

Feminist Business Praxis and *Spare Rib* Magazine

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Feminist Business Praxis and *Spare Rib* Magazine

This article analyses the ‘business praxis’ of the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, one of UK feminism’s most enduring cultural institutions. It discusses the diverse ways *Spare Rib* sustained itself financially (or not), with reference to the role of advertising, distribution, revenue and wages. I explore how *Spare Rib* developed ethical approaches to business through supporting other women-led business endeavours and attempting to balance profitability with accountability to its readership and the wider women’s movement. The provision of grant funding by the Greater London Council transformed *Spare Rib*’s fortunes in the early 1980s, and demonstrates the ways in which the magazine operated in a market ecology comprising commercial, publicly-funded and philanthropic elements. Tracing the history of radical political movements as enterprises and employers expands the existing field of business history and connects it to the history of social movements. The concept of ‘business praxis’, extending across public, private and philanthropic sectors, helps nuance simplistic talk of ‘the market’ or ‘enterprise culture’ in late twentieth century Britain. It also expands social movement analysis, demonstrating that making money and creating employment were important though often controversial principles of radical activism.

Keywords: women’s liberation; feminism; publishing; feminist periodicals; Greater London Council; business history

In 1989, *Spare Rib* [SR] magazine published an exchange of letters between readers, on the validity of women’s pleasure, spending power, and the value of their labour. The magazine regularly featured adverts for feminist and women-run businesses, selling women-produced objects such as shoes, badges and jewellery, as well as feminist services such as women-only yoga, counselling and lesbian-friendly hotels. One of their regular advertisers was the Hen House, a Lincolnshire based women-only retreat. Under the heading ‘feminist elitism’, SR reader Kath Horner responded in fury to the cost of a

weekend at the Hen House. At £126, Horner argued, it was ‘insulting to women with little access to sufficient money’. She concluded: ‘It has taken a long time to get working class women onto the ‘feminist agenda’; places like the Hen House make me angry.’ (203, July 1989: 5).¹

This intervention raised issues of class injustice and exclusion that had long troubled *Spare Rib* and the wider British Women’s Liberation Movement [WLM]. Founded in 1972 with the intention of reaching the widest possible audience and competing with mass market women’s magazines that had circulations of hundreds of thousands, *Spare Rib* had initially adopted commercial strategies and prioritised economic viability. The editorial collective were willing, for example, to accept advertisements that had little relationship to their political goals. But by 1989, the magazine had changed substantially. It had abandoned mass market content such as recipes and dress designs and become a ‘movement periodical’ with an increasingly strong focus on anti-racism, internationalism and class struggle (Waters 2016; Hollows 2013; Forster 2015; Smith 2017). Some readers found this an excessively worthy or dreary prospect, and a charged debate resulted over SR’s values and content (Delap and Strimpel 2021). Thus it was no surprise that Kath Horner’s accusation of elitism sparked an exchange. The SR collective was contrite about the Hen House advert, and published a response to Horner’s letter that pleaded economic exigency:

We accept the criticism. We are constantly struggling with the contradictions of advertising. It is one of the few ways we can bring in some money to fund SR. Our policies already severely limit the adverts that we can accept. We ask advertisers,

¹ The National Archives historical currency converter

[<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/>] estimates that this translates to approximately £260 in 2017.

where possible, to provide sliding scales, and we try to ensure that the majority of the services and events we advertise are accessible to all women. (203, July 1989: 5)

But Hen House founder Rachel Lever did not agree. Her response was also printed, and she robustly defended the value of her service, and the validity of her business:

For about the same price as staying in a guest house or cheap hotel in a typical working class resort, the Hen House provides, for women only, the service, surroundings and comforts of a country house hotel. It does cost a bit more than the rock-bottom shoestring places the women's movement has known up to now. No-one donated the building and it carries a high mortgage.

Lever defended her need to 'pay proper wages to the women who help run the place.' She was also clear about the feminist value of providing 'a haven and retreat [...] to escape family chores, noise and pressures'. She was scathing about other retreats on offer to feminist activists, 'where women have to clean and cook and sleep in dormitories and the workers are not even paid. [...] There are precious few spaces and places for women. What purpose is served by attacking one of them? And is feminism really threatened by a place that offers women a bit of comfort and pleasure?' (203, July 1989: 5)

The Hen House exchange captured some longstanding dilemmas for the women's movement around the significance of money. Was it acceptable to use market mechanisms such as cost and demand to determine what was on offer within the movement? Should all services automatically be available to all women? Was it possible to run a 'feminist business'?

Spare Rib was published monthly for over two decades in a highly unstable economic environment. It was one of the most iconic and long-lasting achievements of the British women's movement. It was also, of course, a business and an employer. This

article surveys *Spare Rib*'s attempt to fuse economic success with political commitment and cultural visibility, in a formation that can be termed 'business praxis.' The idea of *praxis* captures activity that is oriented to concrete change rather than simply abstract interventions or reproduction of the status quo. In Aristotelian terms, it represents the 'moral disposition to act truly and rightly', allied to *phronesis*, practical wisdom, that leads to human well-being or flourishing. Praxis requires risk taking, judgement, creativity and dialogue, rather than rigid application of *a priori* ethics (Brown 2007: 1161-3). Usually associated with radical pedagogy, the qualities of praxis are useful to elucidate the realm of feminist business and its distinctive commitments. Feminist business *praxis* might be envisaged as a commitment to 'meaningful' economic activity: to respecting and balancing the needs of workers, owners and consumers, as well as those of wider society; to being guided (but not governed) by ideological and ethical commitments that intersect or conflict with profit; to transparency and monitoring of sourcing, decision-making and operations; and to responsible growth strategies.

In Britain, activists of the women's movement were reluctant to use the language of entrepreneurialism and enterprise, especially after the Margaret Thatcher's rhetoric linked these concepts firmly to the political right in the later 1970s and 1980s.² In 1989, *Spare Rib* was firmly in support of Kath Horner's call for inclusion, even if this threatened the viability of a business such as Hen House. But the SR collective had not always been so clear cut about the place of entrepreneurialism in the women's movement. Its founders and early collective members had been much more willing to embrace versions of 'business praxis'. Most did not want to make profits from their

² Earlier British traditions of 'ethical business' were available, including the longstanding cooperative movement, widely revived in the 1970s, as well as the emergency of 'community enterprise' in Scotland (Robertson 2013; Murray 2019).

politics, but they felt that making a living and taking financial responsibility could be a genuinely feminist politics.³

Ambivalence over questions of (making) money were echoed within the wider British women's liberation movement and radical politics. Eileen Cadman, Gail Chester and Agnes Pivot noted in their 1981 study of feminist print culture:

