
Special issue: *Radical Periodicals*

Article

Reading the Radical American Periodical

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Abstract

This special issue probes our definitions and understandings of both the 'radical' and the 'American' in North American print and periodical culture. As many of the subsequent papers demonstrate, notions of radicalism as expressed in American periodicals often necessitate(d) looking beyond the nation state. Similarly, this issue highlights the fluidity of 'radicalism' as a temporal and technological concept; relatable not only to literary content, but also to graphic design, editorial control, foreign language use, subscription policies, and other aspects of production, dissemination and reception. Thematically and conceptually diverse, the articles collated here provide a judicious intervention into the developing field of periodical studies.

Keywords: American print culture; radicalism; State of the Field; periodical studies; American periodicals

It is now a little over a decade since Sean Latham and Robert Scholes pointed to the emergence of ‘periodical studies’ as a discrete field of scholarship within the humanities and social sciences.¹ While organisations and outlets such as the Research Society for American Periodicals and the *Victorian Periodicals Review* long predate their 2006 article in *PMLA*, Latham and Scholes argued that the convergence of different intellectual and technological trends in recent decades has contributed to the blossoming of a new scholarly discipline.² The paralleling ‘explosion’ in periodical research, the emergence of new outlets such as the *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* and the continued growth of more venerable outlets such as *American Periodicals*, would appear to substantiate such claims.³ Intersecting with the larger field of print culture, ‘periodical studies’ has provided scholars with new challenges and bold solutions to existing paradigms for the study of American history, literature, visual culture and media studies. Alongside the ‘cultural turn’ in academia, much of this growth has been fed by the development of digital technologies and digital archives, which have pushed us to reconsider periodicals not merely as containers of information about history, but as texts ‘requiring new methodologies and new types of collaborative investigation’.⁴

Yet even as the newfound accessibility of periodicals has helped to transform the field, scholars have noted that the proliferation of digital archives and research technologies carries mixed blessings.⁵ The process of periodical digitisation has not been wholly democratic, with large collections hidden behind paywalls or reserved for those working within the ivory tower of the ‘academy’. Another concern has been the ways in which digitisation can serve to reinforce a scholarly focus towards or reliance on a relative narrow subset of periodicals – often nationally-syndicated and widely circulated newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, or regional papers oriented towards the tastes of middle and upper-class white communities. Digitisation has provided invaluable access to marginalised forms of American print but has arguably prompted a ‘return to the centre’ for scholars of periodicals. In an era of archival plenty, accessibility risks trumping intellectual curiosity about dissident or oppositional periodicals, with their ‘distinctive, radical, and sometimes unruly ideas’.⁶

Self-identified or externally prescribed ‘radical’ periodicals – broadly defined here as outlets committed to ideas, concepts and content outside of the political or cultural mainstream – have often been short-lived, badly made, covertly disseminated and enthusiastically destroyed – factors that mean they do not readily lend themselves to archival accessibility.⁷ More broadly, the interests and ambitions of ‘radical’ periodicals were often at odds with mass circulation, one of the most reliable measures of periodical preservation. As Elizabeth Miller has argued, the editors of many anarchist periodicals produced during the late nineteenth century believed that ‘large-scale mass-oriented print was no way to bring about revolutionary social change’.⁸ Writing on the margins of accepted opinion, individuals and organisations have often been unwilling to broadcast their publishing endeavours and have hindered the efforts of researchers to unearth such information. In his 1963 survey of ‘Radical Periodicals in America’ for the *Yale University Library Gazette*, William Goldwater complained that his interest in the topic was regularly stymied by editors who denied involvement with ‘the very periodicals which list them as editors’.⁹

