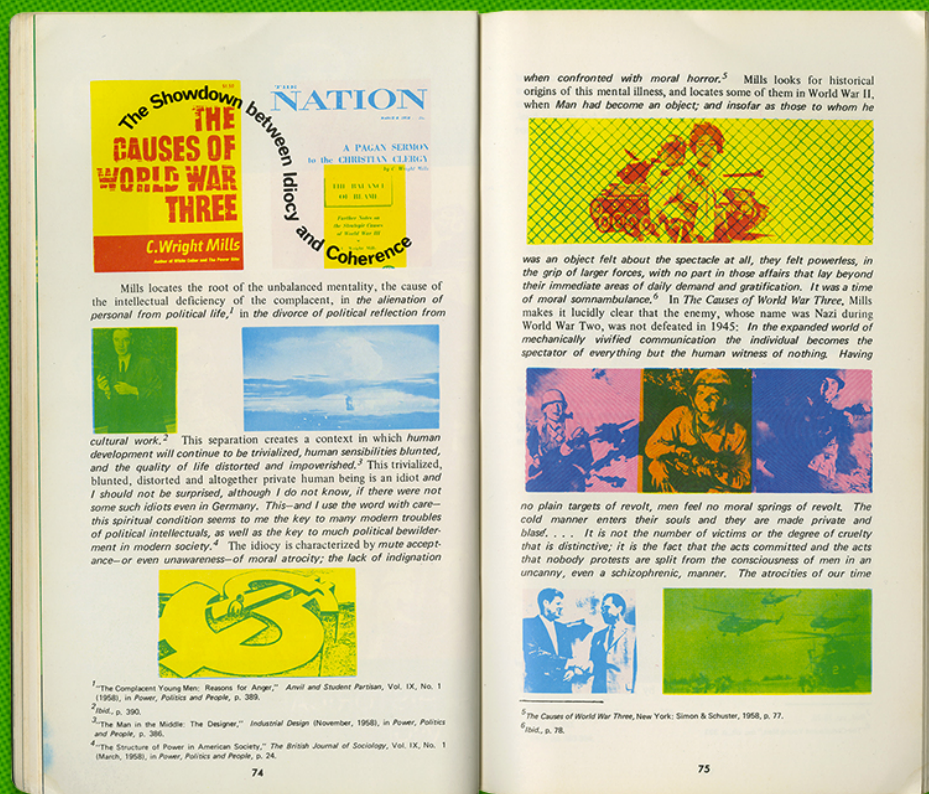


The Detroit Printing Co-op Showed the Revolutionary Potential of Design

The prolific producer of leftist literature worked to define a different relationship to wage labor, materials, and politics

Words by
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Published on
February 5th, 2020



printer union. Back in Detroit, another group located a space on the ground floor of an industrial building on Michigan Avenue. Darkroom equipment and supplies were procured, comrades came out to install electrical wiring, and within a matter of weeks, the Detroit Printing Co-op was up and running.

The Detroit Printing Co-op was the site of production for tens of thousands of leftist books, pamphlets, and posters from 1970 to 1980. There, the acts of writing about and debating politics were folded into the activities of page layout, typesetting, printing, binding, and trimming. It drew a wide range of people from across the city, most of whom were involved in movement politics, and printed some of the most important leftist literature of the 1970s—including the first English translation of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, the Black Star publication *The Political Thought of James Forman*, the poetry magazine *riverrun*, and five years’ worth of issues of *Radical America*, the journal of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). All books published by the radical left press Black & Red were printed at the Co-op while it was open.

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The people who printed at the Co-op were mostly self-taught. None had formal training in “the graphic arts” or considered themselves graphic designers. Participants were, first and foremost, motivated by a desire for political and social change. Yet, many of the publications printed at the Co-op exude raw enthusiasm for the craft of printing, attention to graphic detail, and a playfulness with respect to the tools and materials they were using. Members of the Co-op didn’t relate to the idea of graphic design or print production as wage labor, or a step in their career development, but as a craft with revolutionary potential.

workplaces, or fighting to form unions where they don't exist. When we join together to work independently, the questions that arise most often revolve around how these relationships are defined. In that way, the history of The Detroit Printing Co-op demonstrates a different relationship to wage labor, materials, machines, each other, and the larger political landscape that understandably resonates today.



02 Interior spread of Manual for Revolutionary Leaders, co-authored by Fredy Perlman

from working in New York in the early 1930s, where he was largely self-taught. He was also a prolific writer—he had a PhD in economics and published countless essays, novels, and articles on topics ranging from Marxist analysis to anarcho-primitivism. These were most often published by Black & Red, the press he founded with his wife Lorraine, and *Fifth Estate*, an anarchist newspaper in Detroit. Lorraine was a professional violinist, and did much of the typesetting work for their books.

In the early years of the Co-op, Fredy experimented with overprinting, collage, typography, and elaborate color separations. Lorraine Perlman would later write that during this period, “Fredy was exhilarated by all aspects of the new activity... he frequently asserted that never before had he felt so intellectually stimulated as he was by the challenges and gratifications he found in mastering the graphic arts equipment and techniques.”



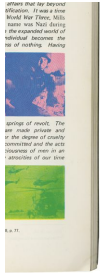
03 Lorraine and Fredy Perlman

After the Perlmans and friends set up shop, the group came up with a set of guidelines for the Co-op. They considered the equipment to be “social property”—not owned or controlled by any person or group. The purpose of the Co-op was to be a site where participants could engage in printing without facing the threat of censorship—which, at the time, was a real problem for activists on the left—and they could labor free from exploitation. Anyone who printed at the Co-op worked of their own free will.