There is a certain distaste on the part of the radicals in Britain to indulge in [selling]. There are two factors that contribute to this reluctance. One is the moral ambivalence towards and theoretical confusion about the role of money – should socialists or feminists sully their fingers with this most capitalist and patriarchal of objects? Secondly, there's a certain middle-class snobbery towards commerce of any sort. (Cadman, Chester and Pivot 1981: 88, emphasis in the original)

The question of women's access to money had not been mentioned in the initial four WLM demands made in 1971, but at the 1974 National Women's Liberation Conference, participants added a fifth demand: for financial and legal independence for women. The fifth demand was frequently interpreted as referring to welfare benefits. Its supporters envisaged that the social democratic state, or the anticipated socialist state, would provide care and resources for women, rather than the market or entrepreneurialism.⁴

³ D-M Withers explores similar dynamics and praxis within the feminist music distribution project, Eurowild, heavily influenced by American feminist entrepreneurialism (Withers 2018)

⁴ Mary McIntosh elaborated that the fifth demand had been formulated with the means testing of wives in mind, prompted by the Anti-Cohabitation campaign that resisted means testing of couples. McIntosh, interviewed by Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project*, 2010-2013. British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C1420/11 © The British Library and The University of Sussex.

Similar ambivalence to enterprise was voiced in SR. When SR ran a double page spread in June 1985 titled ‘Every Man A Capitalist - What about every woman?’, it was women’s access to welfare benefits that was addressed (155, June 1985: 54-5). The magazine had occasionally published features which encouraged women to set up their own businesses, such as Linda Kinnaird’s guide to self-employment and taxation and Sue Reeve’s guide to setting up a cooperative.⁵ But its wider coverage of entrepreneurialism was negative, connecting it to pro-market and Thatcherite policies that did not seem to favour women. *Spare Rib* had been scathing about the 1977 Conservative Party Women’s Conference, terming it ‘a meeting of small capitalists.’ It also reported on the exploitation of wives’ unpaid labour by male small businessmen, and rarely portrayed women as business-people in their own right (60, July 77: 39; 96, July 1980: 10). Roisín Boyd, a collective member from 1980, summarised feminist attitudes of the time: ‘business was seen as Tory, if you were business you were right-wing.’⁶

British feminist attempts to combine profit and political goals were mostly small scale, and typically adopted a ‘not-for-profit’ mode. With the exception of the high-profile Virago Press, the idea of ‘feminist business’ as a means of achieving autonomy and economic sustainability was barely articulated.⁷ In contrast, the American women’s movement saw well developed debates about the validity of feminist business experiments. Drawing on the Black civil rights emphasis on economic autonomy as well

⁵ SR 165 April 1986 p. 57; 166 May 1986 p. 166.

⁶ Roisín Boyd, interviewed by Zoe Strimpel and Lucy Delap, 17-18 Dec 2018, *The Business of Women’s Words*, 2018-21, British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C1834/05, © The British Library.

⁷ For an exception, see Cholmeley (1991). On Virago, see Withers (2019).

as the wider American cultural ethic of entrepreneurialism, feminists in the United States were more willing than many of their socialist-leaning British counterparts to see revolutionary potential in market-oriented feminist businesses. There were numerous small-scale start-ups across the United States, offering women-produced goods, from books and records to sex accessories, as well as occasional ambitious projects such as the Feminist Economic Network (FEN) and its purchase of the Detroit Women's City Club in 1976 as a 'womanspace' to achieve 'economic self-sufficiency for the Feminist Movement' (Enke 2008; Davies 2017; Echols 1989; Loe 1999; Waters 2020).

These efforts in the United States were always contentious and prompted angry debates over whether working class and black women had access to business capital, and whether capitalism would inevitably co-opt feminist businesses. An article in the radical feminist periodical *Off Our Backs* pointed to the capacity of capitalism to absorb any kind of feminist innovation into its own profit-making. Business was apolitical, the authors claimed, and could have no engagement with the necessarily political terrain of feminism: 'What differentiates a 'feminist' business from any other business, male or female run, is largely a matter of advertising. [...] In practice there is no difference between 'feminist' business and any other kind of woman owned and/or run business. Products do not affect the nature of business as such.' Despite this pessimism, the authors were willing to concede that publishing houses and periodicals, despite their business-like operations, could not be categorised as "'feminist' businesses', because 'their primary function is not business (making money) but propaganda.' Books and magazines could be seen as part of the movement even for those firmly opposed to any combination of business and politics (Williams and Darby 1976).

Spare Rib's archival records reveals substantial thought and practical experimentation with the issue of how to maintain ethical profits in the feminist

magazine market. They also show the complex relationships feminists sustained to the state and other sources of grants. These funders carried risks of dependency and appropriation, as well as providing a lifeline. Their prevalence in late twentieth century Britain means that ‘the market’ spanned public and private sectors in ways rarely acknowledged by polemical debates at the time, or more recently by historians. Stephen Brooke has drawn our attention to the ‘affective ecology’ of political cultures in 1980s London, and Daisy Payling has similarly outlined Sheffield’s activist and local government ‘ecology’ (Brooke 2017; Payling 2014; Payling 2017).⁸ But this literature has yet to include the ways in which the private sector is also entangled in political cultures. The history of *Spare Rib* makes visible a ‘market ecology’ of politics, commerce, philanthropy and grant-giving. Tracing its contours elucidates the meaning of ethical enterprise in late twentieth century Britain and suggests its possibilities and limits in fusing activism and money-making.

Capital

Spare Rib had been launched in 1972 by two professional journalists, Marsha Rowe and Rosie Boycott, as a private limited company, Spare Ribs Ltd. They had raised an initial £2000 in capital from private sources, including borrowing from family, and issuing shares. The magazine had an account at a prestigious merchant banker, and their overdraft was guaranteed by Charles Lane, the wealthy brother of Rosie Parker, one of the early collective members. Roisín Boyd recalled that the original group included some ‘very very wealthy’ individuals: ‘And I’d never come across people like – I

⁸ See also Bazin and Waters (2016) on the ‘media ecologies’ of feminist periodicals.

couldn't believe it when I first went there. [...] it does change the dynamic.'⁹ From the outset, therefore, this was a business built on the resources available to upper middle class and well-educated women. An early appeal for funds described it unhesitatingly as 'a commercial venture by a group of young women who started it on their own.'¹⁰ Despite little experience in the magazine publishing business, Boycott, Rowe and their early collaborators set about founding the magazine in a professional manner, drawing up projections of income and costs. They opted to pay contributors what was then *The Guardian's* rate of £1.00 per hundred words. Their business forecasts of a range of outcomes reveal that they anticipated breaking even or making a small profit by May 31 1974.¹¹ Sales were premised on an anticipated market of readers who were not closely connected enough to the women's movement to read one of its existing periodicals, but who nonetheless had an interest in feminism. The SR manifesto, issued by its founders in 1972, promised to reach women who were 'isolated and unhappy', but to avoid 'pushing a strongly political line.'¹² Rowe described them in *Retail Newsagent* as 'married women aged 30 with 2 children' (cited in 180, July 1987: 39).

