

Book Review

Kathy Ferguson, *Letterpress Revolution: The Politics of Anarchist Print Culture*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023

Every political movement engages with communications and print media in distinctive ways. But for anarchists, whose prefigurative ethics insist on the unity of means and ends in pursuit of revolutionary social change, these engagements take on a unique significance. The means through which anarchists have corresponded with each other and circulated ideas over the past two centuries both articulate and materially embody their political visions.

While I wouldn't have put it in those words, I intuitively knew this as I entered into anarchist communities at the height of the global justice movement. The scissors and gluesticks used to collage together the layout of DIY zines; the long hours bent over the photocopier at the corporate office store, printing and stapling and folding and looking over one's shoulder to make sure employees weren't getting suspicious; trips to the post office box and prisoner letter-writing nights at the local infoshop—these were as instrumental to the experience of being an anarchist of that generation as militant protests or Food Not Bombs meals. DIY aesthetics, scamming corporations, and volunteer-run spaces for sharing print materials produced by horizontal collectives were not only practical adaptations for a chronically under-resourced movement to be able to keep its ideas in circulation, but concrete expressions of anti-capitalist and non-hierarchical values. Within the hothouse of punk and anarchist countercultures, our relentless focus on the politics of everyday life could verge on moralism at the expense of strategy, as critics then and since have observed. But we understood that an intimate linkage existed between the ideals to which we were devoting our lives and methods through which we promoted them, both the material objects we produced and the relationships that went into them.

But the punk anarchists of the global justice era were by no means the first anti-authoritarian generation to take these questions of medium and message seriously. In her lovingly crafted study, *Letterpress Revo-*

lution: The Politics of Anarchist Print Culture (Duke University Press, 2023), political theorist Kathy Ferguson documents and analyzes how an earlier era of anarchist printers, writers, and readers collaborated to materialize their political visions in word and in deed. The book argues that Anglophone classical anarchist print culture “thrived through a dynamic combination of media technology, epistolary relations, and radical scholarship” that directly embodied the movement’s ideals (3). Ferguson eloquently summarizes the prefigurative nature of anarchist print culture as “creating the society for which they longed through the process of calling for it” (10), and argues that today’s radical movements can learn lessons from “earlier anarchist successes in combining material, semiotic, and social relations to build alternative forms of public life” (4).

While all political movements, radical and otherwise, have their organs of communication and debate, Ferguson insists that something distinguishes how anarchists have historically used them: “Journals did not just report the anarchist movement; they were, in large part, the anarchist movement”(x). Rather than simply consuming aligned ideas via subscription to national publications—more common among socialists, she observes—anarchist print culture adopted a political ethos centered on decentralization and active participation. She notes how British Marxist historian E.P. Thompson, “exasperated” by what he described as a “rash of anarchism” on the British left, grumpily cataloged the bewildering range of their periodicals “published on blue paper, red paper, and toilet paper” (3). Indeed, in the words of a Spanish anarchist truism quoted in the preface: “If you find two anarchists you’ll also find three newspapers” (x). (I’m sure I’m not the only reader to have chuckled in rueful recognition at this observation.) This penchant for proliferating periodicals has meant that historians of anarchism have relied heavily on them as sources. But while many studies explore the content of these publications in relation to the movements that spawned them, Ferguson contends that “little attention has been paid to their form” (25). Thus *Letterpress Revolution* integrates a careful study of the material dimensions of print culture—the machinery, the ink smears on fingertips, the visceral weight of a new book or periodical in one’s hand—with sophisticated reflections on the networks of relations engendered within

these objects and close readings of their textual practices.

The book's introduction parses three distinct senses of "letters"—as graphic symbols representing a sound in speech, as units of written communication exchanged across distances, and as a mode of learning—which correspond to the book's three major body chapters. To explore the printed letter that comprises text, the first chapter explores anarchist presses that produced books, pamphlets, and periodicals for the movement. The second chapter, "Epistolarity," assesses the anarchist culture of letter-writing through a close reading of the exchanges between several mid-century correspondents. The third chapter analyzes the culture of anarchist letters that emerged within several prominent classical era English-language periodicals, dissecting the anatomy of print genres and themes to draw conclusions about the movement's political praxis. The final chapter briefly considers the implications of the analysis for anarchist theory today, while a series of appendices document anarchist compositors, pressmen, and bookbinders, biographically describe several of the book's main characters, and list the contemporary printers interviewed for the study.

