

**By Tom Woodin**

There has been a recent tendency to downplay the significance of the radicalism of the 1960s, not least among those in that age group who still feel estranged from the '1968 generation'. On one episode of the BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*, for example, judge Len Goodman repeated an expression I have heard many times, that 'I was born in the war,' followed by a poignant silence, a means of asserting continuity, even though the 1939-45 conflict had nurtured social change. In reality, we are still living with the complex implications of the explosive impact of the 1960s. The changes permeated social, political, economic and cultural forces, and, after the visible demonstrations against Vietnam and other issues died down, many radical ventures were seeded that would set down roots in the 1970s. One of these ventures was Centerprise, a voluntary association which engaged with working class communities in Hackney, London.

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Centerprise photographed by Sherlee Mitchell. © Sherlee Mitchell / Bishopsgate Institute[/caption]

Centerprise started working with young people and provided a safe space where they could play chess, write poetry, socialise, form bands and publish books. The impulse rapidly proliferated into welfare rights, childcare, adult literacy, community writing and publishing, a bookshop, coffee bar and meeting rooms, all under the one roof on Kingsland High Street in Hackney – a lime green building. Centerprise welcomed gardeners, Black power groups, Leninists, Conservative Party members who turned up their noses at workers as well as the 'scowling' left-wing groups who had their eyes on state power rather than community organising.

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Left; Centerprise drawn by Doffy Weir in the 1970s, © Doffy Weir / Bishopsgate Institute |  
Right; A meeting held in the unfinished coffee bar at 34 Dalston Lane, early 1970s. © Tom  
Wilson / Bishopsgate Institute[/caption]

In a book published in 2017, [\*The Lime Green Mystery: an Oral History of the Centerprise Co-operative\*](#), Rosa Schling has captured the feelings, emotions, experiences and dilemmas of the people who created this social experiment. The book takes the reader on a guided tour of the building, visiting rooms where many different activities and relationships were developed. The book is one outcome of the project [A Hackney Autobiography](#) run by [On the Record](#) and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Centerprise archive, including oral histories by On the Record trained volunteers, is now housed at the [Bishopsgate Institute; audio tours](#) bringing the archive to life are freely accessible online and on iTunes & Android apps; events and workshops have been held; and learning resources [developed](#).

Despite the thematic organisation, the book betrays a chronological trajectory familiar to voluntary groups. The early phase was characterised by an assortment of anarchic and charismatic individuals who campaigned and brought the thing into being, imbuing it with a vision and purpose. For co-founder [Margaret Gosley](#), one starting point was sitting in a bus shelter in Brighton with [Glenn Thompson](#), denouncing the wealthy and putting the world to rights. The towering figure of Thompson cast a long shadow over Centerprise, importing ideas from the USA civil rights movement, not least the mix of coffee shop and bookshop. [Richard Gray](#), who went on to form the Peckham Publishing Project, was awe-struck on first meeting Thompson ‘his Afro... his Cuban heels, cool jeans and leather jacket... He was like I imagined Malcolm X or Stokely Carmichael...’ One commentator noted how leaders could emerge naturally at Centerprise, like one who ‘strode into Hackney much as his ancestors had gone off

into distant parts of the empire to bring the British way of life to the natives’ – reminiscent of ‘Barrington’ in the Robert Tressell’s *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. Despite a suspicion that some saw themselves as ‘intellectually superior’, over time, sympathetic relations developed and, for people such as the author [Roger Mills](#) who frequented Centerprise in the mid-1970s, it represented a university experience which nurtured a new way of thinking.