The manifesto also promised that the magazine would minimise hierarchy, though not in a doctrinaire fashion. Concerned by the inefficiencies of strict job rotation at other feminist ventures, the founders noted: '[We] do realise that certain

⁹ Roisín Boyd, interviewed by Zoe Strimpel and Lucy Delap, 17-18 Dec 2018, *The Business of Women's Words*, 2018-21, British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C1834/05 © The British Library.

¹⁰ Emily Liddell to Lena Jeger, July 4 1974, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), Feminist Archive South [henceforth FAS].

¹¹ Vernon Shaw to Rosie Boycott and Marsha Rowe, May 30 1972, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

¹² SR Manifesto, 1972, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/facsimile-of-spare-rib-manifesto>

functions need to be the responsibility of the person with that specific experience.’ They promised that SR would ‘operate on an exciting, alternative work basis,’ though what this might mean was left unspecified. The editors were committed to what Rosie Parker termed ‘regular ‘professional’ production, in reaction to the unreliability of alternative productions and also to prove women’s capability and efficiency.’ (84, July 1979: 6).

In practice, SR’s working environment was demanding. Work flow and attention to detail was difficult in the small offices SR initially took on Newburgh St, central London. When they moved to larger premises in Clerkenwell, the organisation of work remained ad hoc. In 1978, for example, the book-keeper, Linda Phillips, discovered that SR had been counting cheques twice in its income stream.¹³ The archives of the magazine are full of apologies for lost and late correspondence; handwritten editorial notes on contributions tried to establish their status and provenance. Collective member Ruthie Petrie wrote apologetically to one contributor in 1980, ‘[I] feel very conscious that our working processes at SR must look chaotic. And I’m afraid they are in some ways.’¹⁴

With few resources to draw on, SR’s publication schedule could be unpredictable. In 1975, the manager at SR’s distribution company, New English Library, wrote in frustration to collective member Rose Ades (who took responsibility for SR’s distribution and production) complaining about the distribution problems caused by sudden changes of publication date.¹⁵ Ades was relaxed about timing, noting earlier that ‘it’s not end of world to come out on 30 instead of 22’.¹⁶ But a reader’s letter

¹³ DM2123/1 Box 55 FAS.

¹⁴ Ruthie Petrie to Nina, May 19 1980, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 55](#), FAS.

¹⁵ Trevor D’Cruz to Rose Ades 11 Feb 1975, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

¹⁶ Ades, Dec 18 1974, SR Minute Book, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

from Cambridge testified to the impact the fluctuating publication date could have on sales. Liz Wilenitz reported with delight that WH Smiths in Cambridge sold as many copies of *Spare Rib* as *19* (a mass market women's weekly), and that feminist complaints had successfully got the magazine displayed under 'general interest' rather than with the other women's weeklies. However, she also reported that the sales manager 'says that in fact he could sell even more if he knew conclusively when the date of publication for 'Spare Rib' was going to be. It seems that many women think Smith's doesn't stock 'Spare Rib' anymore if copies of it aren't there at the same time as they were when they bought them previously.'¹⁷ Despite the intentions of professionalism and a wide appeal, uncertain distribution and stubbornly flat sales meant that the magazine became deeply indebted in its first 24 months.

Crisis

Under its early business plan, the magazine quickly ran into difficulties. Even with initial high circulation figures of 20,000, the operations of the first year had resulted in a £2000 overdraft. Sales dipped to less than 10,000.¹⁸ In May 1973, SR's bankers threatened the magazine with liquidation, and by 1974 the overall loss had built up to £11,000; £7500 was owed to the printer. Marsha Rowe was bullish, telling the collective that 'if it came to a legal battle, we must safeguard our business chances.'¹⁹ A significant donation of over £10,000 by a private individual kept the magazine afloat, also helped by reader-organised benefit gigs, discos and other donations. But the

¹⁷ Liz Wilenitz to SR, 21 March 1978 [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

¹⁸ 'SR's Financial History', undated, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

¹⁹ Rowe, Dec 20 1974, Minute Book [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

magazine's correspondence from this period is imbued with a panicked sense that closure might be just around the corner. Rowe's letters revealed her sense of being 'submerged under financial problems which only now look as though they may be resolved. It's been a miracle each time an issue actually hits the streets.'²⁰ The journal was forced to raise its cover price to 30 pence in June 1974. A double page feature explained to readers: 'Each copy costs 9p to print. Of the existing cover price of 20p we receive only 9 ½ p. That leaves ½p to cover everything else. No independent magazine like *Spare Rib* can survive when printing costs are more than one third of the cover price. At 30p our costs will be covered and the magazine will be on a realistic financial basis.' (24, June 1974: 24-5).

SR withdrew its commitment to paying its contributors in 1974, having built up substantial debts to them. The period of crisis stretched into 1975, and the journal's affairs were eventually stabilised by a switch of contracts for distribution, typesetting and printing. Early issues of SR were typeset by the 'alternative' community enterprises 'Bread n Roses' and 'Dark Moon', but using ideologically-aligned services became a luxury. Typesetting was brought in-house by the adoption of an IBM 'Selectric' golfball typewriter, a technology that had transformed the operations of the 'underground press' since its introduction in 1961. Switching printers also allowed for savings, and the magazine experimented with different paper types to find the most cost-effective. The print bill was rapidly increasing due to the sharply rising costs of paper caused by the oil crisis of 1973. SR's debts and cash flow crisis forced the magazine to turn to a cheaper Carlyle print firm, even though it clearly lacked feminist sympathies; they were reputed to consider SR as a magazine of 'lesbians and strident feminists who needed a

²⁰ Rowe to Merlin Stone, Sept 24 1973 [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

good fuck.’ (Gosling 1993: 36). But it was no longer viable to try to find a printer that shared SR’s values.

