

"Everything we do is niche": a roundtable on contemporary progressive publishing

Anna Feigenbaum with Kheya Bag, Ken Barlow, Jakob Horstmann, David Shulman, Kika Sroka-Miller

Participants

Anna Feigenbaum is an Assistant Professor of Communications at Richmond the American International University in London. She is currently working with Fabian Frenzel and Patrick McCurdy on the book *Protest Camps: Imagining Alternative Worlds* to come out with Zed Books in 2013. You can follow her research at protestcamps.org. She can be contacted at anna.feigenbaum AT richmond.ac.uk

Kheya Bag is Publishing Director of *New Left Review* and an Advisory Board member of *Upping the Anti*.

Ken Barlow is commissioning editor at Zed Books, where he is responsible for commissioning for the Africa, Latin America, Politics, International Relations and Economics lists. He previously worked as an editor at Ebury Press, part of the Random House group.

Jakob Horstmann was until recently Commissioning Editor for Gender, Development, Middle East, Asia and Environment at Zed Books. He now works as freelance editor and writer, offering consultation services for individuals and institutions <http://www.jhpublishing.net/>.

David Shulman is Assistant Commissioning Editor at Pluto Press. He previously worked at Verso Books. He is on the Advisory Board of *Upping the Anti* and works with the periodical *Canadian Dimension* and political magazine *Shameless*.

Kika Sroka-Miller is an Assistant Editor at Zed Books. She is also a graphic designer and has worked as a creative consultant for a number of publishing houses, charities, and other organisations.

The conversation was transcribed and edited by Anna Feigenbaum.

Introduction (Anna)

This summer my co-authors and I signed a book contract with Zed for our co-authored manuscript *Protest Camps: imagining alternative worlds*. Before the Arab Spring, our work on the transnational history of protest camping was generally regarded as "too niche", or "quirky activist stuff for idealists". But by April 2011, as Tahrir Square became an international sign that perhaps another world was possible, the phenomenon of protest camping gained broader appeal.

We were contacted that spring by a number of commissioning academic editors interested in the possibility of turning our on-going research into a book. After

meeting with a handful of publishers, the choice to go with Zed felt like a no-brainer. An independent publisher run as a workers-cooperative seemed like the perfect fit for a collectively written book about collective politics. This decision got me thinking more broadly about the choices we make around publishing as academic-activist researchers. And conversely, about the decisions publishers like Zed make about us and about our work.

To coincide with the announcement of our contract I decided to organise a roundtable, in its most literal sense. One late October evening I was joined for dinner around my table by some of London's most prominent independent publishers. Together we discussed the current state of both the progressive press and the academy, covering a range of issues around publishing politics and markets, from finding the right niches-within-niches to copyediting nightmares.

First Course: making decisions on what gets published

Anna: *My understanding of the distinction between radical academic publishing and traditional academic publishing is that if you are working for Palgrave or one of these big textbook companies you're taking on books just to make money so the way that you assess a book is about how much money you'll make. As long as you can sell 200 copies to a library for £80 apiece, you'll make your money back so it's worth it. There is not much thought given to the content.*

Jakob: You are even taught that. If you go to a publishing training centre and do a course in Financial Planning you get two scenarios. You've got Book 1 and Book 2 and you get these fantastic excel spread sheets to figure out what book you should take and it's a number in the end. There's not even a mentioning of what the book is about. It doesn't matter. It's how much you could possibly make.

Ken: We do have to consider profit and loss. It's not like we just decide if we like a book, we have to do the costing. Essentially we would just go under if we started published exactly what we like. We get a lot of PhD theses with really fluent theoretical stuff but only 20 people are going to buy it. So we do consider the commercial of every book but we balance that against what it gives back as well. The reason a lot of academics like us is that we publish everything in paperback but the flipside of that is we have to sell quite a lot of paperbacks to make it work. If you are doing a hardback monograph you can make money on 200 copies. That's not the case with paperbacks. So we have to know we are going to sell enough copies to make our money back. And also physically we've got 2 commissioning editors so we can't publish many more than 55 books a year. We don't have the capacity to start doing, say, 70, 80 or more books. So we have to choose which 55 we're doing. And we have to sell enough over those 55

books to sustain the company. So sometimes we can do 1 or 2 niche things or sometimes we get funding from research organisations.

David: I would sort of dispute your choice of the word niche in this context. Because niche doesn't equal low sales, the point is finding the right niche. And if you find the right niche you will sell those 1000 copies. And when Ken says you have to sell quit a few to make your money, you'd be shocked at how low that number is.

