

Nicholas Thoburn, *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). 392pp. Paperback \$30.00.

The first point to make is that the “radical publishing” referred to in the subtitle of *Anti-Book* does not denote the various feminist, gay, black, or other identity-politics-based movements that have a long history of championing marginalized groups’ access to the printed word. Rather, Nicholas Thoburn uses the term to refer to highly niche, “ultra-left” publishing practices closer in motivation to fine-art projects (89). Not only do these fail to attract an audience of any significant size, they frequently eschew the idea of anything but the minutest readership as capitulation to the relations of commodity capitalism. The aim here is, to borrow a phrase from the chapter on micro publishing outfit Unpopular Books, “a wilfully unpopular approach to political community” (103).

This last point takes us to one of the fundamental problems in what is otherwise a highly researched and nothing if not theoretically self-conscious book: the nature of so-called “radical” publishing. The term barely appears in the text itself; it is the “Communist” book which is theoretically set up in the book’s Introduction and analysed in its various, transmedial incarnations. “Communist” here is not to be confused with any of the international political regimes, past or present, that have deployed the term. Rather it is abstracted to a “potential” (13), a “Communism without identity” (21)—more a construct of post-Frankfurt School critical theory than any practical program for social and economic improvement in the lives of large numbers of people. That the term “radical” appears to have been substituted for “Communist”—presumably under pressure from the publisher University of Minnesota Press for enhanced marketability—speaks volumes. For a book so exhaustively self-referential in other ways, this is no little irony.

Theoretically, *Anti-book* situates itself (French-style reflexive constructions are endemic) between the fields of artists’ books and critical theory, mostly German or French in origin, with Marx, Benjamin, Adorno, and, especially, Deleuze featuring heavily. Surprisingly, given the book’s interests in the materiality and socio-economic context in which books are produced and in tracing the effects of context on resultant texts, the discipline of book history is comparatively marginal to Thoburn’s enterprise, confined to a few brief references in the Introduction to Roger Chartier, Leah Price, and N. Katherine Hayles.

The body of Thoburn’s analysis takes various material platforms in turn—the pamphlet, the codex, the magazine, and various print-digital hybrids—with an excursus in Chapter 4 into the concept of anonymity in publishing. With each of these media, the author explores texts where the relationship of content to material substrate is especially charged, particularly where these two dimensions seem to pull in opposite directions (the “anti-book” of the title, a borrowing from

Richard Kostelanetz).

Hence, Thoburn's fascination in Chapter 2 is with the long history of Communist pamphleteering (the term "socialism" was itself coined by a typographer). The author is surely right in his assertion that literary studies as a discipline has been predicated on extreme fetishization of books' content, coupled with dismissal, bordering on contempt, for their material incarnations, with all the taint of commercialism these imply. The legacy of Protestantism—committed to producing vernacular Bibles but chary of appearing to coarsen the Word of God with commerce—lies heavy here. The pamphlet, with its ephemeral form and marginal commercial status, might seem to evade this inherited structure, although Thoburn's analysis of the fate of Infopool pamphlets at a Tate Modern exhibition suggests that it is artists, as much as literary scholars, who insist on this impossible insulation of literary or political content from the besmirching world of commerce.

Chapter 3 shifts its focus to the so-called "rhizome-book," which Deleuze and Guattari oppose to the conventional codex or "root book." The rhizomatic book embodies its subversive politics in its form, rejoicing in fractured layout, riotous textual contradictions, and refusing the self-sufficient closure of the traditional codex. It is in this chapter that the marked disconnect between Communist publishing's espoused aims and its actual readership manifests most glaringly. Long analyses of the politics and book-as-performance projects of the Situationist International reveal a Communism that was more conceptual art practice than a social movement with practical aims of economic empowerment and reduced inequality. There arises an almost ludicrous disjunction between the self-circumscribing high-seriousness of neo-Marxist avant-gardist cliques and their rhetoric of grand societal revolution. This reaches its apogee in the Situationist International's Hamburg Theses—concocted on a pub crawl and never written down for fear of contamination as a written commodity. As self-parody this would be inspired, but Thoburn does not treat it as such. He allows that Communist printed objects are frequently "cultish" (218), but appears too beguiled by the intellectual piquancy of left-inflected critical theory to address the elephant in the room.

Economic issues, surprisingly for a book about Communist print objects, only make a belated appearance in Chapter 5's analysis of the London-based *Mute* magazine's various and shifting print and digital incarnations. These were prompted by an unusually self-conscious editorial board's attempts to chart a future for print communication in a digitally disintermediated era (and a profoundly neo-liberal, austerity-driven one at that). In what is the book's most satisfying analytical manoeuvre, Thoburn moves out of the fog of high theory to consider the board's conflicted relationship to the material world around them: vociferously anti-business though proclaiming themselves a "business" (264); dependent to a large degree on Arts Council England funding (until this is cut) though hostile to cultural policy's increasing instrumentalism in the era of creative industries; avail-

ing themselves of Web 2.0's talisman of the "hive mind" while chary of the commodification and datamining of user-generated content. Thoburn himself diagnoses *Mute* as a "moving tangle of contradictions" (267) but cannot resist the magazine's graphic-design dazzle and alluringly oppositional political rhetoric, especially in its deluxe quarterly editions phase. The result is reminiscent of a Fabergé egg: aesthetically opulent and representing the highest achievement of its type, but begging the question *why, to what end?* Can this be the logical end-point of Marx's exhortation to philosophers to cease merely interpreting the world and instead to *change* it?

Thoburn's methodology encompasses Continental critical theory, detailed textual and material analysis of specific case-studies, and archival work, at times complemented by interviews with print and digital practitioners. Somewhat maddeningly, given the highly niche nature of most of the case-studies examined in *Anti-Book*, Thoburn's modus operandi is to engage in elaborate theoretical set-ups before introducing the specifics of the print works under discussion, leaving the reader wading through much abstraction before finally arriving at the textual object that has given rise to such philosophical excursions. Thoburn's command of an extensive body of leftist philosophical writings, his intellectual subtlety in interpreting and deploying these, and his abundant fascination with a history of "Communist" print objects are not in doubt. But it seems the most bitter of ironies that a social movement born out of desire to improve the lives of society's most disadvantaged should, after a century and more of tortuous and torturing political history, have arrived at the point of celebrating baroquely self-involved artistic creations for the most coterie of audiences.

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Andrej Grubačić and Denis O'Hearn, *Living at the Edges of Capitalism: Adventures in Exile and Mutual Aid* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016). 336pp. Paperback \$29.95.

When I picked up this book, I immediately questioned what it means to "live at the edges of capitalism"—or, perhaps more importantly, what constitutes capitalism's "edges." As Grubačić and O'Hearn explain, these are spaces in which communities try to escape—or are forced out of—the capitalist world-system. In part because such groups are removed from the market economy, they rely heavily on communal mutual aid. Nevertheless, I remained skeptical; I had difficulty imagining groups that are entirely or almost entirely outside the world-capitalist system.

Grubačić and O'Hearn, however, share my skepticism. Throughout *Living at the Edges of Capitalism*, they argue that such communities remain inextricably