The costs of publishing, in terms of rent, postage and paper continued to make the magazine financially precarious, leading to attempts to rethink its ‘business plan’. The minutes from February 1975 show debate around a ‘new market publicity venture’ which centred on whether the magazine should be aimed at ‘organised instead of isolated women.’ The ‘isolated’ woman who was not a member of a women’s group was proving hard to reach; women in trades unions might be approached in a more cost-effective way by advertising in the journals of the labour movement. SR, it was hoped, might find a more stable readership amongst those who did not have ‘just personal interest.’ Could this include members of organisations such as the Women’s Institutes, asked a collective member? These likely conservative, non-political women were ‘irrelevant’, another concluded. The attempt to attract new readers showed up fault-lines around who feminism was for. In the end, there was no obvious change in targeted reader until the shift towards women of colour and the international women’s movement from the mid-1980s.²¹

Finances remained a continual source of worry throughout the journal’s life. Despite SR’s political commitment to the labour movement, for example, when the National Union of Journalists raised its membership dues in 1981, an SR collective member bluntly noted ‘“written to saying we can’t pay’. The collective did not disguise this from readers, and often published summaries of income and costs to illustrate their financial dilemmas. This transparency was an important element of SR’s business

²¹ 26 Feb 1975, April 16 1975, SR Minute Book, [DM2123/9/1/1](#), FAS. The archival records are scarcer for the latter years of *Spare Rib*; on the debates over race, see Thomlinson (2016a, 2016b).

praxis, even though the solutions elicited were often impractical. One more practical solution to the profitability crisis was to diversify into other kinds of sales. Perhaps unexpectedly for a monthly serial, SR proved to have a lasting sales appeal, with orders for back issues making up a substantial income stream. Rose Ades was horrified to learn that the distributors habitually destroyed unsold stock; she managed to save three pallets of magazines when SR changed distributor, and the magazine received large numbers of orders from readers who wanted to complete their run.²² Even as it was published, SR was treated less as a disposable magazine of its specific moment, and more as a ‘paper of record’ of the women’s movement.

Another means of making money came from the development of ‘sidelines’. An early venture involved sales of the ‘Easy Rider Baby Sling’, which was regularly advertised in SR, modelled by their own staff. Each sling brought SR £1.50 in profit, and in 1974 the collective hoped they might raise £300 annually by this means. They later branched out into production of their own items – tea towels (‘You start by sinking into his arms, and end with your arms in his sink’) and belts (‘Women will belt up no longer’), badges (‘Don’t Do it, Di!’), stickers, Christmas cards, and above all, the Spare Rib Diary. First issued in 1979 at £2, the diary became an important generator of income, and helped embed the SR ‘brand’ in the everyday life of readers. Co-published with Sheba Press and distributed by bookshops, it featured listings of feminist groups, cartoons and feminist inspirational quotes. The 1985 edition, costing £3, promised to tell ‘all about food’, and included a menstrual calendar. Those compiling the diary drew freely on what they saw as the collectively-produced cultural resources of feminism. But when they used lyrics from song-writer Sinead O’Connor, they were sued for

²² Rose to Trevor D’Cruz Feb 5 1975, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

breach of copyright by her record company. Sidelines provided a financial lifeline, but they forced the collective to take intellectual property claims more seriously, within a wider women's movement that had an ethic of sharing freely 'in sisterhood'.²³

Advertising

It was hard for sidelines to provide enough income to offset the major breach in the magazine's budget represented by the uncertain revenue from advertising. For magazine publishing, advertising was a crucial source of income. The profit forecasts for SR in 1972 assumed adverts would provide £800 a month. However, securing this revenue proved politically sensitive. In keeping with the British women's liberation movement, SR had always adopted a critical stance on the wider advertising industry. Their very first issue in July 1972 criticised advertising for the vaginal deodorant Femfresh, and subsequent issues collected readers' examples of how advertising objectified and sexualised women in a regular feature, 'Tooth and Nail' (Bazin in Smith 2017: 197–212.) 'Admen play on our neuroses about the way we look to others,' declared a typical letter to the magazine (13, July 1973: 3). But it seemed odd to readers that SR itself

²³ One reader wrote from Malaysia to congratulate SR on an article on Islam and proposed reprinting it locally. She cheerily asked, 'SR would not mind being pirated (just that article), does it?'. Y S Wang to Ruthie Petrie, Jan 24 1980, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS. SR was pulled up on its own pirating by an Australian contributor, Nadia Wheatley, who was surprised to find her writings reproduced in the SR poetry anthology, *Hard Feelings* (Women's Press, 1980) without her knowledge. Wheatley asked for royalties, though was willing to waive them if profits were going back into the magazine - a characteristic feminist ambivalence towards earning money. Wheatley to SR, Dec 5 1980, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

accepted adverts that apparently portrayed women as sex objects, and complaints were widely voiced. The editors decided to continue to accept objectional adverts, but to signal their political disagreement. An image of a topless model used by Epic Records in 1973, for example, was titled by the collective: 'This advert objectifies women' (9, March 1973).

In 1974, RCA Records took out a full page inside cover advert that showed musician Dana Gillespie advertising her debut album, *Weren't Born a Man*. She was dressed in suspenders, corset, and a feather boa. The collective justified running the advert to its readers: 'When we received the artwork, we were in the difficult position of having to decide whether to accept such a blatantly exploitative ad. So we rang Dana, but she said that she had chosen the outfit and the photograph.' (24, June 1974: 5) Respecting the choices made by women was weighed up against the sexual objectification of the image, and SR decided to accept the much-needed money. Readers were unimpressed. One asked 'please don't let finances bring your very high standard down.' She advised an appeal to readers to fund any deficit. Another suggested that when it published an 'openly, stupid, sexist advert', the magazine should include 'a notice saying how desperate you are for money and that you don't 'necessarily approve' of the content...' (28, Oct 1974: 3; 29, Nov 1974: 3). The most uncompromising readers felt this was a make or break issue: 'We understand that a commercially viable magazine needs to create advertising revenue, but we feel it would be better for Spare Rib to go bust — an honest failure, than for it to accept advertising of this kind.' (30, Dec 1976: 4)

Rose Ades explained to a supporter that while controversies over advertising were causing real damage to economic viability, feminist principles still governed SR policy: 'As far as advertising goes we have been forced to reject advertising for an

exerciser (we went to great lengths to suggest changes in the copy to make the ad. more suitable, less sexist, and agreed to pay for the changes, but the advertiser eventually could not be bothered) and so [we] feel that any real future in this field will come from 1. Feminist products, 2. General interest, slightly alternative products – as advertised in Time Out etc.’²⁴

Advertisers in SR’s fifth anniversary issue in 1977 included content specially tailored for feminist readers, who were invited to purchase the WISP Women’s Individual Savings Plan, SR badges and pregnancy tests. The Women’s Press advertised its first books in 1978, and ‘The Other Cinema’ film distribution company listed ‘Feminist films’. ‘Alternative’ products and services also featured such as Peruvian knitwear, cheap bus fares to Amsterdam, and Yak sandals. Unions, publishers, local government, campaign groups such as Amnesty International, and educational institutions had become major advertisers, alongside what were probably free exchange adverts for magazines such as *Gay Left*. Despite the controversies over the advertising of record labels, Topic, AM and Mother Earth Records continued to showcase their artists (60, July 1977).

