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## 'A Company that Runs on Tummy Waters'

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# ‘A Company that Runs on Tummy Waters’

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An activist business, by definition, prioritizes values over profit, but the market must play some role—however small—in the running of any business. Davis's comparative study of activist businesses in the US challenges the ‘widespread idea that the work of social movements and political dissent is by definition antithetical to all business and marketplace activity’ (4). In four chapters, each devoted to a different type of activist enterprise (Black-owned bookstores, head shops, feminist businesses and natural food stores), Davis shows how activist enterprises performed ‘political outreach’ and drew more people into their movements by offering free and safe spaces where marginalized groups could meet and political values were

promoted. For feminist businesses, this meant the provision of women-only spaces, from bookstores to bars where women could 'go for a drink alone without being harassed by men' (129). The first second-wave feminist bookstore, A Woman's Place, which opened in Oakland in 1970, was characterized by one member as 'really a Women's Centre disguised as a bookstore' (145). But the 'political outreach' of feminist enterprise also extended far beyond their business premises, thanks to the extraordinary reach of initiatives such as Liberation Enterprises, a mail order business founded in 1972 which built a mailing list of more than 10,000 feminists by 1973; the feminist directory *The New Woman's Survival Catalog*, which made it to the *New York Times* bestseller list and sold more than 100,000 copies; and the women's health guide *Our Bodies Ourselves* by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, which sold more than 225,000 copies (151–2). These networks and publications, which engendered more lasting change, were facilitated by the spaces of safety activist businesses could provide.

Feminist businesses were the most successful, in Davis's assessment, at blending idealism with commerce, in part because of their commitment to collective organization which sought to flatten hierarchies and restructure labour relations. However despite their high ideological standards, feminist entrepreneurship was the subject of significant—and at times furious—dissent within the women's movement. Parts of the movement rejected feminist business as a form of 'cultural feminism' which replicated male forms of oppression and failed to confront gender inequality. Defenders of feminist business argued that women were oppressed by their economic dependence on men and that financial independence would further the cause of women's liberation. Labour relations were often the focus of conflict within the movement. The establishment of a 'national headquarters for feminist business' in downtown Detroit by the Feminist Economic Network (FEN) in 1976 which aimed to 'sow [...] the seeds of feminist economic revolution' was met with anger from critics who accused FEN of exploiting their female workers, many of whom were Black and working-class (129–30). These internal dissensions generated what Davis describes as 'the richest and most deeply probing analyses of enterprise by any other social movement in those years', and much feminist writing on business ethics and the intersections of sex and class-based oppression (132). Coletta Reid, writing in *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* in 1974, argued that feminist businesses which gave their workers real control over the organization and paid them decent wages contributed to women's economic independence and challenged exploitative capitalist structures (153). The difficulty lay in translating the ideal of anti-capitalist labour relations into practice.

While the deep recession and anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s saw both the movement and feminist businesses go into decline, their hard-won successes endure. Women entrepreneurs, for example, were hugely successful in the 1980s despite rarely identifying as feminist themselves. Davis traces the same pattern across activist businesses in general: 'although most activist businesses did not survive the 1970s, many of their ideas did' (234). The language of liberation and social change, progressive products and the absorption of the counterculture have been embraced (and co-opted) by countless corporations since. Davis's rich and wide-ranging study brings the legacy of activist businesses of the 1960s and 1970s to light and shows how these businesses expanded the remit of enterprise in North America.

There is also a long history of feminist business in Britain. Thomas and Garrett's *Suffrage and the Arts* makes an important contribution to this history by focusing on the visual culture generated by the suffrage campaign and the extensive network of artistic businesses that supported the movement. 'Artists and suffrage groups', Garrett and Thomas write in their introduction, 'were among the first to fully exploit newly available publicity methods, such as adverts and posters, alongside the growth of an inexpensive and vibrant print culture, to create a political propaganda campaign unprecedented in its vitality' (1-2). The eventual enfranchisement of women in 1928 testifies to the enormous success of the propaganda campaign which suffragist businesses helped to build. Records of suffragist businesses have too often been lost due to the small scale and short lifespan of such businesses, but *Suffrage and the Arts* unearths some of this lost history, with essays on the Suffrage Atelier, Agnes Garrett's and Emmeline Pankhurst's interior design businesses, the array of businesses which advertised in the women's press, and the makers and sellers of English suffrage badges and other suffrage merchandise. As such, these essays bring much-needed recognition to the network of designers and makers who 'spread the message of the campaign to larger audiences' (3).

