BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by Chuck D’Adamo

Bob Ostertag has written a brief history of the relationship between the independent press and five social or political movements in the United States. The movements concerned the abolition of the slavery of people of African descent, women’s suffrage, gay and lesbian liberation, the GI movement within the broader anti-Vietnam War movement, and the environmental movement. Throughout Ostertag skillfully interweaves the use of primary documents and secondary sources.

Ostertag’s guiding premise in his survey of the periodicals is that “words matter, but only when something is done with them.” Thus, he reviews the work of publishers and editors at the origins of these movements: David Walker’s Walker’s Appeal (founded in 1829), William Lloyd Garrison’s The Liberator (1830), Frederick Douglass’s The North Star (1847), Paulina Wright Davis’s Una (1853), Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony’s Revolution (1869), Henry Gerber’s Friendship and Freedom (1924), Edith Eyde’s Vice Versa (1947), Robert Mitch’s The Advocate (1967).

These founders and their periodicals helped expand within the U.S. liberal oligarchy (what mainstream political scientists call “liberal democracy”) the individual rights of blacks, women, gay men, and lesbians. The stories are often exciting with moments of danger, and in the case of the abolition of slavery not completed until the end of Civil War.

David Walker, a free black publishing from Boston, advocated that blacks north and south act for their rights, including the “right of slaves to rebel,” though his priority seemed to be education. Distributors of Walker’s Appeal, black and white, often sailors, were arrested in Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans. Shortly after distribution of the pamphlet began, the state of Louisiana enacted law that threatened life imprisonment or the death penalty on anyone who might “write, print, publish, or distribute any thing having a tendency to create discontent among the free coloured population of this state, or insubordination among the slaves.”

The work of Walker and other movement publishers expanded civil and political rights in the 19th and 20th centuries, though many of these struggles continue today, witness the conflicts over same-sex marriage. While Garrison, who was also involved in the American Anti-Slavery Society and once escaped lynching, stopped publishing The Liberator with the end of slavery, gay and feminist periodicals like The Advocate and Off Our Backs continue in their 40th and 37th years, respectively. And 142 years after emancipation, blacks still experience oppressive inequality even though the Civil War left more than 620,000 dead.
1970 was an important year in US history, one of many reasons being the enactment of the Environmental Protection Act, signed into law by Republican President Richard Nixon. Ostertag surveys the press of the environmental movement.

David Brower “re-founded” the Sierra Club Bulletin in the 1950s. Originally founded in 1893, the Bulletin was for decades an outdoors report and lobby media for wilderness conservation. Under Brower, the Bulletin emphasized popular mobilization as well as lobbying for legislation. Yet, the Sierra Club did not oppose nuclear power until 1974. Eventually, Brower left Sierra to found the Friends of the Earth and its periodical Not Man Apart, a more radical project.

Even more radical tactically was Earth First! and its tabloid of the same name. Founded in 1980, Earth First! advocated direct action, such as tree-spiking, rather than lobbying, to stop the logging industry’s deforestation. But, on the whole, the environmental press like its movement focuses on reforms doable within the U.S. liberal oligarchic regime even as environmental catastrophe looms. Ostertag is critical of this press, writing: “while researching this chapter, I was actually put to sleep reading through them.” The articles bored him even as they gave him nightmares about future devastation.

The year 1970, in May, was also the year of the general strike of more than four million students in protest of the Vietnam War. Related to the anti-war movement was the development of the “underground press.”

In 1967, Andy Stapp began publishing The Bond with the mission to help organize GIs into a union – the American Servicemen’s Union. Stapp was found with anti-war literature while stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He fought a court-martial to publicize his position on the war.

Jeff Sharlet, a veteran, used a Woodrow Wilson scholarship to found Vietnam GI in 1968. This paper’s audience was GIs in Vietnam; its writers active soldiers and veterans. Careful distribution networks were developed to get the tabloid to Vietnam. In its pages, a retired brigadier-general even advocated mutiny. By 1972, 245 GI anti-war periodicals were publishing according to the U.S. Department of Defense.

The distribution of these publications, like that of Walker’s Appeal, entailed risk. Andy Stapp served 45 days hard labor in 1967. Wade Carson was sentenced six months for “intention” to distribute. Bruce Petersen got eight years hard labor at Leavenworth. More dangerous was Vietnam. And the GI movement made it dangerous for U.S. officers in the field. From 1969 to 1972 between 550 and 1,000 fraggings occurred, mostly by grenades. These were radical times and Ostertag brings to life the seriousness of the GI movement’s “underground press.”

The excitement of much of the book’s narrative dies down, and not because of the bedtime reading of the environmental press. There is no conclusion. Instead, there is “A Note from the Independent Press Association” written by its executive director. This indicates the major
weakness of Ostertag’s book: it was an expansion of a report commissioned by the IPA, a nonprofit organization. (Note: the reviewer served on IPA’s board 1999-2001).

Ostertag writes that he did not seek to be comprehensive. Still, a chapter on the origins of the labor movement press would have enhanced the work, especially with coverage of its related socialist press, including anarchist and communist. James Weinstein’s research found 323 socialist newspapers and magazines published in 1912.

Nowhere does Ostertag define what is a social movement. And is there a difference between a “people’s movement” (in the book’s title) and a “social movement?”

Sociologists have developed two general orientations to analyzing social movements: resource-mobilization paradigms (for example, Charles Tilly) and identity-oriented paradigms (for example, Alain Touraine). True, Ostertag is writing as a historian; however, some definition would have helped. Without it, it remains unclear why these particular movements.

Ostertag argues that he choose the abolitionist, suffrage, gay/lesbian, environmental, and GI movements because they allow of a “broad mix of issues of class, race, gender, and age” with specific goals. And he writes that “the book will end with the emergence of the Internet, which in some ways signals the end of the era of the social movement [press].” Yet, to not survey the labor movement press means Ostertag is weak on class, and he never does discuss the emergence of the Internet.

With the Internet, Ostertag could have reviewed the development of the Independent Media Center movement in Seattle in 1999. What has developed is a global network of volunteer journalists –150 centers and counting. While sometimes uneven in content, Indymedia is connected to the movement against global capital and has given birth to a number of print newspapers, including the excellent *Indypendent* in New York City.

In his introduction, Ostertag mentions the “conventional left” newspaper *In These Times*. But this “conventional” paper had unconventional origins. Its 1976 founder, James Weinstein, was a founder of the New Left journal *Socialist Revolution* in 1970 and its predecessor *Studies on the Left* in 1959, and in the early 1950s was trailed by FBI agents. There’s an interesting thread of history with these periodicals, and others with origins in the New Left, such as *The Black Scholar* and *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. The editors and writers for these publications were intellectuals with activist orientations who sought to develop broader structural analysis of the political-economic and socio-cultural conditions in which movement activists worked for social change – radical change, not only the expansion of liberal rights and the passing of reform laws.

Ostertag’s book, while often engaging and informative, falls short. It lacks comprehensiveness; it lacks clear definition. A chapter on the labor and socialist press was needed – a conclusion acknowledged by the author when suggesting ideas for further research. Nonetheless, *People's Movements, People's Press* is recommended for public, college, and university libraries.