Getting sufficient advertising was perceived by the collective to be crucial to breaking even. But it required a mindset that many collective members found difficult. A collective editorial meeting in 1975 minuted: ‘Reemphasise that we shd. think of advertising potential of articles.’ Accordingly, when an article was planned on suffragette Annie Kenney a few weeks later, the collective discussed approaching businesses in her hometown of Oldham, though no advertisers were forthcoming. A later minute recorded that ‘There should be some way of selling the mag on the basis of

²⁴ Ades to Emily Liddell, undated letter c. 1975, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

particular articles,’ but the author noted that she felt ‘very unsure how to proceed...’²⁵

The minutes of an SR financial meeting in 1977 recorded that the ‘display’ role required ‘getting on the phone: hustling...’²⁶

‘Hustling’ implied a degree of comfort with sales that most collective members lacked. The readership was similarly oriented to collaborative rather than profitable modes of operation. Rose Ades had suggested that readers should ‘hustle their newsagent [to stock Spare Rib], so that might be their first feminist act.’²⁷ But while readers often passed their copies on to other individuals or groups, they were often detached from the bottom line. SR had begun charging women’s groups for listings, but one reader requested ‘free advertising of events in each area. We must remember that many women’s groups are struggling for funding, I’m sure a little free space would be a big help.’²⁸ It was rare for readers to defend a pro-enterprise line. One reader argued for the need to support feminist businesses: ‘the women who have succeeded [sic.] in building businesses, should they not be able to advertise their wares and services? ... Should we not support our sisters? Or have I got the message and aim of feminism wrong?’ (218, Nov 1990: 4). But she was a relatively isolated voice.

Distribution

Like advertising, distribution was also at the heart of business viability. It was

²⁵ Anon. ‘Distribution’, 11 Feb 1976, [DM2123/9/1/1](#), FAS.

²⁶ May 16 1975, Minute Book, [DM2123/9/1/1](#), FAS.

²⁷ Ades, interviewed by Zoe Strimpel, 5-12 November 2018, *The Business of Women’s Words*, 2018-21, British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C1834/03, © The British Library.

²⁸ Ms Dorothy McDowell, c. 1986, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

symbolically and practically important to the SR founders to sell in ‘mainstream’ newsagents such as John Menzies and W H Smiths, which required the use of commercial distributors. In the end, all the major newsagents did stock SR, though Smiths occasionally withdrew certain issues where it found content offensive. SR’s distribution had initially been organised by Seymour Press, who took 25% of the cover price, plus postage, on each magazine sold, and had a poor track record in getting copies out effectively to retailers. Readers continually complained about their inability to access the magazine; Rose Ades reported to Seymour Press: ‘In Bristol it seems to have sold out very quickly. There is a very active women’s group there. Someone rang us up from Bangor because they could not get hold of the magazine at all. Smiths had not heard of it. In London many of the small newsagents in Charing Cross Rd and Tottenham Court Rd had not themselves seen a copy but had had many people asking for it.’²⁹

Most chain-owned newsagents required an order of over 20 monthly, and this was a real barrier to distribution. Seymour Press were downbeat, reporting to Marsha Rowe that ‘issue no. 2 is not selling as well as we would have hoped. It appears that the initial PR impact has not carried forward to this issue. [...] most shops and bookstalls report that there has not been a great demand for the title.’³⁰ Around 40% of the second SR print run of 20,000 were sold. Rose Ades offered some gentle directions to Seymour Press: ‘we wondered whether it would be possible to distribute more to the Provinces, say 60% or at least 50% rather than swamping the City.’ She also personally visited shops in Newcastle, Carlisle, St Andrews, and Penrith to provide copies. Ades spoke on

²⁹ Ades to DP Taylor August 8 1972, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

³⁰ DP Taylor to Marsha Rowe, 26 July 1972, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

local radio in Scotland and the North East about SR in 1972, and made direct contact with student societies to raise the regional profile of the magazine. She deliberately cultivated sales in university towns, writing to the distributors, 'I suspect that all University towns, come September, could make use of a larger number of copies than they have had so far, particularly in the Campus book shops...'³¹ But Seymour Press sales reps reported only meagre sales. Compared to women's magazines, the 'covers are not bright enough and the title does not have much visual impact.' The sales manager offered SR to a company that distributed to women's hairdressing salons, but it was quickly dropped: 'Their customers thought it was not value for money compared to other women's magazines such as COSMOPOLITAN and NOVA. Arguments based on the editorial concept of SPARE RIB were of no avail...'.³²

From 1973 New English Library [NEL] took over distribution, taking 12.5 % of the cover price. Rosie Parker termed NEL a "hard sell' company'. Its manager pressured the collective to adjust the design to appeal more broadly. He wrote in 1974, 'the jacket has now become more acceptable to the less militant women's liberationists, which is a great asset and makes it more readily accessible to the customer as well as the Retailer.'³³ SR editors must have winced at the objectification of their magazine when NEL described it as 'the most wonderful product'. But Marsha Rowe was also capable of using similar commercial language on occasion. She wrote to NEL in 1974

³¹ Ades to DP Taylor, 14 August 1972, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

³² DP Taylor to Rose Ades 25 April 73; 11 Jan 1973 [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

³³ Rosie Parker, 'Seven Years On', SR 84, July 1979: 6; R J Hellen to Rose Ades, 23 Dec 1974, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

when the company were thinking of dropping SR: 'Spare Rib is a valuable commodity, with potential for sales which is only beginning to be exploited.'³⁴

Marsha Rowe had hoped for a relationship with NEL that was 'worthwhile and profitable'. She pursued a tough negotiation strategy, writing to NEL distribution manager Trevor D'Cruz: 'Your sec[retary] read me your letter over the telephone. I'm sorry, but I know you were sympathetic and, unfortunately, that's not enough.'³⁵ Her demanding approach was spurred by SR's growing financial problems, and concerns about the visibility and availability of the magazine. The NEL distribution manager noted that 'whatever efforts we put behind it, we are unable to get past the ceiling of approximately 10,000 copies a month, and I know this is causing some concern to you.'³⁶ In 1975, SR switched distributors, leaving NEL in favour of Moore Harness, a company chosen 'largely because they have a very close relationship with freelance wholesalers who distribute to colleges etc.' It had become clear that the magazine sold well amongst student populations. An alternative distributor, Paperchain, was also considered, but rejected because the company was 'shady and disreputable, ... pretending to be non sexist,' but rumoured to be distributing pornographic magazines. There were still important feminist principles that governed who the collective would work with.