Ferguson draws on sophisticated intellectual tools to scaffold the book's arguments, including Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of assemblages and its elaboration by Manuel DeLanda and other theorists, the political thought of Jacques Ranciere, as well as work in Black studies, literary criticism, media analysis, and affect theory. For readers already interested in anarchist history, aspects of Ferguson's approach may come across as unnecessarily scaffolded with extensive theorization. At some points, these interventions seem merely to restate straightforward conclusions with excessive citations, perhaps helpful in translating or legitimizing anarchist ideas to non-anarchist academic audiences but limited in how they advance our understanding of anarchist print culture. However, at their most elegant, Ferguson's interventions skillfully deploy interdisciplinary theories to illuminate sophisticated insights immanent within the anarchist tradition. For instance, she picks up on the archivist Bertha Johnson's passing use of the term filament to describe her connections with other anarchist correspondents, weaving it together with

assemblage theory to establish a leitmotif recurring throughout the text to poetically evoke the linkages connecting radicals in rhizomatic networks across time and space.

Letterpress Revolution's first chapter turns our attention to the material dimensions of anarchist print culture in two registers. First, it documents the presses that produced anarchist materials and the people who operated them. Focusing particularly on Romanian-American anarchist printer Joseph Ishill, but surveying a wide range of workers who participated in different aspects of print work, Ferguson attends to gendered patterns, mobility, union membership, state and vigilante repression, and the place of printers within anarchist networks. Second, the chapter delves into the physical process of printing itself, from the machines used to the sensory dimensions of the labor experience, and evaluates the aesthetics of different printings in terms of the material techniques needed to enact them as well as anarchist conceptions of the significance of beauty within visions of revolutionary transformation. The analysis rests not only on archival findings but also Ferguson's interviews with contemporary radical printers who use analog print technologies that date back to the period of classical anarchism, enabling her to describe in fine-grained detail the tactile experience of setting type and operating the machines. Far more than the caricature of the disheveled bomb-thrower, she convincingly argues, the figure of the printer wielding the composing stick best embodies the classical anarchist movement—and deepening our knowledge of the practice of printing can meaningfully enhance our understanding of the movement.

In focusing on printers themselves and not merely the writers whose words they printed, the book decenters more widely known anarchist historical figures who occupied the public's (and later the historian's) eye with their speeches and writings, in favor of little-known rank-and-file participants in the movement. This approach continues into the second chapter, which focuses on the significance of writing letters within anarchist communication networks. Anarchists, Ferguson maintains, seem to have a penchant for epistolarity—apparently Emma Goldman is estimated to have written some *two hundred thousand* letters over the course of her life—and revisiting

their correspondence helps to trace the filaments linking everyday participants in the movement and the ideals to which they devoted their quiet lives. The chapter offers close readings of the letters exchanged between writer and activist Rudolf Rocker and printer Ishill, Labadie Collection curator Agnes Inglis, and sisters Bertha Johnson and Pearl Johnson Tucker. While none of these figures except Rocker would likely be known to any but the most avid anarchist historians, all served as nodes within transnational networks of activists and conduits of ideas, debates, conflicts, and passions that animated early and mid-twentieth century anarchism. Ferguson offers insights into the gendered dynamics of archiving, communication, and care work as feminized forms of labor, illuminating the persistence of patriarchal norms even within radical movements. Amid theoretical reflections on the complex temporalities and interactive subjectivities embodied within letters, this chapter offers some of the most moving and human moments within the book, as the dreams, frustrations, vulnerabilities, and determination of the correspondents shine through excerpts from their letters. Ferguson focuses attention not only on the objects she encounters in the archives but on her own evolving reading practices and the archival research experience itself. In a particularly poignant moment, she describes how the shock of encountering Rocker's obituary without warning, after so many long hours spent immersed in his letters left her weeping: "I thought we had more time" (120). A section titled "Reimagining Bertha and Agnes" undertakes what some scholars have called a critical fabulation, narrating a speculative alternate history in which the two elderly women consummate their long correspondence as domestic partners, freely mingling Ferguson's own desire and fantasy with the details of the women's lives. Concluding with Inglis's poetic manifesto in praise of anarchist historical research, the chapter reads as a love letter in its own right to the people, the politics, and the process of archival excavation as it intersections with the utopian imagination.