The political outreach performed by suffrage businesses came in many different forms, and the suffrage market played a significant role in promoting the suffrage cause. Elizabeth Crawford shows how the suffrage press enabled some small businesses to combine politics with commerce. Most of the businesses that advertised in the suffrage press were 'suffrage neutral' but there were some who were more explicit in their support and advertised goods that were intended to appeal to a suffrage market, such as dresses in the colours, 'Christabel' and 'Emmeline' shopping bags and suffragette jewellery (118). These commodities were themselves a form of propaganda, as a woman dressed 'in the colours' was an effective advertisement for the campaign. Some advertisers, such as Clara Strong, a milliner,

appealed to potential customers' commitment to women's financial independence: 'Have a new hat ... Help other women to keep their employment' (126). An essay on suffrage badges, by Kenneth Florey, discusses at greater length the ways in which suffrage merchandise and commodities helped to support the cause. Badges in particular played a central role in the marketing of the suffrage campaign, operating as a form of political propaganda which recruited supporters to the cause and gave suffragists a sense of identity and solidarity, although they could also expose the wearer to unwanted attention and even physical violence. Affordability was key to the badges' success – celluloid pins, sold for a penny each, were something 'even a shop girl could afford' (141). 'When worn by many women', Florey concludes, 'they helped to foster the message that the movement was large and powerful' (151). In terms of providing spaces where suffragists could safely meet, Liz Arthur's chapter shows how the artistic, social and suffrage networks of the Glasgow School of Art, which provided space for the production of suffragist propaganda materials, trained women students and enabled them to start their own small businesses, was in turn closely associated with Kate Cranston's chain of Glasgow tea rooms (artists from the School designed their avant-garde interiors), which were used as meeting places for Scottish women's activism and networking.

The collection also explores how suffrage women's professional status influenced their political commitments and vice versa – an early chapter in the story of gendered labour relations. Thomas's opening essay on the institutional conservatism of the Women's Guild of Arts and Miranda Garrett's essay on Agnes Garrett's and Emmeline Pankhurst's interior design businesses consider how the struggle for professional status – at a time when there were very few professional opportunities available to women – could either undermine or be harnessed in service of the suffrage movement. For many of those artists who belonged to the Women's Guild of Arts, as Thomas shows, professional aspiration and individual ambition came before political commitment, and those women who did participate in suffrage activities risked the viability of their own businesses. On the other hand, Miranda Garrett identifies a productively symbiotic relationship between Garrett's and Pankhurst's professional and political careers. Their women-run businesses demonstrated that women could be professionally successful and 'added considerable weight to their arguments for women's suffrage'; and in turn their businesses were shaped by their political commitments to egalitarianism and inclusivity, exemplified in their affordable pricing and employment of women workers (93). What is more, by using their own homes both as venues for pro-suffrage meetings and as showrooms for their interior design businesses, Garrett and Pankhurst simultaneously advanced the interests of their businesses and of

the movement. As Pankhurst became more militant in her politics, she neglected her business, but this commercial failure was far outweighed by her political success.

The question of how suffrage enterprise reshaped labour relations is most present in Tara Morton's chapter, which focusses on the Suffrage Atelier (SA), an arts and craft society formed in 1909 that had an 'overtly politically feminist approach' and was unique in that it functioned 'both as a commercial and a political arts and crafts enterprise' (68–9). The SA produced posters, postcards and embroidered banners that became 'synonymous' with the suffrage campaign and provided a new space for debates around women's labour politics and alternatives to industrialization. A commitment to class inclusiveness was evident in the SA's practices of low costs, accessibility, payment and training including evening classes. As Morton writes, 'in paying its artists, the SA acknowledged them as "workers" who needed to earn a wage irrespective of their status or class' and 'it also encouraged those who could not otherwise afford the time to participate in feminist politics' (77). Yet despite its aspirations, the SA's success was mixed: it appears to have been mainly made up of middle-class women and was described by one supporter as the 'worst sweated labour' they had ever known (79). As Miranda Garrett acknowledges in her chapter, incomplete archival records make it difficult to discover who did work, and for what wages, for suffrage businesses; but it is clear that the aspiration to train and employ women, especially working-class women, shaped the practice of suffrage enterprise. The rich collection of essays in *Suffrage and the Arts* suggests many avenues for further research as well as providing a foundation for studies of more recent feminist businesses in Britain.