The possibility of expansion overseas was also debated in the mid 1970s, with strenuous efforts to obtain free exchange adverts with American feminist titles such as *Ms.* magazine and *Off Our Backs*. Universities in the United States which taught women's studies courses were targeted, and from January 1979, the price was printed in

³⁴ Rowe to AR Jollye, July 30 1974 [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

³⁵ Rowe to Trevor D'Cruz May 2 1974, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

³⁶ D'Cruz to Rose Ades, Jan 9 1975 [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

both dollars and pounds on the SR cover. Distribution in Australia had been in place from 1973, and Rose Ades had also provided distributors with contacts in Canada, Paris, Amsterdam and Hamburg.³⁷ By 1976, distribution was split between the more conventional Moore Harness and the alternative Publications Distribution Co-operative [PDC], which ‘distributes SR to bookshops, wholefood shops and stalls in women’s and community centres, student unions, etc.’ The archives still reveal frequent complaints from readers, including one from Cardiff noted that her W H Smiths had no copies, and wrote to ask, ‘have you ceased to supply the mentioned shop or has it refused to sell the women’s liberation magazine?’³⁸ Nonetheless, sales finally broke consistently through the 20,000 ceiling, rising to around 35,000 by 1981. In 1983, PDC went into liquidation, leaving SR debts of £11,402. SR had no working capital to ride out such events, and it was only saved from bankruptcy by a series of Greater London Council [GLC] grants from 1982 (Atashroo 2017: 122-4).³⁹

Labour

Spare Rib tried to bypass the crippling costs of distribution by establishing some direct sales, amounting to around 600 copies per month in 1976. The late 1970s saw continual appeals to readers: ‘Can you help sell Spare Rib? ... Why not take copies with you to conferences? Pass them round at work? Show all your friends? Sell them in the streets?’ (72, July 1978: 33) But direct sales involved onerous processing, packing and labelling

³⁷ Rose Ades to Mary Botara, 10 Feb; Anon., ‘Distribution’, 11 Feb 1976, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

³⁸ Christine Jones to SR, May 29 1980, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

³⁹ On wider cultures of London grant funding, see Brooke (2017), Atashroo (2019).

that the collective could barely manage given the longstanding lack of ‘womanpower on all areas of the magazine,’ (60, July 1977: 23).

Marsha Rowe had reported in 1973 that an advertising assistant had departed fairly quickly: ‘she doesn’t think she can live on £15 a week which is what we pay ourselves.’⁴⁰ In the early days, many SR collective members either had another job or family wealth. In 1977, when the price of SR rose to 35p, the editors explained that wages had remained at £4 a day, despite the sharp rises in the cost of living: ‘Not only has the real value of our minimal wage dropped, but fares have soared, and with less part time work around, it’s harder for women to supplement Spare Rib wages.’ (60, July 1977: 23). Linda Bellos joined SR in the early 1980s as a part time Finance Officer for £31 a week, a wage she described as ‘pathetic’.⁴¹

SR regularly used volunteers, who took on routine office labour such as stuffing envelopes. The magazine was wrapped for delivery in brown paper by members of the Camden Old People’s Welfare Association until a GLC grant paid for a wrapping machine. Readers were deeply critical when the magazine seemed to exploit low or unpaid labour. One wrote: ‘I was shocked and appalled to see from the back cover of your June issue that you are using ‘sweated labour’ to cope with your distribution problems. Could I be doing you an injustice? Maybe you are paying [...] the union rate, I personally doubt very much that any money exchanges hands, or if any does that it is a living wage.’⁴² However, the practice of using volunteers was widespread amongst

⁴⁰ Rowe to A R Jollye at NEL, Oct 15 1973 [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 56](#), FAS.

⁴¹ Linda Bellos, Heart of the Race collection, BWM03B, Black Cultural Archives, London, henceforth BCA

⁴² S.C., May 30 1980, [DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 55](#), FAS. Labour was saved in the mid 1980s by turning to a computerised system for subscriptions mailings, offered by the London-

feminist projects, as Sarah Browne has documented in Scottish Women's Aid and Rape Crisis initiatives (Brown 2016: 148-150, 159-161). Amongst feminist publishers, practice varied from the not-for-profit Sheba, which in its early days was entirely volunteer-run, to the complete eschewing of volunteers at the more commercial Women's Press (Cadman et al. 1981). The value of labour raised particular tensions however when deployed by WLM periodicals which were both activist projects and commodities for sale. *Trouble and Strife* [T&S], a radical feminist magazine produced three times a year between 1983 and 2002, epitomised this trend. The collective did not pay members at all and were proud of their independence from any grant funding. Zoe Fairbairns, a contributor to both T&S and SR, contested the former's non-payment of writers, citing a lack of budgeting and 'monetarist' approach to supply. This last observation was clearly provocative in linking non-payment to Thatcherite economics. 'Obviously all the collective work for nothing. We see it as political work,' was the defiant response from the editors (T&S 2, Spring 1984: 7) T&S did develop a more formal business basis, though volunteers continued to feature. In 1985 the collective reorganised their production of the magazine into a company limited by guarantee, which they saw as 'a necessary precaution against litigation and financial ruin!' This required an accountant; lacking the expertise, they appealed to readers for volunteers (T&S 6, Summer 1985). Working for free meshed well with the 'anti-careerism' ethos of the women's liberation movement, where professionalism was often understood as creating unfair hierarchies. Nonetheless, paid collective members such as Roisín Boyd were aware of the 'bad feeling' caused by volunteers getting little attention in the busy

based feminist computer firm Microsyster, who also handled the database for *Outwrite* magazine.

SR office. They were placed in a 'darkish area' of the office, away from the editorial and graphic design staff, and put in charge of more 'tedious' jobs such as subscriptions and sidelines.⁴³ One SR volunteer noted at the weekly editorial meeting that working for free felt like 'a bit of blackmail: ie if you support SR you work for it free.'⁴⁴ There were clearly hierarchies, spatial and social, that structured the SR office despite its collectivist ethics.

The women who produced WIRES, a fortnightly WLM newsletter that circulated from 1975, were determined to maintain a flat hierarchy. Collective members noted their difficulties in 'telling somebody what to do'; jobs such as typing were given to those who lacked sufficient typing skills, and then retyped if necessary. Al Garthwaite noted, 'there was a very anti-skill thing – you weren't allowed to do anything really well.' Wages were paid, but in a way intended to offset the unfair advantages of those with professional experience and skills; the WIRES collective divided pay into 30p an hour for the 'interesting work' of editing, and 50p an hour for the 'shitwork' of 'collating and sticking on stamps.' (T&S 2, Spring 1984: 51). Feminist periodicals thus saw a diversity of views on how waged labour should be organised, or whether it was even necessary. The WIRES collective reflected in SR after its closure, 'The main thing we regret about WIRES is that it never made enough money from any sources.' They consoled themselves, however, with the thought that lack of revenue 'just shows that we are radical. That's why the state won't fund us.' (70, May 1978: 19).