Archival research marks one mode of what Ferguson, engaging with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's theory of the undercommons, terms *radical study*. This paradigm animates the third chapter, which turns to the textual practices through which anarchists communicated and embodied their ideals within print culture. Focusing on

three prominent anarchist periodicals launched in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, *Free Society*, *Mother Earth*, and *Freedom*, Ferguson produces a detailed formal analysis of these journals' textual practices, including taxonomies of their main thematic elements and arguments and their means of engaging readers as participants. Detailed discussions of two distinctive types of articles, the "social sketch" and the "think piece," enable consideration of the gendered dynamics of genre and the relationship between form and content within anarchist writing. These journals, the chapter concludes, modeled a mode of radical study that epitomized the alignment of means and ends, inviting readers "both to think about anarchism and to think the world anarchistically" (184).

Historically oriented readers may puzzle over the book's irregular periodization. The opening chapter focuses primarily on mid-twentieth century printers, but draws on Ferguson's interviews with contemporary anarchists who have sustained the use of analog print technologies. The correspondences read closely in the second chapter primarily date from the 1940s-1950s, while the periodicals that form the basis of the third chapter are primarily from the 1890s-1910s—except for the UK's *Freedom*, which was published for over a century—and the final chapter examines three contemporary movements. While this temporal flux offers the advantage of a broad view of the anarchist tradition that enables resonances across generations to emerge, its collapsing of quite distinct periods in radical history may dilute the specificity of its conclusions.

This becomes especially clear in the final chapter, "Intersectionality and Thing Power," which differs notably from the three preceding it that comprise the bulk of the book: much shorter, more prescriptive in its analysis, turning away from print media, and focusing on recent movements. Ferguson opens by turning the common perception that anarchism is admirable in theory but unworkable in practice on its head, asserting by contrast that anarchist practices have proliferated widely with great success—whether under the sign of "anarchism" or not—but that this rich tradition of anti-authoritarian activity remains undertheorized. She identifies two key pathways for enriching anarchist theory: using theories and histories from Black studies to

deepen intersectional analyses of power, and engaging new materialist frameworks to illuminate the liveliness of matter, or following political theorist Jane Bennett, “thing power” (189). Unfortunately, despite its valuable goal of contributing to the development of new anarchist theory, this chapter is also the book’s least convincing.

First, Ferguson attempts to diagnose the inadequacies of anarchism’s historical engagement with questions of race generally and Black struggles specifically. She proposes four explanatory factors: the appropriation of the language of slavery as a metaphor for all exploitation, extracted from the specificity of Black experiences; lack of attention to the history of slavery and anti-Black racism; a focus on writing to the exclusion of other modes of oppositional political expression, and an overly rigid rejection of reformist politics. How to understand the historical failures of US anarchist movements to meaningfully engage race and Black struggles—particularly in contrast to contemporaneous communist movements, which did, from the 1920s forward—is a crucial question with urgent political implications for our intersectional radical movements today. However, most of these factors require explaining themselves rather than serving as explanations, and are hampered by a lack of temporal specificity.

For example, one factor that might more convincingly account for limited anarchist engagement with Black struggles during this era in the US is geography. As Ferguson notes in the preceding chapter, while anarchists adopted an internationalist lens to report on struggles around the world, their periodicals often centered local struggles to engage readers in their region. During the period in which the publications on which she based her analysis of US classical anarchism were active (1897-1918), the first wave of the Great Migration of African Americans was only just beginning, and 90% of the nation’s Black population lived in the South—the only region of the country with virtually no active anarchist presence. Viewed through this lens, Ferguson’s critique echoes biographer Jacqueline Jones’s critique of renowned Chicago anarchist Lucy Parsons for not orienting her politics around Black identity—despite the fact that during the 1880s, Black Chicagoans made up around 0.01% of the city’s popula-

tion. While Jones is less and Ferguson more sympathetic to anarchist politics, both project contemporary demographic realities and ethical-political prescriptions onto historical anarchist movements, with limited analytical value.