In their introduction to *Re-reading Spare Rib*, Angela Smith and Sheila Quaid identify *Spare Rib*—one of the preeminent feminist businesses of the 1970s and 1980s—as part of a tradition of feminine and feminist publications that began with suffrage magazines such as *Votes for Women*. From its inception, *Spare Rib* set out to perform political outreach, transform labour relations and reimagine the role of the consumer. The 1972 *Spare Rib* manifesto stated its aim to 'reach all women', to establish a non-hierarchical structure and to involve its readers as active, rather than passive, consumers.<sup>1</sup> As Smith and Quaid observe, although *Spare Rib* did not enjoy as large a circulation as suffrage papers like *Votes for Women*, it played a key role in the dissemination and development of second-wave feminism; it catalysed the establishment of other feminist enterprises such as Virago Press; its first editors went on to have successful careers based on their reputation as founding editors of *Spare Rib*; and despite conflicts within the movement that dogged the magazine from

1 The *Spare Rib* Manifesto (1972) can be viewed here: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/facsimile-of-spare-rib-manifesto>

the very beginning (a group of gay liberationists crashed the launch party to accuse the editorial team of ‘selling out to the bourgeois’, 16), *Spare Rib* had a twenty-year run—significantly longer than most activist businesses. The British Library’s digitization of the magazine’s entire run in 2015 extended its reach to another generation of feminist activists and scholars, and the *Spare Rib* digital map visualizes the geographical breadth of the magazine’s network across the UK and Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

Due to its focus on *re-reading*, Smith and Quaid’s edited collection gives greater emphasis to collective consumption than collective production.<sup>3</sup> Smith and Quaid acknowledge the ‘underlying theme of consumption’ that runs through women’s magazines but point out that their pages also offered women a political arena, nodding towards a feminist politics of consumption that scholars such as Joanna Hollows have discussed at greater length (11).<sup>4</sup> One former reader describes the very act of buying *Spare Rib* as a ‘kind of statement’ (27): feminist politics blended with the act of consumption. Victoria Bazin explores the relationship between commodity and consumer in greater depth in her chapter “‘A New Kind of Trade’: Advertising Feminism in *Spare Rib*’, which focuses on how the magazine’s rejection of its most profitable source of revenue, advertisements, reimagined the role of the consumer. Bazin treats *Spare Rib*’s advertisements as ‘evidence of feminism’s encounter with consumer culture’ and a site of paradox: *Spare Rib* aimed ‘to offer women an alternative to the commodified forms of femininity offered by mass market magazines’ but was itself a commodity (198). *Spare Rib*’s advertisements did what all advertisements do—hail, and hence define, the consumer—but they also invoked the agency of the feminist subject as a consequence of their placement alongside explicitly feminist content. Advertisements for vibrators, for example, stood in ‘dialogic relation’ to the many articles on sexual liberation and reproductive rights (204). Active consumer engagement was solicited, and readers were invited to send in sexist advertisements they encountered in other print media to *Spare Rib*’s ‘Sellout’ or ‘Tooth & Nail’ feature. Through her reading of *Spare Rib*’s paratext, Bazin arrives at the important insight that the magazine mediated the act of consumption by fostering readers’ critical and reflexive faculties to better enable them to negotiate the ‘productive paradox of feminist consumption’ (198). In so doing, *Spare Rib*’s very business model worked to combat an objectifying and sexist media culture.

Bazin’s analysis of the ‘restless, contingent’ feminisms in circulation within *Spare Rib*’s pages touches on an important but often overlooked aspect of these activist businesses—that they are organizations laden with affect. Lennie Goodings’s *A Bite of the Apple* brings the affective aspects of running a feminist business, in this case the feminist publishing house

2 The *Spare Rib* digital archive has now been taken down as a consequence of changes in copyright law following Britain’s exit from the EU but the *Spare Rib* map with many other related resources can still be accessed here: <https://www.bl.uk/spare-rib/map>

3 Lucy Delap discusses *Spare Rib*’s business model and its labour relations at some length in her article in this issue: ‘Feminist Business Praxis and *Spare Rib* Magazine’.

4 See Joanna Hollows (2013), ‘*Spare Rib*, Second-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Consumption’, *Feminist Media Studies* 13:2, pp. 268–87.