Despite, or perhaps because of, such challenges, the relationship between radicalism and American print and periodical culture has continued to attract the curiosity of many researchers. It was this connection that drew together a diverse band of scholars at the University of Sussex in May 2016 for a one-day symposium on ‘Radical America: Revolutionary, Dissident and Extremist Magazines’. The symposium, organised by the Network of American Periodical Studies, provided space for extended discussion into the production, dissemination and reception of ‘radical’ American periodicals from the late nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, addressing questions of archival access and inaccessibility, the impact of individual editors and periodicals, and the legacy of broader literary movements, networks, institutions, and communities.¹⁰ This special issue of *Radical Americas* marks a continuation of our discussions regarding these themes – on the experimental, dissident, objectionable, and otherwise marginal organs which often slip between the cracks of scholarly analysis, even as our interrogation of American periodicals and print culture continues to gather steam.

In different ways, the papers gathered here probe our definitions and understanding of both the ‘radical’ and the ‘American’. In keeping with the transnational turn in American Studies, the Network of

American Periodical Studies defines ‘America’ not on national but on continental terms.¹¹ As many of these papers demonstrate, notions of radicalism as expressed in American periodicals often necessitated expanding beyond the nation state. Similarly, this special issue highlights the fluidity of ‘radicalism’ as a temporal and technological concept. Within the context of periodical studies, we might apply our understanding of radicalism not merely to literary content, but also to graphic design, editorial control, foreign language use, subscription policies, and other aspects of production, dissemination and reception. It should not be a surprise to learn that periodicals may be readily identifiable as ‘radical’ outlets because of their racial or gender politics whilst simultaneously featuring deeply conservative editorial or production practices. While notions of radicalism and American print culture have often been equated with leftist periodicals, it is also important to recognise the impact of fascist, segregationist and extremist organs on the right.¹²

In his article on the *Cronaca Sovversiva*, Adam Quinn explores the connection between anarchism and American immigrant communities during the early decades of the twentieth century. Pushing back against the reductive characterisation of the *Sovversiva* by federal authorities as an outlet for dangerous anarchist thought, Quinn demonstrates how the periodical also played a less sensational but no less important role as a community interest paper. The result was an outlet that was both subversive and mundane, mixing potentially ‘explosive’ material with repetitive and seemingly ‘inert’ weekly listings, adverts and community news.

If fears of anarchism helped to frame the federal response to Eastern and Central European migration during the first decades of the twentieth century, then an overlapping but ideologically distinct anxiety regarding the ‘specter of socialism’ is at the heart of Rachel Schreiber’s analysis of *Four Lights*. As an ‘adventure in internationalism’ and an outlet for socialist feminism, *Four Lights* provides a critical insight into the transnational ambitions of many radical periodicals. Published for an initial print run of less than a year, *Four Lights* also illustrates the short shelf-life, but long half-life, of organs published outside of the periodical mainstream, providing an early model of intersectional feminist critique and anticipating the mass activism of American women’s peace organisations during the second half of the twentieth century.

We return to the subject of anarchism and immigrant newspapers in Morris Brodie’s analysis of Depression-era periodicals such as the Spanish language *Cultura Obrera*, the Italian *Il Martello*, the Russian *Delo Truda*, and the German/Yiddish *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*, one of the longest-running anarchist periodicals of the twentieth century. As Brodie demonstrates, anarchist periodicals published in America during the 1930s allowed radical activists and intellectuals to maintain diasporic connections and provide information about developments in the ‘old country’. However, the pressure to temper their political commentary was coupled with a growing realisation that English was the ‘language of the future’ both for immigrant communities and the anarchist movement in America.

