Disseminating Radical Ideas in a Hostile Environment

John Sendy has written a book, Melbourne's Radical Bookshops, which is both fascinating and informative.

Its title is perhaps a little deceptive. To be sure, the story of the bookshops is there, and is well told. But Sendy also writes as much about the lives of the people who made the bookshops, and the temper of the times, as he does about the shops themselves.

In so doing the book avoids becoming a dry and barren history; it rarely falters in this respect.

Sendy also tells us a great deal about the titles which graced the shelves of the bookshops and the various distribution networks that helped these books reach out to wider audiences.

The book is largely based around a chapter by chapter description of Melbourne's radical bookshops and sellers of the past 100-odd years. An opening chapter deals with the "early days" — a time of diverse origins and efforts. Perhaps not surprisingly we learn that: "Bookselling in Melbourne appears to have commenced in 1841 when an Irishman opened a bookstall under a gum tree on the site where the Town Hall now stands." Something poetic about that!

The reader is then taken through the ventures of the anarchist Andrade, of Ross's Book Service and the Victorian Socialist Party, of the Esperantists Rawson and Pyke and various other sellers and outlets.

The origins of the International Bookshop trace back to 1933 when a small shop called the Modern Bookshop was established by the Communist Party as part of its then newly acquired headquarters. A year later the shop had changed its name to "International Bookshop". "No explanation for the change has been found," Sendy reports.

By 1937 the business had become a private company. Predictably, "it concentrated upon CPA literature, the classics of Marxism and material from the Soviet Union". Many novels were also available.

However, it was only with the onset of World War II and more favourable political conditions at home that the International really became a bookshop of lasting significance.

The story of its next forty years links closely with that of the CPA in the post-war period — a story with which I'm sure most readers are familiar.

The one real difference in their respective fortunes has been the growth and consolidation of the bookshop over the last 10 or so years. As the shop has assumed a more independent management policy and stocked a greater diversity of literature, it has benefited greatly from the expanded interest in "radical" literature. As Sendy notes: "Customers these days come less from the traditional industrial working class and more from student, academic and teaching circles". Some would bemoan...
Strangely, this book can make a young (and "intellectually trained") person like myself feel rather inadequate in his/her past reading. Sendy's research reveals bits and pieces about the intellectual diet of earlier generations of radicals. How different the nutritional diet of latter-day radicals is!

I looked with envy at the rich collection of "130 Books for a Working Class Library" advertised by Andrade's Bookshop in 1921. I can only claim to have seriously read ten of them (and those mostly "classics" like Marx, Engels and Labriola).

What a well-balanced diet it was; combining marxist classics with anarchist, socialist and social-democratic writings; leading progressive novelists with the new evolutionist trend in science and positivist trend in philosophy; and standard texts on world history with books on how to write, argue and speak well.

Unfortunately, the author fails to tell us whether anybody (or organisation) ever bought a complete set. He does, however, mention those books which were most in demand. For example, the novels of Upton Sinclair and Jack London were better read in the '20s than the pamphlets of Lenin. Although the novelists are different, I doubt whether the situation would be much different today! And so it should be, some might say.

The radical bookshops of the 1900-1935 period also reveal a decidedly libertarian streak. There was as much interest in "free thought", utopian and sexual matters as in communist literature. Indeed, it appears these early radical bookshops were a primary source of information for a public denied ready access to material about matters sexual and marital.

Not until 40-odd years later, under the impact of the anti-censorship, women's and gay movements, does the radical bookseller again appear to promote stocks devoted to such subjects. Undoubtedly someone more familiar with the earlier literature than I could point to the great differences in approach of writers then to now.

By the 1930s, the graduated impact of the Russian Revolution, the narrowing of focus to a new political orthodoxy, and the sanctions imposed by a "Victorian" morality, largely eliminated the desire on the part of radical booksellers to promote such reading.

A few of the more revealing examples of these early libertarian interests deserve recounting. Ross's Book Service, closely associated with the Victorian Socialist Party provides one example:

"The January 1916 edition of Ross's, under the heading "Know thyself", advertised "a series of usually hard to get books on sex". The next issue declared that Ross's Book Service had "a long list of sexological works".