⁴³ Roisín Boyd, interviewed by Zoe Strimpel and Lucy Delap, 17-18 Dec 2018, *The Business of Women's Words*, 2018-21, British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C1834/05, © The British Library.

⁴⁴ Michele, Dec 6 1974, SR minutes book, [DM2123/9/1/1](#), FAS. Low wages or volunteering were also common in feminist bookselling (Delap 2016).

Grants

State funding was to become a much more prominent part of the ‘business praxis’ of feminist enterprises in the 1980s, paralleling the experiences of other radical movements (Connell 2019: 22-6). It was only when Greater London Council funding created a financial surplus through grants that SR could expand their workforce. In 1982, they won a grant to increase their wages from the below-union rate of £13 a day. They also proposed employing three additional Black women workers, as part of their emphasis on anti-racism. Linda Bellos, brought in for her financial management skills but quickly moving into an editorial role, had been the first Black woman on the SR collective.⁴⁵ SR’s GLC application outlined their vision of expansion and transition to a self-supporting basis, ‘without becoming controlled by advertising.’⁴⁶ In 1982-4, they received £49,809 and were able to raise wages and staffing. Another £80,182 in 1984-5 created a two day a week finance officer, to oversee forecasts, accounts and wages, and to relaunch the magazine in a more colourful format aimed at younger women. The SR collective were able to contract with feminist businesses such as Outskirts Women Woodworkers to upgrade their office space. They adopted employment contracts that offered generous unpaid leave arrangements, dependents’ allowances and additional holidays for ‘Collective members who feel strongly about other (non British) annual celebratory holidays’. The GLC grants were intended to benefit Londoners, and as a result SR emphasised its London-centred readership and workers. The GLC also asked

⁴⁵ SR’s plans to advertise for black women workers were ruled illegal under the Race Relations Act. Bellos, ‘Backlash’, (122, Sept 1982: 16).

⁴⁶ GLC/DG/WCSU/1/53/S21, London Metropolitan Archives, henceforth LMA.

explicitly for policies on how to benefit black and ethnic minority Londoners, lesbians and the disabled. These requirements shaped the magazine's coverage in the mid-1980s and incentivised a metropolitan bias that irritated readers outside London.

Supplementing its commercial income with funding from bodies such as the Arts Council had been attempted by SR in the 1970s, but without success. It had been private philanthropy that kept the magazine afloat. The generous funding environment of the 1980s was a bonanza that (temporarily) enabled ambitious growth. However, there was considerable ambivalence over grant funding in the women's movement and other radical projects. Black activist Gerlin Bean recalled the 'urban aid development' grant received by Sabarr Books (later the Black Cultural Archives) in the 1980s, which she suspected would 'destroy it because they'll want to control it.' The grant introduced a formal rationality to what had been a vibrant political project. Bean reflected that 'we start becoming employers, that's where we went wrong. [...] we're just doing a job, we pay your money and all that and then all the administration and all, we had accountant now and employee.'⁴⁷ A similar ambivalence marked the See Red women's print collective, who gained grant funding from Southwark Council and the GLC in the 1980s. The new availability of wages painfully split the See Red collective; a majority felt that waged work should be offered to working class, lesbian or black women only. As a result, two longstanding members were asked to leave. The funding provided new equipment and premises, but 'the workshop lurched between GLC grant cheques, which were always late, even up to a year in one case. The practicalities of being grant aided were more demanding than we had envisaged. Quarterly reports had to be written in language to meet shifting criteria. Accounts had to be up to date and the bank and

⁴⁷ Gerlin Bean, Heart of the Race collection, BWM32, BCA.

suppliers had to be staved off while waiting for overdue payments.’ Collective members recalled that being grant-funded felt like ‘walking on eggshells’ and the project ‘lost its voice’ (Stevenson et al, 2016: 30-1).⁴⁸ The withdrawal of funds in 1986, on the closure of the GLC, also posed problems of economic survival since See Red had committed itself to significant outgoings in rent and wages.

The substantial GLC grants of the early to mid-1980s built a degree of resilience, working capital and resources into the operations of a variety of feminist creative enterprises. SR benefited enormously from being able to offer stable employment and improved wages. Working hand to mouth in the first decade of the magazine’s life had taken a heavy toll, and required risk taking, self-exploitation and political compromises. But SR’s commercial orientation had also kept to the fore the need to stay in dialogue with readers, distributors and retailers about what they wanted from a magazine. Grants enabled SR in later years to publish on what they felt was politically important, leading readers to complain of narrow, doctrinaire articles in its later years, which one reader rejected as ‘a political journal, a socialist tract, a minority platform’ that had stopped focusing on women (217, Oct 1990:5). Women of colour on the SR collective suspected that their focus on Black and Asian women was at stake here, and there were heated debates about race and anti-racism during the second decade of SR’s existence. But the changes at the magazine cannot only be linked to this issue. Articles that bemoaned the policies of the European Economic Community or celebrated the policies of Muammar Gaddafi as revolutionary and ‘extremely threatening to imperialism’ (234, May 1992: 43) drew on a repertoire of leftist issues

⁴⁸ See also the detailed See Red complaint to the GLC in its progress report c. 1983-4, GLC/RA/GR/02/110, LMA.

that seemed unrelated to feminist concerns. Ruth Wallsgrove, an SR collective member from 1977 to 1984, talked of the ‘terrible dulling, hectoring line’ that characterised later issues, and the ‘sense of powerlessness to change anything by arguing back’ amongst readers when the magazine became ‘ultra-leftist’ in the years of grant funding.

Wallsgrove identified as a radical feminist and went on to work for *Trouble and Strife* and *Off Our Backs*. She remained proud that SR had been a stablemate of *Vogue* magazine in the late 1970s through their shared distributor, COMAG, which had termed *Spare Rib*, ‘a good commercial bet’. But this status seemed irrelevant once generous funding allowed SR to concentrate on what Wallsgrove termed repetitive, ‘worthy’ material (T&S 23, Summer 1993: 6).