Ken: I used to work at Random House and we were talking about tens or hundreds of thousands. I mean really commercial non-fiction. I was working on celebrity biography so we would sell hundreds of thousands. At Zed 2,000 is a lot. It's relative.

Jakob: The breakeven point is somewhere around 600 normally.

David: 2,000 would be a success for us. In terms of the balance between money concerns and political commitment I think the line for us would be that we would never publish anything where we would expect to lose money. I think if something was politically important enough to us to publish then we would try to do it in a way that we could at least break even. If something seems so marginal that no one is going to buy it, maybe it just shouldn't be a book.

Ken: Sometimes we get a PhD thesis that is a really specific ethnographic research about a village in Malawi and I'm sure the research is really good but it's just so niche in terms of its subject. But if something is important politically it generally means that enough people will read them so it's not that hard to spot one.

Kika: Because 2,000 people will buy it!

Jakob: We got a PhD submission from a great university in London. The whole book was about transactional relationships with "professional girlfriends." The case study was based on 6 years of research living in one country, but it just focused on that one country. So I spoke to her about expanding it and doing a comparative study and she was really into it, she was going to connect it to stuff going on in the US and the UK, but it couldn't happen because it would take 3 more years of research for each country to get that kind of data.

David: We get a lot of submissions like that in our anthropology series. They come in about a particular community or village or refugee camp and then make a broader social, theoretical claim based on that. But because we have an anthropology series it's actually a strength of those books.

Kheya: For NLR it's not so much the geographical square metres, but what's the treatment of the subject. So for example an article on Ireland becomes a way to talk about what is going on in Europe more generally. You can take something that's niche and use it to talk about a facet of a bigger picture. We actually have a series on city studies; even if the scale is small, the question is "What does this place tell us about the world?"

David: I think one of the things all our presses have in common is that they are all self-consciously international. It's my impression that Zed is very particular about this. You don't have a catalogue that doesn't have all the areas you cover. You're good at making sure you've got all your regions covered. At Pluto ours is more of a broad commitment to internationalism. NLR as well, you don't see a single issue where there isn't an effort to cover more than the Western capitalist core. I think that's the product of a conscious commitment on the part of all of these companies. At the same time, as Kheya was saying, we try to do this in a way that isn't just tokenistic, but gets at the core issues that we are all concerned with.

Ken: Our main areas of focus are Latin America, Africa, Middle East and Asia. We are focused on the global South so we very rarely do books specifically on Europe or the UK. I turn a lot of books down because of that, of course there are exceptions. Our books tend to be comparative unless it's a major country like Brazil. We probably couldn't do *Farming in Uruguay*. It has to be some kind of comparative perspective. That's why a lot of our books are *Gender in Africa* or *Climate Change in Africa*. We'll ask our authors to broaden out. I'll get a proposal and we'll ask, "Can you add other case studies?" How can you prove that your case is applicable elsewhere?

Kheya: My impression is that people are specialising more and more. So twenty or thirty years ago you might have gotten more PhD theses covering a region, but it seem like the way academia works people want to make their names in very specific fields.

Anna: *As PhD students we are trained to write on very specific cases or areas. They will look at our proposal and say, "This is too broad. You need to narrow it down." And we will do the same with our students. The question for me is, How do you balance context with argument? Once you're making a comparative analysis, you want to run that argument through a number of different contexts. But you can't become the expert on more than a couple of contexts of a couple of countries. It's incredibly hard to do it for one! And then two and then even more, at least as a single author which most monographs are. The book is supposed to be bigger, but each context is three more years of study and unless you are going to take 12 years to write a book that is no longer about contemporary politics - something is being compromised on some end. Unless you've got a whole lot of money and research assistants, in which case you're probably not going for radical publishing!*

Jakob: Sometimes what I find sad is that the quality of books is actually being watered down by this. You've got a really interesting subject on one country and we ask them to broaden it out. But maybe they don't know anything about other countries, so they ask their colleagues and put in this token chapter and it's not as strong as the single focus but it needs to be in there for that global aspect. There's also the question of how contemporary we are. The publishing cycle is 12 months after the final manuscript so it won't be up to date. In areas like the Middle East things are changing every two weeks.

David: You've got a book on the Arab Spring on your catalogue cover!

Jakob: This was one of the rare examples of a truly contemporary subject, and it was possible because the author promised to write it within four months.