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Young customers of Centerprise outside the entrance, early 1980s. © Wendy Pettifer / Bishopsgate Institute [/caption]

The powerful individuals of the initial phase gave way to a collective working pattern in the second which fostered a symbiotic relationship between self-help and campaigns for change. For instance, while a playgroup was organised along lines of parity with council services, Centerprise simultaneously agitated for better facilities elsewhere. Smalley Road Estate residents were supported in collating their experience of living in poorly built new flats, organising meetings, arranging technical surveys and publicising the results through the papers and TV. A sense of professionalism meant that Centerprise treated residents more like customers than clients, breaking out of a social services typology. There was also a strong vein of opposition to staff

becoming famous or gaining kudos from their work. [Janet Rees](#) was absolutely forbidden from appearing on TV in relation to her work on the Smalley Road campaign. The resistance to ‘personality politics’ echoed her Baptist childhood in Wales, ‘you work hard, you’re very self-effacing, you’re very modest, you put yourself to the back of the queue.’ Dedication to this quasi-religious cause was shown by workers putting in 70 hour weeks, which nurtured a form of hermetic living that took its toll on personal relationships while giving rise to new ones. Rees recalled that ‘We were just always there. It was like joining a monastic order, except that you could still have sex...’ As a collective, Centerprise was inevitably torn between prioritising the needs of the wider community and those of staff working in the collective. Working relations were to prefigure broader social change, yet the politicisation of everyday life, which allowed people to raise important issues, could be warring when acrimony and scapegoating infused meetings. The impulse to include everyone also became testing in dealing with the glue-sniffers and other difficult characters who made Centerprise their home.

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Centerprise coffee bar, 1980s. © Maggie Hewitt / Bishopsgate Institute[/caption]

Crucially, Centerprise championed the democratisation of history and literacy, which built upon the early work of the [History Workshop movement](#). Researching worker writers and community publishers, I found Centerprise to be one of the most significant examples in Britain and internationally. The Hackney Reading Centre, which ran from the mid-1970s to the 1990s in a room at the top of the Centerprise building, organised adult literacy classes with a focus on writing and publishing about student experience. The learner’s experience helped to locate them as expert and stimulated many debates with tutors and workers. It paralleled the impressive work of the publishing project that promoted local writers in a wide range of publications. The scale and scope of publishing required a lot of investment but emerged out of a desire to represent sympathetically and promote the lives of local people - the ‘irrepressible beauty’ in Vivian

Usherwood's poems, the still vibrant poetry of Hugh Boatswain or the autobiographical work of Ron Barnes and others.

Alongside widespread debates over the representation of class, race, gender, disability and sexuality, simple but poignant memories relate to the smells, sights and feel of participating in this cultural democracy. As the magic of printing became available for popular consumption, recalling the paper and the whiff of glue evoked the magic of creation arising from a physical process: 'I remember Letraset type. I seem to remember it involved some type of carbon paper impression on it and paper being churned through a roller. I remember the pasting up of the artwork was done with little bits of paper and glue. I remember the smell of it' (Neil Littman). Taste was also a cue to conjure up the characters who worked in the café, especially when staff roles were rotated which meant that mediocre cooks exchanged places with skilled ones – red snapper roti and jerk chicken on the good days, less appetising fayre on others.

In the early 1990s, following financial irregularities, the collective arrangements ceased and a manager was appointed. Centerprise activity was also re-directed to serving the black community more explicitly. This is an aspect of the history into which this book does not really delve in great depth and it creates the feeling that there was more than one Centerprise. The project is now closed, a loss which coincides with a period of greatly rising inequality and social cleansing. Centerprise was a space where new relationships, identities and practices were constructed. The Lime Green mystery repopulates this rich history on the page. It remains a resource for thinking about the future.

Rosa Schling's [\*The Lime Green Mystery: an Oral History of the Centerprise Co-operative\*](#) was published in 2017 by On the Record.

[Tom Woodin](#) is a reader in the social history of education at the [UCL Institute of Education](#). He has written about history of education and the co-operative movement and, most recently, is the author of [\*Working-class writing and publishing in the late twentieth century: literature, culture and community\*](#), Manchester University Press, 2018. He also writes about the co-operative movement and the history of education and co-edits the journal [\*History of Education\*](#).