

Compendium Bookshop, 1968–2000

London's Compendium Bookshop, a landmark in a certain sort of vanguard bookselling, finally closed its doors in early October. Born in that fabled *annus mirabilis*, Compendium opened a window into the stuffy predictability of English bookshops, importing literature from the States and Europe, and providing a connection to the most advanced currents then emerging in European political and philosophical thought. With a wilful eclecticism, Compendium stocked books, magazines, journals and ephemera whose only common feature was their novelty and their intrinsic interest. Fiercely resistant to the commodification of thought, Compendium was a resource for those engaged in the critique of nascent spectacular society and in the imaginative construction of alternatives. Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem were always the presiding spirits, even if, over time, newer and stranger gods arrived in the pantheon. (And often to a quiet derision: one memorable signing managed to produce no audience for Baudrillard in the flesh: perhaps the simulacrum was preferable.) After Marx and Sartre and the phenomenologists, the postmodernists, the post-Marxists: after the posts, the revivalists and the hybridizers. Right at the end, Deleuze and Guattari had come to the throne, displacing the now seemingly exhausted Derridean dynasty.

But Compendium only survived as a peculiar anomaly. Perched relatively cheaply in Camden's bohème, it partly created its own constituency, the new layer of soon-to-be-influential culturati who gave it their loyalty because the rest of the industry had yet to catch up. British publishing and bookselling were laggard in being transformed by the forces of cultural globalization, still wedded to a rather narrow, mid-century conception of culture and letters. In the 1990s all that changed. First there was the chaining of the retail end, with an explosion in the number of bookshops (especially superstores), and discounting policies which followed on the abolition of the Net Book Agreement. Second, there was the rise of Internet retailing, with discounting the main tactic in the vicious pursuit of market share untrammelled by concerns of operating profit. Compendium found its niche suddenly assaulted by numerous brawnier predators, outbid in range and depth of stock as well as price.

Just as the intellectual currents that Compendium had championed became common currency, so their provision suddenly became ubiquitous. Suffering the dreadful fate of all vanguards, Compendium started to look *passé*. But there was an additional element beyond brute economics and the pains of fashion, beyond even the degeneration of Camden into squalid Eurotrash tourism (a transient moment of its ineluctable conversion into high-price, high-rent mallification): the relentless transformation of what had been philosophical publishing into academic publishing, and that latter into an arm of the Research Assessment Exercise. The seemingly infinite production of readers and anthologies, recycling the same canonical texts and competing to service the same narrow band of undergraduate readers, coupled with the premature and only career-necessary publication of single-authored essay collections, generated a publishing culture of breathtaking banality. This was truly the mass production of thought and it had now taken hold of the very intelligentsia who had probably bought that Black and Red edition of Debord's classic in Compendium's basement.

Compendium, then, in the end was a victim of the very forces it had always opposed: the commodification of culture and the growth of big capital.

Philip Derbyshire