My dictionary tells me "sexological" means "relating to interaction between the sexes, esp. among human beings".

An amusing episode is recorded in the days of Andrade's business:

The shop sold plays and theatrical goods to schools and amateur theatre groups. Catalogues were circulated to state and convent schools. May Brodney, a veteran of the socialist movement, has recorded the story of how a leaflet advertising contraceptives was inadvertently enclosed with the play catalogue sent to schools and how the Andrade employees thoroughly enjoyed the prospect of teachers and nuns being shocked because of the mistake.
In reading Sendy's book there were only a couple of things which I found myself at odds with. The style of presentation, while usefully employing a thematic method and building chapters (mainly) around booksellers, is not without its drawbacks. For those not already familiar with the period concerned, this method tends to confuse the historical sequence and interconnections of events and bookshops for the reader.

On a more technical note, one might question the wisdom of citing various circulation figures (especially in Chapter 10) without comment. By reputation, the Guardian was a good paper, but Communist Party claims in such publications have been known to be inflated for public consumption.

It was also a bit unfortunate seeing a graphic so badly mis-labelled as the reproduction of the 1977 anti-uranium pamphlet Red Light for Yellow Cake. The caption reads: "A disarmament pamphlet (1983)''. (p. 145)

But such minor criticisms should not deter the prospective reader from the immensely rewarding insights the book offers.

It needs to be pointed out that Sendy has not attempted to write a history of the intellectual influences on Melbourne's radical movements over the past 100 years. Nevertheless, he does provide enough detail and comment to stimulate further reflection (and research, hopefully) on this topic.

A common assumption of the left in Australia, when trying to come to terms with its historical roots, is to assert the anti-intellectual nature of the working class. Indeed, it is quite common to see left groups pandering to this anti-intellectualism; and this in the name of being "in touch" with the working class.

Sendy, however, cites an observation of the American historian, C. Hartley Grattan, to dispel the more facile of the interpretations that have been made of this claim:

Whether benignly or aggressively anti-intellectual, the Labor movement has consistently been subject to ideas; or differently put, it has been subject to intellectuals located elsewhere than in Australia.

Perhaps no other single fact accounts for so much of the failure of left ideas to take deep root in Australia. While most left radicals today have thrown off their dependency on "Russian" thinkers, the suspicion remains that they have been replaced by others equally alien to the Australian situation. Worse still, they have been replaced by nothing more than the received wisdoms of past eras.

Before I am mistakenly accused of advocating a form of nationalist chauvinism in the international marketplace of ideas, let me come to some related points.

The anti-intellectual origins of Australian working class history are different, I would argue, than the intellectual wastelands common to its present predicament.

In his "Afterword", Sendy rightly points to the popular culture of today as having replaced the working class reader of the late nineteenth century. "Commercial television, pulp fiction, crass consumerism and the vulgar entertainment of the mass society" are the main intellectual diet of today's working class.

Serious reading itself — or the rediscovery of it in some form — has become a value which socialists will need to argue is essential for the making of a new society. In doing so, we will be asserting the need to "conserve" an old art which, for centuries, was the preserve of leisured and scholastic classes. Having won the right and means to share in this art, the working classes of today find this right has been devalued and is progressively being rendered obsolete.

In arguing to preserve the value of reading, socialists will be arguing against the objective trends of our society. This, however, is not the same as an argument against television, computers or rock music (although there are plenty of radicals today who would wish to run the argument in this logical direction). The socialist argument with those elements of popular culture which are replacing or devaluing reading is pitched against the exploitative, controlling and homogenising aspects of their influence.

How can this battle best be waged? Is the radical bookshop a fortress from which the proletarian, girded with knowledge, can then sally forth?

We are well beyond the scope of Sendy's book with these questions. What can be said is this: radical bookshops have in the past played an important part in disseminating radical ideas in an otherwise fairly hostile environment. But if these bookshops are ever to be more than a "residual" corner of a highly differentiated capitalist market, then a new audience and new lines of communication must be created which reach deep into the Australian situation. Like the Irishman of last century, selling books under a gum tree where the Town Hall now stands, we need more than novelty value to attract the passers-by.