

The Party Is Over

In the autumn of 1981, Pluto Press, the most successful of the new breed of radical book publishers which emerged in Britain in the 1970s, held a party in a North London nightclub to celebrate '10 Years in the Red'. The mood of the party was upbeat and stylish; its message was that the new decade would be the time when the radical book trade came 'out of the ghetto' and into the mainstream of the British book business. Pluto, with their new list of diaries and cookbooks, instant books by journalists on topical events, and cooperation with mass-market publishers like Pan with *The State of the World Atlas*, intended to lead the way.

Five years on, it all looks very different. Instead of expansion, several of the then most promising radical publishers and bookshops have collapsed; others have contracted. Pluto themselves are now in the hands of the receivers. The party is well and truly over.

For each individual radical publisher or bookseller that has gone under, there is a straightforward explanation, usually connected, as in Pluto's case, with trying to expand with too little capital: the classic dilemma of small successful firms in a market economy. What is more difficult to explain is why one of the great achievements of the Left in the 1970s, the creation of the most extensive network of radical publishers and booksellers since the late 1930s, now seems like some misplaced dream.

It is too easy to blame all this on a downturn in the overall book trade, for there have been downturns before, particularly in the late 1970s when radical firms did well. Too simple, also, to attribute it to seven years of Thatcherism: there is often an increase in the demand for radical literature in times of recession or under Tory governments.

What many of us involved in the radical book business in the 1970s misunderstood was that that decade was a very

unusual one for publishing and bookselling.

In bookselling, there was an absence of lively city-centre bookshops which could market and sell books on the new social issues of the time: feminism, ecology and nuclear power, political action outside the traditional parties. In publishing, there were few commercial firms adventurous enough to recognise a demand for something in between the conventional hardback and the mass-market paperback, what became known as the 'trade' paperback. For a few years in the mid-1970s, the new radical publishers and booksellers had an audience which was not being reached by anyone else, the college-educated, radically-inclined middle class.

When the new chain bookstores started emerging in the early 1980s, they quickly became known as more efficient places to buy radical books than most radical bookshops. When the amalgamations which took place in British publishing in the 1970s produced new 'trade' paperback imprints, the result was a stream of radical texts often cheaper than their equivalents from radical publishers.

The parts of the 1970s' radical book trade that have survived are those which chose to specialise in particular topics and make one part of the radical book market their own, publishers like the feminist presses, Comedia, Gay Men's Press (GMP), Zed (on the Third World); booksellers like Central Books and Bookmarks with clear party allegiances or Compendium with 'contemporary' books.

Those parts of the radical trade who, like Pluto, tried to use their 1970s success to continue to operate across the range could not compete. Because it had been relatively easy to sell radical books in the 1970s with little commercial competition, they had not developed the hard business skills to survive. •

David Berry