Virago, to the fore. Halfway through her 'part history part memoir', Goodings quotes an investor who, having been told how publishing decisions were made, characterized Virago as 'a company that runs on tummy waters', invoking an intuitive 'gut feminism' that lies at the heart of this feminist business (x, 128). Goodings is very candid, too, about the pragmatism of Virago's business model, emphasizing that Virago is a 'proud feminist business which makes a profit in order to publish' (53). That tension, between feminist belief and pragmatic business sense, is the tension, as Goodings describes it, within which Virago lives. *A Bite of the Apple's* often granular account of the inner workings of a feminist business tells that the effort to blend idealism with commerce was far from easy, but the very fact of Virago's continued existence demonstrates the great strides taken towards its founding aim: to change the publishing market and make space for writing by women.

Political outreach, once again, is integral to Virago's business model. Goodings recounts how Virago began with the 'same mainstream mission' as its sister business, *Spare Rib*, to reach 'ALL women' and to 'bring women's issues and stories into the mainstream' (12–13). The first chapter ends with Goodings's memory of reading her first *Spare Rib* magazine at the top of a house in Tufnell Park, in a demonstration of the deeply intertwined beginnings of these two quite different feminist businesses. Although in many ways a traditional business which 'has almost always made a profit', Goodings stresses that profit-making was never Virago's main aim (45). For the Virago model of feminist business, profit enables the production of feminist literature. As Goodings wrote in her 'stiff, earnest' application letter sent to Carmen Callil, then Virago's Managing Director, in 1978: 'Even though your [Callil's] group adopts an alternative approach to publishing, it must sell its goods in the traditional market place' (5). Callil wrote back to correct Goodings's impression that Virago was a cooperative ('we operate in a normal business way') and to arrange an initial meeting. Selling feminist goods, however, was a risky business. The Virago editors frequently found themselves facing accusations that they marketed feminism at public events. Goodings admits her own anger and frustration in the face of such criticism, writing that 'I wanted to say back to them: how many people have you reached? How many lives have you touched?' (52). Affective response and somatic experience is always close to the surface of Goodings's account, whether it takes the form of crying in the loo 'when it all got too much', the 'hot distress' of being confronted with the whiteness of feminist publishing, heated disagreements on the future of the company, or leaky breasts at the Booker Prize.

When Goodings began working for Virago on a part-time basis, she was also working for a radical printing co-operative, Writers and Readers, and

Virago's business model—strict, hierarchical, 'supremely organised'—stands in high contrast to Gooding's experience of working for the structureless and somewhat chaotic cooperative (33). Virago's extremely well-ordered business model was however underscored with affect. To work for Virago was to identify deeply with the Virago mission and to be deeply invested—both emotionally and financially—in your job. As Alexandra Pringle puts it, 'we were like family', and when disagreements did occur they were amplified by these political, emotional and financial investments. Goodings rightly calls out the sexist media treatment of Virago's internal disputes but it is clear that labour relations—as with so many activist businesses—were often strained. Virago has had a varied business history, with periods of independence interspersed with takeovers by larger companies. Takeovers resulted in layoffs, and buy outs involved difficult salary negotiations which sharpened divisions between management and staff (128). Goodings writes that the redundancies made her 'feel ill', but, recalling her time at the Writers and Readers Cooperative, reflects that cooperative models of working are not necessarily any fairer than traditional, hierarchical models (181).

In the 1990s, during its second period of independence, bookselling struggles and the demise of the women's movement hit Virago hard. As Goodings observes, a downturn for Virago—a carrier of the mantle of feminist business—threatened not only the end of a publishing business, but the end of feminist enterprise itself. In 1995, after much agonizing on the part of its editors, Virago became an imprint of Little, Brown which seemed to Goodings to be 'the ideal situation: a continuation of idealistic publishing backed by the might of a conglomerate' (189). At the very end of *A Bite of the Apple*, Goodings reiterates that 'wanting to reach out ... has been at the heart of Virago from the start' (59). Despite the remission of the women's movement, Virago's pragmatic brand of feminism ensured that it survived to carry the torch of feminist business from the twentieth century into the twenty-first.<sup>5</sup>

