notions of an undifferentiated 'we'. The issue of what claim the actual memberships of the printshops had to the 'representation' of a heterogeneous 'oppressed' was to surface with the intensification of identity politics — and some would argue the destruction of 'class politics' — in the 1980s.

During this period, many of the radical printshops and community presses attempted to perform some kind of 'positive discrimination' towards potential new members. For the community presses (and poster workshops), who can be considered 'cultural producers' rather than 'printers' and who almost all received operational and wage grants, (by then from the Labour Left run Greater London Council) the issue became, in some cases, a constitutive one. One of the clearest cases in point is that of the Lenthall Road Workshop (established in 1976 as a feminist community screen-printing and photography workshop). By the mid 1980s the workshop had made it a policy that the members of the collective should reflect the class and ethnic background of the area in which the workshop was situated (Hackney). In part this was to try and encourage the greater use of the facilities by local black and working class women. In 1986 the collective stated:

> *We prioritise work with women, working class and minority groups for whom communication has a special relevance. Being female or a member of any of the minority groups has traditionally meant exclusion from whole areas of public life, becoming 'invisible' or being represented (or misrepresented) as seen from a 'mainstream' point of view… We have no official hierarchy, but unofficial hierarchies are hard to eliminate… [G]raduations of social class can sometimes produce delusions of 'natural leadership' (…) this has to some extent been ironed out by having a group the majority of whom are 'working' as opposed to 'ruling' class* (Lenthall Road, 1986: 36).

From discussions with former members of the See Red collective, it is also apparent that the issue of 'positive discrimination' was not just about representation but providing economic opportunity. The 'voluntarism' of the early printshops was perceived by some as exclusionary, requiring economic self-sufficiency and no dependants. It could be argued however that at that point in time the printshops were to some extent supported by the *'squatting and claiming'* culture of the libertarian left (Landry et al., 1981: 14) — which in principle was open to all, although in reality was dominated by middle class ex-

students. With grants for reasonable wages, the community presses could address another barrier to 'cultural production'. In turn, the grant-giving policies of the Greater London Council and other local Labour Left authorities can be seen as contributing to the increasing 'professionalisation' of radical politics in the UK in the 1980s (Lent, 2001), a cause for critical concern as earlier expressed in the quote from Union Place printshop.

For the radical (service) printshops, the situation was somewhat different, given their income was generated through their own labour. They were not part of the broader community arts scene — although there was clearly traffic of both workers and 'users' between the two — but were rather the radical component of the printing industry. Issues of accountability and representation were not quite so pertinent although access to the printing trade was, given both its historic domination by white (working class) men and the highly exclusionary practices of the print unions. These printshops, some of which had emerged out of the self-help/community print scene, all used offset-lithography and increasingly 'large offset' which required a far greater degree of technical knowledge and skill than the screen-printing processes used by the community presses/poster collectives. This meant that it took a considerable amount of time and financial commitment – especially given that most printshops (radical and community) had flat pay structures, to train a printer. From my conversations with past and present radical printshop members, a varied picture emerges; some had a coherent policy about training women on the presses, others operated a 'positive discrimination if we can' approach and others perceived such practices as politically irrelevant. Needless to say these positions shifted around during the life of a given press, depending variously on the attitudes of the current workers and what they perceived to be the priorities of the press and, often, its economic circumstances.

6. CONCLUSION

The radical and community printshops facilitated the majority of radical media production in Britain for at least a 20 year period. Through the selective theme of 'cultural democracy', I have attempted to demonstrate how they also represented via their own constitutions and practices, some of the significant developments, debates and formations within British radical politics/social movements of the time. In their attempts to claim the means of media and cultural production they challenged dominant discourses about what could be said, by whom and how. Through the politicization of their organizational and production processes they struggled to enact a radical democratic practice. It may be

argued that the printing press is an inherently authoritarian technology[3]; it demands consistent bodies, consumables, premises — and that the inability to contend with the implications of this contributed to the printshops demise. The internet, with its *'capacity to transform time, space, costs and the very roles of (…) producers and consumers'* (Bennett, 2003: 20), clearly offers the potential for a more (although not inherently) democratic mode of media and cultural practice. Within media studies there is significant critical interest in how the internet *'may be constitutive of alternative political communities'*, new political identities and *'ultimately new radical democratic cultures'* (Dahlberg & Siapera, 2007: 11). There may not be 'lessons learnt' nor an enhanced understanding of contemporary radical communications from the histories of the radical/community printshops. However, critically revisiting their aspirations and practices does I hope, offer not only a contribution to the historical contextualization of alternative media activity but also a thickening of the conceptualisation — and analysis — of radical democratic practice.

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[3] In response to the anarchists critique of authority and their exhortation that it needed to be removed from every sphere of existence, in 1872 Frederick Engels wrote the tract *On Authority* in which he argues that modern industrial processes are *inherently* authoritarian.

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