A more pertinent question may be why from the 1920s onwards, when demographic shifts and increased political mobilization meant that Black communities and movements were far more legible to non-Black anarchists than previously, anarchist movements did not correspondingly shift into more extensive engagement. While periodicals based in Great Migration cities such as New York's *Vanguard* in the 1930s did publish occasional analyses of resistance to anti-Black racism by Black anarchists, these efforts paled in comparison to the Communist Party's extensive mobilizations to organize Black workers, protest anti-Black violence, support Black legal defense in cases such as the Scottsboro Boys, and more. This robust engagement from authoritarian communists did not stem from a more expansive notion of what constituted politically valid resistance—in the twilight of the classical era, anarchists certainly held less rigidly workerist conceptions of political engagement than much of the left—which raises questions about whether this criteria offers much insight to the problem.

Considering a longer historical arc casts further doubt on Ferguson's contention that anarchists' rigidity around rejecting reformism led them to overlook the significance of Black struggles. As historian Andrew Cornell has documented, anarchists played significant roles in Black civil rights organizing from the 1940s onwards, contributing direct action strategies and covering campaigns for racial justice extensively in their periodicals. Understanding the reasons for the historical underdevelopment of anarchist engagement with Black struggle and theorization of race will demand a more carefully historically calibrated set of explanations—though Ferguson has done anarchist history and thought an important service simply by posing the question and providing initial hypotheses for debate.

The fourth chapter concludes with brief analyses of three quite different movements with anarchist-aligned politics—Food Not Bombs,

Protect Maunakea ‘Ohana, and the feminist bookstore movement—through the proposed intersectional and “thing power” lenses. The movements are interesting, but the analyses cursory relative to the richness of the earlier chapters. It is unclear, for example, what conceptualizing Food Not Bombs as “actualized by the actancy of food” (202) does to enrich our understanding of its politics. The concluding section seems to merge the self-evident observation that radical movements always involve sensory engagement with material things with an assumption that effective radical theorizing requires developing a specialized vocabulary to describe how these things can both affect and be affected: “Attending patiently to multidirectional relations among loosely bounded actants can be a way to nurture liveliness in both our theories and our things” (214). It seems more plausible that indigenous theories that broaden notions of kinship and relationality beyond the human, intersecting with anarchist engagements with radical ecology and animal liberation—none of which appear in this volume—could enrich political theories bound by liberal, settler, and anthropocentric conceptions of subjectivity. But, having logged many hours stirring pots at Food Not Bombs and staffing the counter at radical bookstores, I remain uncertain how the new materialist approaches to “thing power” described here can enhance my analysis of these political practices. Perhaps Ferguson will develop these concepts further in future work; until then, I am content to bracket the final chapter as an underdeveloped coda to an otherwise powerful and persuasive analysis of anarchist print culture.

Letterpress Revolution, like the innumerable print artifacts it analyzes, is a labor of love. The book opens in its preface with Ferguson’s recollection of taking part in the production of an obscure anarchist periodical by a tiny collective in upstate New York in the 1970s. This personal connection, locating her long-forgotten youthful efforts within a long and powerful radical genealogy, animates the care with which she documents and theorizes the anarchist print cultures described in these pages. Its prefigurative political vision is clear and trenchant; indeed, one of the book’s many striking gifts is its remarkably lucid and concise exposition of the core ideas of anarchism on its second page. While the overgrowth of theory and citation might stand some judicious pruning to allow the archival material enough

room to blossom, the book's understory teems with a rich ecosystem of ideas and stories painstakingly cultivated through patient research. For academic readers familiar with interdisciplinary theories of narrative, media, assemblage, and undercommons, it offers a window into the enduring value of a century and a half of anarchist theories and practices as manifested through print culture. For readers looking to anarchist history for inspiration, it offers a nostalgic and impassioned defense of how a movement of "bookish poor people" (132) used letters, in the word's triplicate sense, to wage their quixotic global struggle against capitalism and the state—and how their successes and failures might inform our own efforts to "think the world into being" anew (184).

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