*See Red Women's Workshop: Feminist Posters 1974-1990* provides another first-hand, visual account of the running of a very different feminist business—one which worked as collective, and never made a profit. Read alongside *Suffrage and the Arts*, it is clear that the forebears of See Red Women's Workshop were the suffrage art guilds such as the Suffrage Atelier. See Red produced visual propaganda for the British women's movement in the form of an extraordinary series of posters and other visual material which are reprinted in this volume. In her foreword, Sheila Rowbotham writes that the work of See Red was far more ambitious than 'selling a product or even getting over a party political message ... they aimed to convey ideas about a transformed society' (ix). The history

5 For a lengthier discussion of Virago's business culture, see D-M Withers (2019), 'Enterprising Women: Independence, Finance and Virago Press, c.1976-93', *Twentieth-Century British History*, pp. 1-24.

of the workshop itself is written collaboratively by former See Red members Jess Baines, Anne Robinson, Susan Mackie and Prue Stevenson in the same collective spirit which shaped their work in the 1970s and 1980s (a list of members and contributors plus selected biographies are included as an appendix). Reacting against male-dominated art schools and the cult of the individual artist, See Red chose to work as a collective (much like *Spare Rib*, with whom they had a close relationship), despite the challenges this entailed.<sup>6</sup>

The primary way in which See Red advanced the work of their movement was through the production of visual propaganda. The workshop made use of innovative methods, from silkscreen printing to stencils and photography, to convey often complex ideas (one poster was captioned 'Capitalism relies on domestic labour') in a punchy, informative format. The collective describe the posters they produced as more than just social commentary—they were activist products intended to 'generate a response and demand action' (7). *See Red Women's Workshop* reproduces some early typewritten notes which set out See Red's aims and organization in more detail, and pose questions around distribution and publicity such as: 'How can we reach more women?' (9). If their posters were not 'accessible to all', See Red writes, 'they were not serving their purpose', in an echo of the founding aims of *Spare Rib* and Virago Press (11). See Red's account makes it clear that a network of feminist businesses existed in the 1970s and 1980s—See Red would advertise in *Spare Rib* or *Outwrite*, other radical printing groups would print See Red's catalogue, ideas for captions or posters would be drawn from publications such as *Spare Rib*, women's centres would place orders with See Red, and in times of trouble, funds would be raised for See Red through the movement press. These businesses not only supported one another, but shared the same political principles, aims and vision. The publication of *See Red Women's Workshop* by another small business, independent arts publisher Four Corners Books, with its beautiful reproductions of the original posters, extends its reach beyond the 1980s and into the present day.

*See Red* provides a fascinating if brief account of the realities of managing a collective. The workshop kept a collective diary but administering a group of part-time workers was complicated and time consuming. Staying abreast of developments in the movement to keep their messaging relevant was another challenge. The main difficulty See Red faced, as with many activist businesses, was financial. Even when sales and commissions generated enough income to keep See Red solvent, they were unable to pay wages to collective members (all had part time jobs) and received no funding until 1982. As with so many activist businesses, being unable to properly remunerate workers meant excluding those who could not

6 Lucy Delap and Zoe Strimpel, 'Spare Rib and the Print culture of Women's Liberation' in Laurel Forster (ed.) *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Contemporary Britain*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

afford to accept low wages or juggle part time jobs. Working conditions, too, were difficult. For the first few years the collective moved between unheated, tumbledown premises and had limited equipment either for printing or to protect themselves from the hazardous fumes emitted by printing inks. In 1982, grant funding enabled See Red to set themselves up as a cooperative, buy equipment and pay wages for the first time, but the funding only lasted for three years. After four years of trying to be self-sufficient the workshop closed at around the same time as other feminist enterprises from the 1970s such as Sisterwrite and *Spare Rib*. See Red, in their own account, 'survived so long despite the sometimes heated political and other disagreements because of the overriding commitment to the collective, its work and to each other' (22). As with Virago, affect was the element that both forged and split apart the labour relations of this feminist business, held together by passionate political commitment but riven by disagreements that derived from the same.

These publications significantly extend existing scholarship on twentieth-century feminist businesses in terms of theory (Davis), history (*Suffrage and the Arts*), criticism (*Re-reading Spare Rib*), and first-hand testimony (Goodings and See Red), and open up multiple areas for further research. Taken together, they suggest that the most successful activist businesses are not those which are the most profitable, but those which do the most to advance their movement, either through political outreach or propaganda, the transformation of labour relations, or by reimagining the role of the consumer.

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