The GLC funding also opened up SR to political meddling. The grant of £73,604 approved by the GLC Women’s Committee in 1985 was vetoed by the Environment Secretary Patrick Jenkin, four months after the money had been promised. SR wages went unpaid and the magazine was back in crisis. Valerie Wise, chair of the GLC Women’s Committee, protested in terms that seemed deliberately designed to mimic the Conservative government’s pro-business rhetoric: ‘our investment to date will be wasted by Mr Jenkins refusing consent.’⁴⁹ The tussles between GLC and the central government could end up with grant-aided organisations suffering collateral damage. This was not the only source of political tension, however. The GLC also had its own political ecology, with competition and conflict between its diverse committees and departments. *Spare Rib*’s applications were mostly targeted at the Women’s Committee, but grants were also received from the Industry and Employment Committee. Funding was sometimes held up by negotiation between committees, as well as interventions

⁴⁹ GLC Public Relations Branch News Service, July 9 1985, GLC.DG.PRB.35.49, LMA.

from the legal and finance departments who feared SR's women-only (or sometimes black women-only) employment conditions contravened racial and sex discrimination legislation. SR collective member Loretta Loach described the GLC as 'that bottomless bureaucracy.'⁵⁰ GLC procedures could also be opaque, arcane or disturbingly informal. One SR application in 1985 had a handwritten memo attached that noted laconically, 'as far as I can make out there was a sort of commitment to fund the extra money for wages.'⁵¹

SR had used GLC funding to build up their resources and attract more advertising, often from projects who were themselves GLC funded. GLC abolition in 1986 created a noticeable dip in SR advertising revenue as other London projects also lost their financial support. The magazine continued to be published until 1993, albeit without the funded workers of the mid-1980s, until the recession and diminishing readership of the early 1990s made it impossible to carry on. Gaining grants had required a major reorientation of SR's work to produce the required six-monthly reports, audited accounts and estimates of working capital. It had also imposed a tailoring of SR's contents towards GLC concerns. Feminist business praxis evolved into an increasingly complex negotiation between commercial and local government priorities. Politics remained to the fore, but not only that of women's liberation; the anti-racist, place-specific and leftist commitments of the GLC created a demanding and dense political environment that readers and grantees could find bewildering.

⁵⁰ Handwritten memo, C.K; Loach to 'Chair', 7 Dec 1983, GLC:DG:WCSU:5:53:S21, LMA.

⁵¹ GLC officer Norma Gena memo to Lynda Hamlyn re. the SR application. Feb 8 1985, GLC/DG/WCSU/5/53/s20, LMA.

Conclusions

Spare Rib survived for over 20 years in a very challenging climate – this was a significant achievement when contrasted with more typically short-lived feminist journals in Britain and beyond. It is easy to point to chaotic working and business inexperience. Ruthie Petrie who joined the collective in 1977, retrospectively distanced herself from its finance: ‘I don’t remember ever doing a budget. [...] It wasn’t our concern, our concern was to get the magazine out and we seemed to have enough money in the bank, you know, as long as our distributors paid us.’⁵² The archival evidence of the deliberations of SR founders and collectives suggests that this should not be taken at face value. A distinctive ‘business praxis’ is visible in operations, both in relation to commercial distribution and grant-aided operations.

Setting up SR as a feminist business allowed the collective to express their political commitments, amplify the voices of their contributors, democratise print culture and bring feminist perspectives to new audiences. Political commitment limited some aspects of profitability, particularly in relation to advertising. But political commitments should not only be associated with reduced profits. SR’s feminist commitments also generated market advantages. They provided access to talented women writers who were discontented with mainstream or underground press. The magazine benefited from the intense hard work of their politically-motivated staff, as well as the grassroots distribution and marketing assistance from readers and women’s groups. The challenge of reconciling politics and profit was constantly debated with SR readers, which helped to create an involved, loyal readership. Principles of cooperation

⁵² Ruthie Petrie, interviewed by D-M Withers, 10 October 2018, *The Business of Women’s Words*, 2018-21, British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C1834/02, © The British Library.

rather than competition with other feminist products and services allowed for mutual support. Indeed, *Spare Rib* played an important role in advertising other feminist enterprises and sharing resources with other periodicals such as *Trouble and Strife*, as well as benefiting from a collaborative approach to content, sales and marketing. All these elements helped to meld profitability with political purpose in what can be recognised as a feminist business praxis.

Business praxis, however, was context and time specific. The negotiation and reconciliation of profits and politics was fragile, problematized by the growing sense of judgementalism and aggression that marked the women's movement in the 1980s and 1990s. In SR's pages, the debates over the direction and viability of the magazine became interminable conflicts that put off wider audiences and made for an inward-looking, cliquish focus. There was a sometimes doctrinaire unwillingness to compromise on principles amongst the readership.

Within the magazine's affairs, fair wages were problematized by the competing rationale of voluntarism; for some feminists, political commitment was epitomised by free labour. Any talk of 'profits' or 'viability' became offset by a critical anti-capitalism that identified a vaguely-drawn concept of 'business' as its target. As Rosie Parker argued in 1979, the magazine had always wanted to draw 'attention to the way business profited from women's constantly encouraged consumption and sexual objectification.' (84, July 1979: 6). This became more pronounced when GLC funding seemed to require a more explicit repudiation of business and profits. An SR application to the GLC stated unequivocally that it 'had no intention of becoming 'profitable' in the sense of accruing profits which are awarded to individual members.'⁵³

⁵³ GLC/DG/WCSU/153/S21, LMA.

The reluctance to use the language of enterprise, profit and business amongst British feminists meant that their ‘business praxis’ was not named as such. Other magazines aligned to radical politics in this period were readier to embrace languages of commerce and entrepreneurialism, as Gil Engelstein has recently shown in relation to *Spartacus* magazine (forthcoming). Marsha Rowe was unusual in insisting on SR’s ‘business interests’. Most feminist businesses that did emerge in the 1970s and 80s offered alternative rationales for their operations. Instead of talking about growth or market share, enterprises such as *Spare Rib* spoke in evangelising terms of the need to reach as many women as possible; instead of talking about profit, they promoted the need to make sufficient money to pay fair wages and show ‘respect for skill’. Where more orthodox companies might have identified brand development and loyalty, feminist entrepreneurs prioritised trust, sisterhood or shared ideology. These vocabularies and practices were at least temporarily workable and meaningful; British creative industries in the late twentieth century were enriched by the development of heterodox forms of feminist enterprise.

The demise of the GLC in 1986 left SR ill-fitted to respond to a changing commercial environment of financialisation, shareholder value and aggressive managerialism. The state at local and central levels stepped back from directly supporting creative industries, diversity and job creation (Davis and Walsh 2016). Recent historical accounts of late twentieth century Britain have argued against simple, historically linear attributions of ‘Thatcher’s Britain’, neoliberalism and a turn to individualism (Brooke 2014; Hilton et al. 2017; Robinson et al. 2017; Lawrence 2019; Vernon 2021). This article similarly points to a more complex and longstanding relationship between activism and market forces through a focus on feminist enterprise. Singular talk of ‘the market’ does little to elucidate what it meant in practice to

operationalise feminist principles. The market ecology of feminist magazine publishing was richly populated with a variety of editorial bodies, distributors, printers, typesetters, retailers, donors and grant-givers of varying political hues. The concept of feminist business praxis, developed in a diverse market ecology, helps capture the broad interdependencies, political values and sources of capital that shaped feminist enterprise in late twentieth century Britain.

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