

# The Mimeo Machine & The Revolution

The Little Machine that Got the Word Out in the 1960s

Paul Buhle

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a review of

*Resurgence: Jonathan Leake, Radical Surrealism and the Resurgence Youth Movement 1964–1967* edited by Abigail Susik. Eberhardt Press, 2023

Who would have suspected that the humble mimeograph duplicator, invented for office work and used by organizations of every imaginable kind, would also have a political-cultural role across generations?

Going back to the 1920s, “amateur journalism” brought together young people (males, mostly if not entirely) sending each other their effusions on many topics, often in hopes of developing their own skills and becoming professionals of some uncertain kind. The young H.P. Lovecraft, not yet published as a horror writer, could be found among these seemingly lonely, predominantly male youngsters seeking literary company and encouragement.

Out of this milieu, in a general sense, came Science Fiction Fandom, rapidly expanding in the post-war period when fears of atomic war and invasions from outer space coincided with a paperback revolution. The two fed each other, fans began to have public meetings and then conventions...leading to an organized Comics Fandom with tables of young artists selling their own effusions, at first mainly to each other. In time, by the end of the twentieth century...Hollywood came to comics or vice versa. What began with mimeo machines climaxed, in some sense, in Superhero films, violating in almost every sense the spirit of the original.

But this is far from the whole story, of course. From the 1930s, obscure Trotskyist groups assaulted each other via mimeo while amateur artists experimented with the stencils. We can almost pick up the story of this book in the 1950s, because the poetry of the Beat Generation including that of Diane DiPrima, appeared as often in mimeo as in print, and because the marginal bookstores, sometimes used bookstores then abundant and adopted by Bohemians, also carried copies of these publications. Political or cultural, the mimeo project offered countless leaflets and pamphlets and for good financial reasons, too: paper was still cheap, postage cheaper.

Here comes the changing moods of the early 1960s, prompted by the civil rights movement, ban-the-bomb demonstrations, the increasing availability of the birth control pill, and the commercial discovery of the youth market. Nothing is quite so important to understand of *Resurgence!* as the division between the first half and the second half of the decade.

Until 1965 or so, radicalism had been insular, save in a handful of large cities, and even there, mass demonstrations, neighborhood bookshops encompassing bohemianism, not to mention a youthful and increasingly rebellious population, could all be pretty much ignored.

The Free Speech Movement in Berkeley of 1962 may have changed all that, but no more than a *Life* magazine feature on the Beats, intentionally insulting but actually inspiring instant, widespread imitation, had a little earlier.

Radicalism grew from the bottom up and more than a few handy connections to the middle. Jonathon Leake's ouvre, mimeographed efforts over a decade, can be understood best here. By 1966 or 1967, underground newspapers appeared by the dozens, then hundreds, with anti-war (and pro-marijuana, also sex-positive) messages, outstripping the mimeograph revolution, relegating it to an early obscurity. Rediscovering the hidden, now mostly

forgotten traces is a trip down radical memory lane. Abigail Susik and the Eberhard Press deserve much credit for rediscovering this particular cache of forgotten material and thanks to scanning and printing precision, making it available again.

Jonathan Leake and his brother Paul, radicalized teenagers from a well-to-do New York family friendly with European artists, would naturally grab the available means to express their personal, political, cultural rebellion. They had the means to travel widely, to choose poverty, to contact and meet with youngsters sharing the same sense of rebellion, for which “anarchism” offered an uncertain and perhaps outdated cognomen.

The existing Old Left spectrum of communist and socialist organizations and movements held little charm for the Leakes and their friends. Leading anarchists, for their part, looked hopefully toward a major revival of their end of things, and it seemed to make sense, young people of the time thinking and feeling in ways familiar to many past anarchist trends. But figures like Murray Bookchin and Sam Dolgoff wanted an orderly and thoughtful movement, not one eager for Lower East Side actions provoking police violence through choreographed public confrontations.

These youthful rebels, part of a large and inchoate milieu enraged at war, repression and racism, fell back upon their own devices. Leake, early described as schizophrenic, issued the bulletins reprinted here, full of youthful enthusiasm bordering on ranting but at the very least energetic and intellectually creative. He and his friends succeeded in publishing *Resurgence!* and establishing an aspiring “Resurgent Youth Movement” with no membership and no fixed following.

By happy coincidence, they struck up a relationship with a surrealist circle around Franklin and Penny Rosemont in Chicago, fellow mimeo revolutionaries (and bookstore co-op members). Out of this relationship and shared affinities came a revival of the ideas of surrealism, as Susik and Penny Rosemont usefully explain.

Somewhere in this equation, uncertainly and rather briefly, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) comes into the picture. Badly reduced from the pre-1920 glory days of the organization, the IWW managed to hold on, maintaining a minimal press and an office in Chicago. Hundreds and perhaps thousands of young people came to the IWW and left after a few months or years, finding something for themselves but not enough to suit their own aspirations. The ideals of the IWW, its quasi-anarchist spirit, never lost their appeal nor regain solid organizational form.

*Resurgence!* travels on into the middle 1960s until the very intensity and widespread youth sensibility of revolt seems to have swept Leake himself away. Mimeo publications seemingly lost most of their appeal to political readers or producers, even as mimeoed poetry books and short-lived poetry magazines gave the form one last heroic moment.

The book ends with a kind of diary or memoir. Leake, looking for a movement, drifts toward the eclectic forms of Maoism stalking a Left that could not, by itself, sustain the social rebellions that seemed so very inspiring. The vision of Revolution as explosion had never been very helpful for activists patiently organizing the anti-war movement, reaching ever further beyond the big city and big campus into the smaller towns, religious schools and the South. Nor to the newest site of rebellion, factories where women and people of color now worked within stodgy unions, trying for reform and transformation of their own means of changing their situation.

In the end, we have a remarkable manifesto, or series of manifestoes, as charming and ephemeral as the periodicals churned out of mimeograph machines would inevitably become in retrospect. This is a fine and fascinating book.

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