

Anarchists & The Printing Press

Combining thoughts & words with the cunning of the hands

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a review of

Letterpress Revolution: The Politics of Anarchist Print Culture by Kathy E. Ferguson. Duke University Press, 2023

In his search for truth, William Blake might take an idea of the dominant culture and invert it as he did in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793). There, he calls the printing house “Hell.” He sees dragon men preparing the space, vipers adorning it, eagle-like men building palaces, lions casting the sorts or types, and unnam’d forms casting them so that books were printed and bound. Kathy Ferguson does not write this kind of magical bestiary, instead her writing is scholarly to a high and sophisticated degree. It is useful, clear, and thorough, every bit as ready as Blake to turn the world upside down.

The dragons, vipers, eagles, and lions of the print shop are here assembled in lively, energetic cultural conglomeration with some of that inverted mystery Blake described with animals of earth and sky.

Ferguson’s subject is the letterpresses, and the anarchist men and women who operated them between the late 19th century and the 1940s. She gives us three meanings of “letter.” These meanings form the structure of her book, a chapter is devoted to each.

First, the sorts or bits of metal contained in a case (moveable type) each with a letter of the alphabet which are sorted into the composing stick to form words, lines of type, placed in the press which coats the type with ink, and impresses paper with the image, and, voila, the printed page!

Then, second, the word “letter” may mean the missives or epistles written from friend to friend, comrade to comrade, conveying news, expressing thoughts, making requests, & c. Finally, “letter” might basically refer to learning or knowledge in general as in the phrase “arts and letters.”

Master printers or skilled compositors of the 19th century, such as the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, could actually create ideas while writing with the composing stick where each letter is backwards and upside down. Ferguson describes the process which combines thoughts and words with the cunning of the hands.

Here cunning does not mean sinister or secret, rather it means skillful knowledge, or craft. It takes us back in time when, as the people of the craft guilds put it, work and the cunning of the body was an art and mystery, what Blake was getting at too. Ferguson replaced Blake’s fanciful bestiary with concepts that are useful in the creation of “political energy.”

The letterpress is a complex tool or machine. The author compares the typesetter’s actions to chopping wood and to playing the piano. She respects “the old materialism” while calling for a new materialism with its “attention to the liveliness of things.” Assemblages, feedback loops, and “actants,” that constitute the human and nonhuman in mutuality.

Against the ancient trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, Ferguson instead proposes another triplet of concepts she identifies as creativity, resonance, and collaboration. These are essential to the radical politics arising from printer, press, and public.

Marshall McLuhan proposed in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962) that “print is the technology of individualism.”

Here it is not the medium that is the message, messages are material and arise from collective production. Far from individualism, anarchist print culture was collaborative and collective. Albert Parsons, Walt Whitman, William Morris, Joseph Labadie, Alexander Berkman, Rudolph Rocker, merge mental and manual labor, art and craft, to the end of collective action.

Ferguson visited many contemporary printers and print shops in England and the U.S. She studied the major English language anarchist newspapers of several generations ago, *Freedom* in London, *Free Society* in San Francisco, and *Mother Earth* in New York. She even went to Blake’s “Hell” and tried her hand at the craft absorbing the sensorium of the print shop.

Her theme inverts the conventional view that anarchism is fine as theory, but can’t work in practice. The theory was seriously white-washed at least in classical anarchism because Black history, struggle, and labor are absent among the classic exponents. Ferguson aims to rectify this absence beginning with explaining it.

Anarchists, she writes, failed “to analyze Blackness as a significant element of power and resistance.” She adduces four reasons for the neglect. First, they used the discourse of slavery and bondage to represent all forms of resistance (wage-slaves?). Second, anarchists did not explore the specific histories of slave trade and plantation. Third, their love of print left them inattentive to other media of communication (music?). Fourth, contemptuous of “mere reform” they ignored other forms of resistance (the church?).

in addition to being a significant element of power and resistance, Black people in Africa, the Caribbean, and continental north America were a significant and elemental source of wealth. That wealth was extracted from land and human bodies. It was accomplished by the compulsions of imperialist force, settler colonization, capitalist production, and the Moloch of war, in which the wretched of the earth were slaughtered in one blood bath after another.

It resulted in huge amounts of wealth which is conventionally expressed in the global division of labor, measured in economic value, praised as European civilization, veiled in the hieroglyphics of money, maintained in structures of white racial supremacy, and poisoned by the sorcery of religious bigotry.

Force and wealth combined in the monstrous desecration of life and degradation of the earth. Folks the color of the earth bear the worst of it. Hence, from the bowels of such industrial barbarism—the American Midwest—came the necessary slogan, “Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity.”

Here, some more history might help remembering that Ferguson’s chosen period, the “classic anarchism,” fell between the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Spanish Revolution and Civil War of 1936–39. This period is also marked by Black Reconstruction at the beginning, and the fascist invasion of Ethiopia at the end.

Maximum violence upon the Great Plains of North America, intensive lynching, the “scramble” for Africa, the famines in India, the concentration camps in South Africa accompanied the global expropriations during that period. Such class violence was accompanied and organized by the capitalistic energy transition from wood to coal to oil. Those are the historical forces that fugitive history must contend with.

Ferguson concludes with sympathetic descriptions of three movements: 1) Food not Bombs, founded in 1980, 2) the protection of the mountain of Maunakea in Hawai’i, and 3) the movement of feminist bookstores.

Land, roads, parks, food, books, shelves are seen as the material components of struggles bringing together new combinations, new social assemblages, and new forms of commoning.

They share with the old letterpress communities the anarchist principles of mutual aid, self-organization, and direct democratic governance.

The “letter” of lead type, the letters sent by the post, the lettered bookish folks combine in a cultured assemblage can be preserved in the archive. Agnes Inglis, the archivist of the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan from 1924–1952, explained her work was “for the scholar that will be coming.” She addressed the authors in the collection itself. The papers gather dust until one day young dreamers and young builders undo the strings and unwrap the old bundles, and “the dawning spirit of the Revolution will sweep on...And your thoughts and your acts—past tho they are—are not lost in it. And this, the record, will ever be beloved.” Kathy Ferguson honors this work of the archivists: Agnes Inglis, the sisters Bertha and Pearl Johnson, Sophie Kropotkin, and Julie Herrada to name a few.

Anarchist printers and writers addressed “bookish poor people” or the “fugitive public” of those refusing hierarchy or domination. They spread the word by republishing classics, by commemorating anarchist events, by providing updates on arrests and imprisonments, by supporting strikes, by ongoing debates on war, individualism, and sex and gender.

These radical printers pioneered social sketches and think pieces beginning in the 19th century. Ferguson describes particularly their social sketches of Sadakichi Hartmann, Lily Gair Wilkinson, Lois Waisbrooker, and Mary Everest Boole. They are people of the undercommons. We are grateful to be in the skilled and gentle hands of “the scholar that will be coming,” i.e., Kathy Ferguson.

In 1913, famed opera tenor Enrico Caruso sang to nine hundred prisoners in the Atlanta penitentiary. He said, “I would rather give them a few moments pleasure than sing before kings.”

Perhaps Ferguson will edit an anthology of these social sketches and think pieces inspiring the Carusos of our time.

A child of empire, Peter Linebaugh is a scholar and people’s remembrancer. His most recent book is *Red Round Globe Hot Burning*. (University of California Press, 2021)

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