

Printing Outside the State Apparatus: The Detroit Printing Co-op, Radical Education Project and Black Star

In the late 1960s in the United States there was a proliferation of small leftist and counter-cultural publishers who produced materials on their own. The flourishing of the “underground press” was made possible by the availability of relatively cheap secondhand offset presses that were cycling out of use at commercial print shops. These print shops often operated with a much looser structure than traditional, larger scale printers.

In Detroit, a number of leftist print shops emerged at the end of the 1960s, including the Detroit Printing Co-op, the Radical Education Project, and Black Star. The Detroit Printing Co-op, which ran from 1970 to 1980, considered their printing equipment social property, available for use by anyone who wished to learn how to operate it and contribute to its maintenance. The equipment included a fully operational dark room, a large Harris offset press, and a binding machine. Tens of thousands of copies of leftist books, pamphlets, posters, and brochures were printed there, including the first English translation of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* and the journal *Radical America*. High school students, black radicals, labor organizers, and anarchists all made use of the freely available facilities at the Co-op.

Upstairs from the Detroit Printing Co-op, the Radical Education Project (REP) was the printing arm of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). REP was first established in Ann Arbor, near the campus of the University of Michigan, where SDS had a large presence. In 1969, REP moved its operation to Detroit. A few miles away from them was Black Star, the print shop for the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, a network of militant Marxist-Leninist activists that was first comprised of autoworkers at the Dodge Main auto plant. Black Star had typesetting equipment and several smaller presses. They were most active in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some of the central figures were Helen Jones, Carl Smith and Fred Holsey.

There was a great deal of overlap between the three print shops, as well as the offices of *The Fifth Estate*, a radical left newspaper that had typesetting equipment. Black Star printer Carl Smith was a close associate of Fredy and Lorraine Perlman, and, along with them, a founding member of the Co-op. He helped set up the offset press at the Co-op and printed several Black Star publications on their

large press. Smith also gave Lorraine Perlman a key to Black Star so she could make use of their typesetting equipment. Because the Co-op had a large stock of film that they had acquired at auction, Smith would often experiment with Fredy Perlman to make color separations.

Several Co-op members regularly wrote for *The Fifth Estate* or made use of their typesetting equipment. And though *The Fifth Estate* was not printed at the Co-op — a web press was better for printing newspapers, and none of these underground printers had such a large machine — members of the newspaper's editorial board produced posters or standalone pamphlets at the Co-op. Early REP publications feature the Co-op's union label, or "union bug," indicating that they were printed at the downstairs print shop.

Each of these groups self-organized a little bit differently. The majority of the members of the Co-op were members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Still existing today, the IWW is a radical labor union that views traditional trade union organizing as limited, insofar as different trade unions can end up being pitted against one another. The preamble to the IWW constitution states: "Instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work,' we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wage system.'"

The Detroit Printing Co-op became an IWW print shop, which meant that the members paid monthly dues and agreed to the terms set forth within the IWW constitution. Union shops could use the IWW label on materials they produced. Fredy Perlman designed the Co-op's version of the bug that appears on everything printed there. The bug includes the IWW insignia, a representation of the upper half of a globe beneath the words "IWW universal," surrounded by a thick black outline of a circle with the text "Industrial Workers of the World Label." Perlman added three lines of text to the insignia which are important for understanding the way the Co-op and its members saw themselves: "ABOLISH THE WAGE SYSTEM — ABOLISH THE STATE — ALL POWER TO THE WORKERS."

The Co-op had expenses that they carefully paid off. Equipment had been acquired secondhand or at auction, with borrowed money from friends. In addition, they had monthly rent to pay. The Co-op took on paid jobs in the early years in order to repay their debts, but they resisted entering into any

kind of relationship where one person was paying wages to another. Lorraine Perlman kept track of their income and debt on a piece of paper posted on a wall visible to everyone. Co-op users were asked to help work on the paid jobs, which were taken on collectively, and in exchange they could use the equipment for whatever they wanted, so long as they were not exploiting anyone else or trying to run a for-profit business out of the space. People were expected to clean up after themselves, they would not employ or exploit another person to do janitorial tasks.

In a traditional union, negotiations often center around increasing wages. Fredy and Lorraine Perlman, however, like many leftists, considered the wage system to be a form of slavery. At the Printing Co-op, the call was to abolish the wage system altogether, following the belief that true liberation could only come when workers controlled the means of production. The terms of engagement within the Co-op were spelled out in a document that they wrote and posted on the wall. Anyone who sought to exploit another human being for their labor was held of very low opinion. Inscribed in their bug, the call to abolish the wage system was printed on everything that came out of the Co-op. In several publications, the area of a book usually designated for copyright information would instead state that the book was not copyrighted, that it could be freely copied, and furthermore that no person had been exploited in its production. All stages—from translation, to editing, to printing, binding and distribution—were completed willingly by individuals who chose to engage in those tasks.

Another pillar that can be seen inscribed in the bug is the call to abolish the state. The Perlmans and other Co-op members were equally skeptical of the capitalist state and so-called socialist states like those in Eastern Europe, China, Cuba, etc. They considered these to be state-sponsored capitalism. They saw that people living in these countries were not free from authoritarianism.

