
Review

Anti-book. On the art and politics of radical publishing

Nicholas Thoburn

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, xiii + 372 pp.,
ISBN: 9780816621965

Contemporary Political Theory (2017). doi:10.1057/s41296-017-0170-7

Written in an epoch marked by a growing sense of anxiety regarding the future of the book, Nicholas Thoburn's *Anti-Book. On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing* offers us a critical re-examination of what the book is – hence, the prefix ‘anti’ in the title of this elegantly designed and forcefully argued book. The ‘anti’ prefix, however, does not betray a discontent with books generally, but rather with (1) a specific category of books that the author associates with the capitalist mode of production, as well as with (2) an understanding of ‘print culture’ as an agent of standardization, dissemination, and fixity that had a significant influence over the historical development of modernity itself. The former position can be traced back to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1993), with its famous distinction between three fundamental dimensions in our understanding of the book: any book, so goes their argument, encapsulates a modern, self-enclosed, totalising image of the world (the book as a ‘root-book’), a modernist fragmented and decentred image of the world (the book as a ‘fascicular root-book’), and a post-modernist interrogation of the very separation between the book and the world it is supposed to represent (the book as a ‘rhizome-book’). The latter position follows Adrian Johns' *The Nature of the Book* (1998), which was partly construed as a rebuttal of Elizabeth L. Eisenstadt's argument for the material form of print as a positive agent of modernisation: the technical forms of printing are not inherently fixed and stable; rather, Johns shows, fixity and stability are continuously and precariously produced through them.

Equipped with these two fundamental insights, and oriented towards the goal of reaching an expanded understanding of the materiality of communist textual expression, Thoburn turns his attention to a number of publishing experiments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as concrete instances of ‘anti-books’, i.e. works of writing and publishing that critically interrogate their media form. These experiments all originate in the material culture of communist writing and publishing and include the self-published pamphlet in the early years of the Russian



Revolution (Chapter 2), the political book (Chapter 3), anonymous writings (Chapter 4), magazines (Chapter 5), and political myth as it is constructed in the writing practices of Wu Ming, a Chinese collective author of a vast corpus of political texts (Chapter 6). The figures and plates that accompany the text are helpful as the text is at times dense and jargon-heavy; in general, however, Thoburn does a terrific job in conveying what are arguably very complex ideas in a simple, accessible manner. Where Thoburn fails less well is in providing us with a truly original exploration of the book.

As noted, the basic theoretical framework is Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille plateaux*. This was first published in 1980 at the peak of postmodern turn. A sensation at the time, *Mille plateaux* was relatively ignored in the Anglo-Saxon world until well into the 1990s. Pivotal in this change was its translation into English in 1993 by the University of Minnesota Press, the same publisher of *Anti-Book*. Once available in English, however, reading *A Thousand Plateaus* rapidly became an unavoidable rite of passage for every English-speaking practitioner in the human and social sciences with a post-structuralist or post-modernist disposition. The upside of this, of course, is that *A Thousand Plateaus* is by now a well-trodden terrain, whose blind spots have long been exposed and whose contributions have been explored to a large extent. This is, in other words, the challenge before Thoburn's *Anti-Book*: How to make use of a well-rehearsed theoretical framework as to say something genuinely new and original about a set of publishing experiments, which themselves have for the most part been the object of intense scholarly scrutiny already?

Let me try to answer this question by focusing on the case of political books Thoburn addresses in Chapter 3. To begin with, let us recall that anti-books distinguish themselves by pushing to the limit their materiality, i.e. the physical properties and technological affordances, signifying strategies, graphical composition, and sensory qualities, all of which take place within publishing paradigms, linguistic structures and economic practices of production and consumption (pp. 1–2). This, of course, suggests a distinction between books that do not interrogate their own materiality and anti-books, which do just that. In Chapter 3, we are presented with the case of Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book*. Thoburn's discussion of the *Little Red Book* is essentially an attempt to show how it functioned as an anti-book. This includes a discussion of how the passional subjectivity of Mao Zedong – taken to be the principal content of the work – was embodied and performed, in its proximity to death; how the book also gained traction as a guide to practical morality; how its textual structure (quotations) enabled a pedagogical practice of reciting Mao's teachings in public gatherings; as well as its wider physical properties: its portability (designed to fit in the soldiers' breast pockets), vinyl-clad for protection against the elements, and its redness (connoting prosperity in the Chinese cultural system of signifiers); and how this played a central role in the monomania of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution and the political



violence and bloodbath it unleashed. Short and tensely argued, there is no recourse to new sources. Nor is there any suggestion of a new way of interpreting the work.

More to the point, while certainly alluring, Thoburn does not explain what makes the *Little Red Book* an anti-book. Or, indeed, whether all books are potentially anti-books (if only the necessary cultural work around them is performed). Or, to be more precise, whether the very distinction between a book and an anti-book is illusory. For, if the distinction depends on the questioning of a book's materiality, and not on some *specific aspect* of this materiality, then any book can be, in principle, questioned in such a way as to become an anti-book. This is surely what comes out of Thoburn's analysis of the *Little Red Book*. An intense and complex cultural work by an undetermined number of agents – from its author to the collective of agents involved in its production and dissemination, to the multitude of agents that used it for political ends – made the *Little Red Book* a pivotal instantiation of the Cultural Revolution. Yet this is but an extreme form of the exactly same process of cultural appropriation and construction that any book *qua* book can be subjected to. Any book can, in principle, have its materiality questioned. If this is true, then it follows that there is no real difference between books and anti-books.

At the root of this difficulty lies the theoretical framework and methodology employed to study the *Little Red Book*. The three dimensions suggested by Deleuze and Guattari are as provocative as they can be unproductive, for one can be led to forget the obvious: to explore the *Little Red Book* as a book, taking seriously its materiality and genealogy. Although I enjoyed reading Thoburn's quirky take on the *Little Red Book*, I believe his contribution would have been substantially more robust if he had made use of new archival materials, or suggested a new reading of its content. This would have given us a genuinely new understanding of the social and political role performed by that particular book in 1960s China. Ultimately, such a novel understanding would have impacted our interpretation of the Cultural Revolution (and Marxism) itself. As it is, it does not.

Anti-Book, in any case, makes a strong and valuable contribution to book studies. It invites readers to destabilize categories that we tend to take for granted. In this specific sense, *Anti-Book* is the last of an illustrious lineage of post-modernist books on books. But precisely for this reason it also leaves the reader with a sensation of *déjà vu*. Deconstruction is a crucial function of critical social inquiry. But it needs to be complemented with a positive, fuller examination of the materiality of the objects it proposes to analyse. This is why, in my view, the main contribution of *Anti-Book* lies less in its explorations of the rhizomatic dimension of the book – a primarily metaphysical speculative exercise – than in its discussions of books *qua* books. In a time when the future of the book has been made wide open, this is no small contribution.



References

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