

Review of 'Protest on the Page: Essays on Print and the Culture of Dissent Since 1865'

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ABSTRACT: Review of Baughman, James L., Ratner-Rosenhagen, Jennifer and Danky, James P., eds. *Protest on the Page: Essays on Print and the Culture of Dissent Since 1865*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015.

Keywords: protest, dissent



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I was braced not to like this book. I'm not the biggest academic nonfiction reader, and being the kind of person who counts female-sounding names in tables of contents and finding *Protest on the Page* deficient on that score (as far as I can tell: five women including an editor who didn't contribute any writing to the book, one person who didn't use pronouns in that person's bio, and eight men including the other two editors who both have essays in the book). Full disclosure: I presented at the conference from which these essays are derived and could have proposed my presentation for a chapter, but I found the call for papers¹ daunting. (Turn my mostly visual presentation into 25 pages of text and *maybe* be accepted?)

Readers outside the US will wish the title of the volume was more clear that the essays address US print history almost exclusively. Gender and US-centricism critiques aside, many of the essays in *Protest on the Page* were smart and stimulating. It starts off with co-editor James P. Danky's preface, who, before and since his retirement from the Wisconsin Historical Society, has been an extraordinary alternative press practitioner *and* scholar. The Protest on the Page conference was populated by library practitioners and scholars from a range of disciplines including but not limited to English, Hispanic literature, history, journalism, library and information science, religion, sociology and women, gender, and sexuality studies.

The book is organized into three sections: Revolt and Reaction, Consensus Contested, and Dangerous Print. Revolt examines carpetbaggers in the southern United States, anarchist printmaker Carlo Abate, Spanish-language anarchist periodicals in the U.S., and American Communist Party Black liberation pamphlets.

Andrew D. Hoyt's chapter *The Inky Protest of an Anarchist Printmaker* is notable for its exploration of 'artisanal economies.' Through the work of sculptor Carlo Abate, Hoyt explores the beginnings of labor versus technology issues in the late nineteenth century. He links technical innovation with illness with the use of pneumatic drills leading directly to lung disease among stone carvers. However, the primary thrust of Hoyt's chapter is the qualities that defined the art in the 500 or so anarchist newspapers published in the US in fifty years on either side of the turn of the twentieth century. He notes that approximately a fifth of the papers were in Italian. The meat of the chapter is Hoyt's analysis of the art in these newspapers—whether and how they were signed and how the style, for example deliberate crudeness, was meant to draw attention to the artist's hand, thereby emphasizing the artist's identity and subjectivity.

The final chapter in the section, *Pamphlets of Self-Determination: Dissident Literature*,

1 "Everyone who presented unpublished work is invited to submit a 20-25 page formal paper, including full documentation, to printculture@slis.wisc.edu. These drafts should reflect the comments and suggestions heard at the conference. The editors will read and make decisions over the following months and will select papers by April 15, 2013. Accepted authors should expect to do 2-3 additional revisions as the editors indicate."

Productive Fiction by Trevor Joy Sangrey, is the first contribution by someone who doesn't appear to use he/him/his pronouns. Sangrey, whose pronoun choice isn't identified, is also the first to include much about women on the page. The chapter is largely about how small press social movement literature was part of a 1930s African-American 'enlightenment.' Attention is paid specifically to the work of Black women organizers in the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). There is also exploration of CPUSA pamphlet propaganda in general, and its effectiveness as an organizing tool. Sangrey claims that "Bridging the gap between books and newspapers, pamphlets offered a more thorough discussion of complex issues and ideas but in an accessible format."

The Consensus Contested section opens with a chapter contributed by a metadata librarian (Emilie Hardman) and a sociologist (Laura J. Miller) on vegetarian cookbooks (including cook zines) from the nineteenth century to the present, so you can imagine how a vegan zine librarian and cataloger might feel about it. *By the Pinch and the Pound: Less and More Protest in American Vegetarian Cookbooks from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* examines the implicit and sometimes explicit politics in these texts that communicate "a moral vision of how day-to-day life should be conducted." The often male-authored 19th century cookbooks they examine are so focused on telling women how to live, recipes are deemphasized. 20th century cookbooks model the lifestyle changes they want to see. There is a section called 'The Rise of Vegan Cookbooks and Zines' that provides a brief history of veganism (term coined in 1944) in the U.S. Miller and Hardman note that in the late 20th century, in addition to illustrations, cookbooks and cooking zines also provide playlists and consider how feminism inform the writing and tone, including those authored by men. They did their homework on zine libraries, referencing ZineWiki.com and the Papercut Zine Library in Boston.

Cookbooks are followed by more books as conduct-of-life propaganda in Daniel Vaca's chapter *Meeting the Modernistic Tide: the Book as Evangelical Battleground in the 1940s*. You know that 'Books Are Weapons in the War of Ideas' image radical libraries use sometimes in our own propaganda? It was a logo for the Council on Books in Wartime that produced and distributed books to soldiers fighting in World War II. The council had a Religious Books Committee that sought books to provide cultural and religious uplift to American boys "on the battlefield and on the home front." Vaca, a religious studies professor, briefly mentions the American Library Association's rejection of an evangelical group's supplement for ALA's booklist, but greater analysis would have been welcome to librarian readers. There is a section called 'Commercializing Protest' in which the activists are the evangelicals, who use contests and awards as marketing for their cause.

The final section of the book is Dangerous Print, in which the chapters are about 1960-80s underground and alternative press. Joyce Latham's *Off/On Our Backs: the Feminist Press in the 'Sex Wars' of the 1980s* provides a strong finish to the collection by contrasting the east

coast *off our backs* (1970-2008) with the west coast *On Our Backs* (1984-2006). The latter was founded in response to the infamous pornography throw-down at the [Barnard College Scholar and Feminist Conference in 1982](#). One of the most interesting tidbits Latham reveals is that the lesbian publishers of the sexy sex-positive *On* had a hard time getting their magazine printed and insured. Women-owned presses and bookstores were afraid of being seen as promoting pornography. It was finally the gay men's publishing industry that helped *On* get off the ground.

I gave my criticisms in my introduction to this review, so I'll end by saying how much I enjoyed reading this book. I did skim a few reference-choked chapters by Ph.D students, and I do wish the book had more race and gender diversity among its contributors, but all in all it expanded my knowledge and thought on the US alternative press.