One piece printed at the Co-op that underscores the distrust that many on the left felt toward the state is *Firearms & Self-Defense: A Handbook for Radicals, Revolutionaries and Easy Riders*. It was put out by a group called the International Liberation School, published by the REP, and printed at the Co-op. It provides information about different kinds of firearms and how to use and maintain them. The booklet covers topics like “Self Defense Shotguns” (“For self-defense purposes, 00 Buckshot is generally recommended”) and “Shot Size and Gauges.” Informational text is accompanied by diagrams and photographs, for example, a cross-section of a shotgun shell alongside a photo of Huey Newton holding a shotgun, or a Vietnamese resistance fighter aiming an M-1 Carbine. The back

cover is a photograph of a white hippie couple carrying a baby and a rifle. This kind of manual underscores the fact that leftists felt the need to prepare themselves in the event of a confrontation with the state.

Another publication printed at the Co-op that is critical of the state is a book that Fredy and Lorraine Perlman published in 1972 entitled *Manual for Revolutionary Leaders*. They used the pseudonym Michael Velli for the author name, as a reference to Machiavelli. Fredy Perlman believed that individuals should recognize their own self-power and not follow others. The Perlmans were critical of some of their contemporaries on the left who engaged with radical activity yet seemed most interested in gaining personal power, often through the state apparatus.¹ *Manual for Revolutionary Leaders* was compiled as a satirical documentation of examples of leftist leaders whose goals were primarily to empower themselves as leaders. The Perlmans thought the term “revolutionary leader” was an oxymoron — you couldn’t be both revolutionary and a leader. To see yourself as a ‘leader,’ telling others what to do, was counter-revolutionary.

In the second section of the manual, every paragraph begins with a blackletter drop-cap letter superimposed over a portrait of a revolutionary leader (e.g., Mao, Lenin, Trotsky, Nehru). The typographic treatment calls to mind religious illuminated manuscripts. They saw these “revolutionary leaders” as stand-ins for religious leaders, and equally disempowering to their followers.

One of the collages in the book shows an outline of Vladimir Lenin superimposed over a photograph of the interior of the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, a striking and opulent modern building completed in 1963 on the campus of Yale University. Lenin’s outline is filled in with photos of crowds and laborers topped by the hammer and sickle symbol in Lenin’s head. This image seems to be pulling together two forms of state power — Lenin, one of the world’s most well-known “revolutionary leaders,” and Yale University, a center of wealth and power in the capitalist state. The workers inside the image appear to be the ones building and upholding both Lenin and Yale’s power.

Black Star, the Detroit Printing Co-op, REP and the *Fifth Estate* were all participating actively in radical, leftist activity and they were tracked by state authorities. In 1970, Detroit Police detective

¹ “To criticize the direction of our contemporaries’ radical activity. We assumed that when the lust for power was shown to result inescapably from the development of the leftists’ mild-sounding starting principles, the goal of seeking state power would be discredited.” Lorraine Perlman, *Having Little Being Much* (Black & Red: 1989), p 80.

sergeants Allen Crouter and Paul Chambers testified before Congress on the “Extent of Subversion in the ‘New Left.’”² In their testimony, they cited the activities of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM, which belonged to the League, of which Black Star was also a part), the Co-op, and REP, providing specific details about the latter group’s facilities: “REP still maintains offices at 3908 Michigan, Detroit, Mich., where they have initiated elaborate ‘security’ measures. These offices contain two printing presses; three collators; four IBM typewriters; and one manual typewriter. These offices are filled with various printed material … The walls of the offices are covered with posters and signs representing Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Black Panther Party, and the Republic of New Africa (RNA).”³

The attention to REP printing equipment — two printing presses, five typewriters — indicates the authorities’ focus on their capacities. A May 1970 article in the *Detroit News* tied REP to the Weathermen, the militant left group founded in Ann Arbor, Michigan that attempted to bomb US government sites to protest the war in Vietnam.⁴ It was later determined that this connection was unfounded.

Members of the Co-op, the League and REP were generally aware that they were under police surveillance.⁵ As a response and measure to protect themselves, Black Star had attempted to organize into a viable black-owned business. According to one of their members, Fred Holsey, part of these efforts included doing a number of commercial print jobs for funeral homes in the neighborhood in addition to printing newsletters and other materials for the League. However, Black Star ceased production in the early 1970s as the League essentially disbanded and re-formed into a new kind of group. REP too began slowly printing less and less. The Co-op remained fairly active through the 1970s, but by 1980 the Perlmans were the only regular users. In 1980, when their landlord sold the building they had occupied, they finally closed the Co-op. Censorship was no longer an issue and the

² Extent of Subversion in the “New Left” Testimony of Allen Crouter and Paul Chambers. Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, Ninety-first Congress, Second Session, part 9 (August 6, 1970). U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 1971. Crouter and Chamber refer to the Co-op as the Revolutionary Printing Co-op, which was the name they used before eventually settling on calling themselves the Detroit Printing Co-op.

³ Crouter and Chambers testimony, p. 1231-1232.

⁴ The evidence for the connection between the Weathermen and the Printing Co-op was debunked by a writer for *The Fifth Estate*, a local leftist paper.

⁵ Agents would remain parked outside their buildings and watch people entering and exiting. Lorraine Perlman recalls that a Co-op member once approached the surveillance vehicle and asked the person inside what they were waiting for. They were told that the Co-op was being monitored because the police suspected they were engaged in counterfeiting money.

left was not viewed as a threat in the way that it had been in the early part of the decade. Many of the materials they had once printed had also become easier to acquire. In general the left in the United States had suffered many losses and setbacks. Small print shops would also start to find their business model threatened, with even commercial shops slowing down and closing up over the next few decades. Though the Co-op did not last forever, the fact that it existed as long as it did and that its users were as prolific as they were should serve as an inspiration to those searching for alternatives to production.