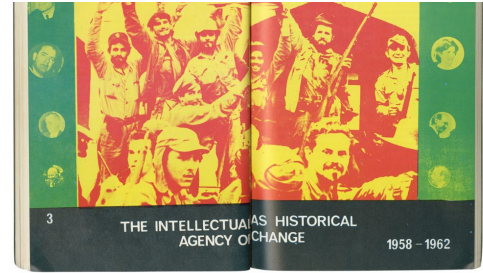
Most of the Co-op users joined the [IWW](#) (the International Workers of the World), and they registered the Co-op as a union print shop. Fredy Perlman created a union label (or ‘bug’) that they printed on all documents that came out of the Co-op. The bug signaled, through no uncertain terms (“Abolish the wage system! Abolish the state!”) that publications printed in this space were created through union labor, and that it was different from a typical union shop. The Co-op was a collective effort of people who came together free from exploitation by the wage system. The terms of their relationships to one another were, in a way, embodied in the bug that appeared on all the materials they printed.

By focusing on the Detroit Printing Co-op as a *site* of production, rather than focusing on one individual, it is possible to bring attention to work that might otherwise be overlooked. The history of American graphic design tends to favor work made by designers with long and prolific careers, who are part of a lineage of other known practitioners—they were taught or trained by them, or worked alongside them. As a result, fewer minorities, women, self-taught, or working-class designers are represented in the graphic design canon. Furthermore, historical surveys tend to favor the final work—the “design object”—more than the process of production or the relationship of makers to one another. The self-organization of the Co-op is one of its most interesting aspects.

At the Detroit Printing Co-op, one regular user was Judy Campbell, who several times turned to printing after having experienced a personal setback or trauma, such as getting fired from her job, or experiencing an assault. Another regular user was Carl Smith, who sought to set up a Black-owned press in Detroit that would service the movement community. Smith was a member of the [League of Revolutionary Black Workers](#) and one of the few people at the Co-op who did have professional



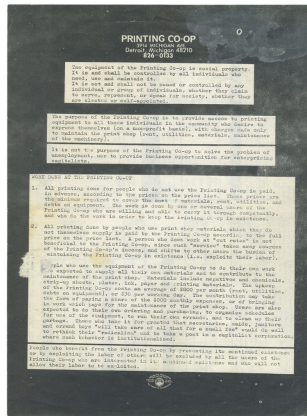
04 **Manual for Revolutionary Leaders**, co-authored by Fredy Perlman



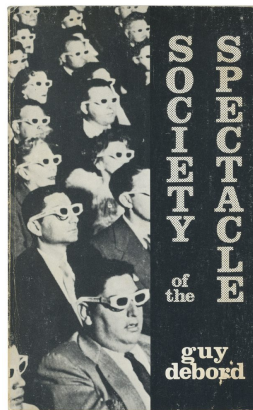
05 **A spread from Incoherence of the Intellectual** by Fredy Perlman

Fredy Perlman was the most active printer at the Co-op. He co-authored and printed *Manual for Revolutionary Leaders*, a book rich with collages and a section where each paragraph begins with a drop cap in blackletter over a duotone portrait of a so-called “revolutionary leader” (Perlman thought of the term as an oxymoron, arguing that true revolution would be leaderless). He also authored and printed the exuberant *Incoherence of the Intellectual*, with multi-colored uncaptioned images on every page, elaborate chapter title pages, and section subtitles set on a curve.

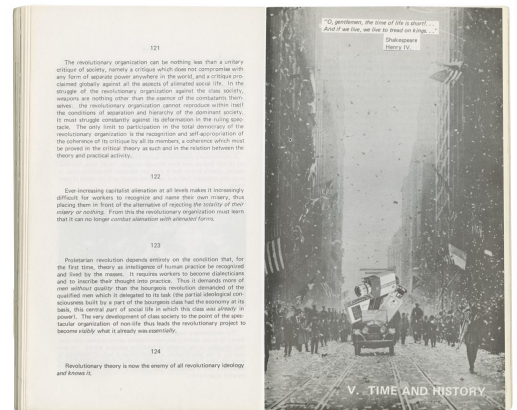
One of the earliest and best-known publications printed at the Co-op was the first English translation of Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*. It had just come out in French in 1967. A group of six friends, including the Perlmans and Campbell, met every day to translate the text. The French language edition has no images at all; it’s laid out with wide margins and follows classical typographic conventions. The English-language edition, which would be published by Black & Red, is full of photographs that the group found to be resonant with Debord’s text. They used images without permission or attention to copyright law, and without consulting with Debord. Many of them came from the Detroit Public Library Image Collection, still located on the third floor of the Main Branch in Detroit. Within a collection of file cabinets, dozens of folders contain photographs and images cut out of magazines categorized by type



11 The rules of The Detroit Printing Co-op



08 The first English translation of Guy Debord's The Society of the Spectacle, published by Black



09 Interior spread of Guy Debord's The Society of the Spectacle,

Over the years, hundreds of people passed through the Co-op. Typesetting and printing were truly collective activities—people would work side by side, engage in debate, and read each other's writings. For those who printed at the Co-op, it had a tremendous impact on shaping their politics and their approach to craft. Though it was not a huge operation, it would have an outsized influence—materials printed at the Co-op found their way to people across the world.

The Co-op closed in 1980 when they lost the lease to their space. By that time, censorship was no longer a pressing issue for leftists, and Fredy and Lorraine Perlman were the only ones regularly using the space. Fredy wrote several books after the Co-op closed and before he died of a heart condition in 1985, at age 50. Lorraine still lives in the Detroit area and works with a commercial printer to keep Black & Red books in print.