

In 1969, as the microprocessor arrived and the first email was sent, the Rolling Stones played a free concert to a quarter of a million in London's Hyde Park. Half a mile away a group of self-proclaimed 'dropouts, layabouts, long hair, don't care[s]' were squatting the palatial 144 Piccadilly (since knocked down and replaced by the Inter Continental Hotel). They issued a crude, mimeographed missive:

'No! We don't give a fuck for labels an' lies. We're not sellin' any alibis we jus' wan' to live our lives, we can't wait until your old world sickens and dies. We are the writing on your wall.'

The last line, a perfect embodiment of their romantic nihilism, an unlikely appropriation of Daniel 5:1-31

This was the work of King Mob – formed variously from the remnants of the renegade English Section of the Situationist International and disaffected graduates of Newcastle School of Art schooled, in pop, politics and action respectively by British artist Richard Hamilton, the Dada artist John Heartfield and the New York, Lower East Side's 'street gang with analysis': 'Up Against the Wall Motherfucker.'

King Mob were responsible for a two year campaign of insurrectionist graffiti, pamphlets, posters and aggravated trespass across west London before drifting apart. Their most lasting legacy found in the 'obnoxious pop group' (conceived by one of their number and realised, some years later, by Malcolm McLaren, a one time acolyte) namely - The Sex Pistols.

Close to King Mob's lair in Notting Hill then lived poet, actor and activist, Christopher Logue. Logue had been one of the small coterie of expatriates responsible for the avant-garde, Parisian literary magazine Merlin in early 1950s. Through this Logue, alongside close friend Alexander Trocchi (and Nabokov, Beckett and Burroughs etc) became associated with Maurice Girodias' Olympia Press challenging government censorship with pornography and critics with their poetry and prose. Back in London and further politicised by the anti nuclear lobby (activity for which he was jailed after refusing to be bound over to keep the peace) Logue invented the poster poem (a medium long since hijacked with reactionary platitudes and digital manipulations of reality).

From the advance of mass literacy in the mid nineteenth century up until relatively recently people in Britain bought and read printed literature and cities hosted numerous cooperative print workshops and alternative bookshops. The Poster Workshop in Camden was one of many who took their cue from the legendary Atelier Populaire, at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, whose members plastered Paris with lithographed pop polemics in Mai '68. Staffed by three art school graduates, a Communist Party activist, an ex-merchant seaman and a pensioner the Poster Workshop produced screen printed posters overnight in a damp north London basement for strikes and associated benefits. They charged people what they were able to pay taking nothing for themselves. Clients included council tenants' associations, Dagenham car workers, anti-apartheid groups, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Trotskyite International Socialists, the Young Communists, anti-Vietnam War protestors, radical film and theatre companies and King Mob. They closed in 1970 as groups turned to the cleaner, more professional presses of Black Dwarf and The

Morning Star, amongst others.

From its inception in Europe in the Middle Ages print has been a particularly self righteous force for change. Many of the first books were bibles. Apparently sacred texts, hand copied for generations, were now (not quite) mass produced and, more controversially, translated. The power of the so-called 'word of god' was thus grabbed from the hands of feudal authority and passed into the hands of a new, intellectual elite and power shifted from the Mediterranean across Northern Europe with the Reformation. Printers consolidated their power and formed unions that were in Britain, in turn, formed from what were referred to as 'chapels'. In 1798 a group of 'organised workers' were accused of holding "a most abominable meeting for the purpose of a conspiracy." Their defender in court countered: 'My Lord they are Printers! They are dispensers of that glorious art which has rescued mankind from ignorance and slavery and conducted them to knowledge and freedom! The art that has snatched man from the degraded posture and condition of a brute animal and placed him upon his feet, erect and looking upon Heaven!'

Unions were to hold ultimate power from their employers with the ability to 'stop the presses' until 1986, when Rupert Murdoch, affronted by such indignity, transferred all production of his English newspapers overnight from London's Fleet Street to Wapping and sacked 6,000 striking workers. Weekly mass demonstrations continued outside 'Fortress Wapping' for 12 months. Protests became increasingly violent and were, ironically, subject to reporting restrictions as the Government sought to silence dissent and crush the power of the trade unions. The legacy is Murdoch's News Corporation with its inappropriately close relationships with successive governments and the police.

And now? Revolutionary change comes via digital channels, bounced off satellites – Twitter, Blackberry Messenger and Facebook 'walls'. Printers are no longer men with inky fingers but are plastic units that sit on our desks and spit out airline boarding cards, photographs, invoices and receipts. Two were also recently used as Trojan Horses - to house bombs, secreted on board cargo planes in Sana'a, Yemen by the Saudi jihadist, Khalid Ibrahim Ahmed al-Asiri.

Printing (alongside gun-powder, the compass, the clock and the mill) were identified by Karl Marx as being essential to bourgeois development. Technological advancement was according to Marx essential within a capitalist economy for the necessary increases in production needed to add to material wealth. And yet, he points out, the essential paradox of capitalism is that in doing so it simultaneously diminishes the value of that wealth. Advances in technology, he predicted, would thus eventually destroy the capitalist system. The Digital Revolution could finally have accelerated things to this tipping point – negligible economic growth accompanied by rising inflation - Mene, Mene, Tekel u-Pharsin. The writing is on your wall.

*Rob Tufnell, Curator - The Writing on Your Wall*