If the 1930s provided fertile ground for the dissemination of anarchist periodicals, it also fostered a strand of conspiratorial anti-communism which provided the groundwork for the emergence of early Cold War conservative organisations such as the American Progress Foundation and its flagship periodical *American Progress*. In his incisive examination of the *Progress*, John Huntington uncovers the key role played by conservative periodicals in an era of liberal dominance. For conservative activists such as Willie Stone, the *Progress* became an influential mouthpiece for anti-communism, conspiratorial anti-statism and libertarianism, overshadowed by more celebrated outlets such as William Buckley’s *National Review*, but arguably more prescient in anticipating the embrace of scandal and conspiracy theories by right-wing provocateurs and media outlets during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.¹³

Just as Huntington’s assessment of *American Progress* can be situated within a broader body of scholarship on the ‘conservative resurgence’ which has emerged over the past three decades, so too can E. James West’s exploration of ‘Black Power Print’ be placed within the rapidly growing field of ‘Black Power Studies’. Focusing on the cover artwork and graphic design of a new wave of ‘Black Power’ periodicals which emerged during the 1960s, West demonstrates how the cover design of black magazines served to both reinforce and complicate their self-proclaimed importance as outlets for black nationalist and black radical thought. Connecting more obscure organs such as the *Liberator* and *Soulbook* to the iconic artwork of Emory Douglas and the *Black Panther*, the author pushes for a reconsideration of the relationship between black radicalism, graphic design and periodical studies.

In the final contribution to this special issue, Sinead McEaney complicates popular readings of the New Left in 1960s America by addressing systemic patterns of sexism and misogyny within the ‘underground press’. As McEaney argues here, the failure of periodicals such as the *Berkeley Barb* and the *San Francisco Oracle* to confront their regressive gender politics – even as they presented themselves as ‘radical’ organs for New Left activism – provides a critical window onto the broader failures of the decades interwoven countercultural movements. Addressing the limitations of the counterculture’s ‘radical imagination’, this article demonstrates how many New Left activists appeared willing to embrace mainstream gender norms, whilst simultaneously pushing back against ‘the man’ in other respects.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

¹ Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, ‘The Rise of Periodical Studies’, *PMLA* 121 (2006): 517–31.

² The Research Society of Victorian Periodicals was founded in 1968, while the Research Society for American Periodicals was founded in 1991.

³ Cynthia Lee Patterson, ‘Magazines as Historical Study Objects’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research*, ed. David Abrahamson and Marcia Prior-Miller (New York: Routledge, 2015), 66.

⁴ Latham and Scholes, ‘The Emergence of Periodical Studies as a Field’, 517–18.

⁵ Ryan Cordell, ‘What Has the Digital Meant to American Periodical Scholarship?’, *American Periodicals* 26 (2016): 2–7.

⁶ James Danky, quoted in James Baughman, ‘A Necessary Relation: Protest and American Print Culture’, in *Protest on the Page: Essays on Print and the Culture of Dissent Since 1865*, ed. James L. Baughman, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen and James P. Danky (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 6.

⁷ For a deeper discussion of periodical radicalism and radical print culture see James L. Baughman, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen and James P. Danky, ed., *Protest on the Page: Essays on Print and the Culture of Dissent Since 1865* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015); Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Ian Morris and Joanne Diaz, ed., *The Little Magazine in Contemporary America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Elliott Shore, Ken Fones-Wolf and James Danky, ed., *The German-American Radical Press: The Shaping of a Left Political Culture, 1850–1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Christopher Tinson, *Radical Intellect: Liberator Magazine and Black Activism in the 1960s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁸ Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 2.

⁹ William Goldwater, ‘Radical Periodicals in America, 1890–1950’, *The Yale University Library Gazette* 37 (1963): 133.

¹⁰ Victoria Bazin and Sue Currell, ‘Radical America: Revolutionary, Dissident and Extremist Magazines’, *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 7 (2016): 163–66.

¹¹ ‘About,’ *Network of American Periodical Studies*, accessed April 2, 2018, <https://periodicalstudies.wordpress.com/about>; Shelley Fisher Fishkin, ‘The Transnational Turn in American Studies’, *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 17–57; Ian Tyrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹² Baughman, ‘A Necessary Relation’, 6.

¹³ Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenlum, ‘The New Conspiracists’, *Dissent* 65 (2018): 51–60.

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