David: Jakob mentioned as an aside that Zed also has a gender list and I think it makes sense to expand the conversation into subject areas as well geographical areas. And these kinds of things reflect different commitments publishers have as well. I also feel like I have to dispute the way that niche keeps being spoken about. I feel like we are using niche interchangeably with small readership. We can't compete with major presses for something that has a mass readership. Everything we do is niche, so the trick is finding the right niche. The niche that hasn't been filled yet, that specialists will need or those libraries will need. If you are doing a book on land reform in Zimbabwe and you know that book hasn't been done yet, then any library with a budget for Africa will have to buy it. So it's not whether something is more niche or less niche, it's about finding the right niche, the one that is still an issue, and filling it. We always ask authors to give us an idea of the competing literature. Then we'll look into that ourselves and if it doesn't stand out we won't publish it.

Jakob: When I use the word niche I'm talking about the entirety of our readership. So that is one niche. And then there are niches within niches. We try to be one step ahead of what is going on right now.

Kika: We try to be the avant-garde within the niche.

Ken: The trouble is the books that are the niche within the niche within the niche and every niche cuts off readership. Everything is a niche, but it's finding the right niche with a big enough readership.

Kheya: It's also about quality, and making an effective intellectual and political intervention.

Ken: A lot of our active commissioning is going to conferences and making personal contact. If there is an area I'm commissioning on I look at who is speaking on that topic.

Jakob: When you go to conferences you speak to 12 people a day. You didn't take a close look, just saw that it looked interesting and they were at a good university. You talk to high quality people and take what you get from that. And you look for people on contemporary issues. That's how our book on the Arab Spring came into being.

Anna: *Are you all getting a lot of proposals on the Arab Spring?*

David: Pluto gets a lot of proposals on the Middle East. We've gotten quite a few on the Arab Spring. We've rejected all of them so far. But they are from Western journalists that happened to live in Egypt at the time and thinks they can write the most gripping, on the ground report of events, or just someone else who's really enthusiastic. But there's already been such a deluge of books and there are going to be so many more.

Kheya: I saw a book on Occupy Wall Street already! "A major new work on the Occupy movement". How can it be major!?

David: That's the OR book. The press release says it's going to be published on the 3 month anniversary of the camp—if it's still there. That's possible largely because of OR's model. They are 100% print-on-demand. They only sell directly to buyers through their website. They shun Amazon. They make much more on each copy but sell far fewer of each title. Their marketing budget per title is much, much higher than what Pluto or Zed would have.¹ But every other publisher that doesn't use this model has to sell into the trade at very high discounts of 50% or more and another significant discount to their distributor. They base the initial print run on pre-orders. Who knows if it will work or not but their model is based on an analysis of the industry. There's all this money that's being lost to distribution. In their view the direction the industry has to go in is to take the money out of distribution and put it into marketing.

Second Course: making decisions on where to publish

Anna: *Going back to what we were discussing earlier about "everything we do is niche," when I told a colleague of mine that I was publishing with Zed he giggled. And I said "What, have you not heard of it?" And he said, "No, of course I've heard of it. It's where all the idealists publish. It's not a bad reputation; it's that we know you are a certain kind."*

Jakob: Yes, that is what we are going for with our brand identity.

Ken: If you know Zed you know we aren't going to get a right-wing crony. It is idealist, that's the nature of radical publishing. That's inevitable.

David: Not to talk about unpleasant things like "branding" but it is really important here in two different ways. We are competing in two different markets: one is the market for readers; the other is the market for content. So if we want to find interesting people who do interesting work that's also political we have an edge to actually get them to come to us. We have two different edges that get people to come to us. One is that we are associated to the left and radical thinking and cutting edge. And the second is that it is actually a big pull that we are publishing in paperback. No one wants to see their life work relegated to a \$100 or £60 hard cover that no one ever buys. I've spoken to a lot of people who published with Oxford or Cambridge and say, "Oh yeah, that happened to my first one and I want to come to you for my second." They know that the people they are writing for are actually going to be able to afford it.

Ken: Particularly in America there is real issue. We find it quite hard to get younger authors or junior academics. There is a real system for where you can

¹ Verso has since announced that they too will publish an OWS book on the three-month anniversary of the camp. OR is a new press: www.orbooks.com

publish as a junior academics. You have to publish your first book with a university press. So we'll have people say, "Oh, I want to go with you, but my department says I shouldn't." Because of this, a lot of our authors are tenured. They call us their "post-tenure publisher" where they can write the book they always wanted to write and they kind of let rip.

Anna: *I wonder if that will change a little bit because I think the nature of academia, amidst the financial crisis for young academics is really shifting. We now have tons of talented young people, who've finished their PhDs, who've written amazing thesis who are not going to get academic jobs. They are therefore not going to be "I have to publish my first book with Oxford" in robot tenure mode. I keep going to conferences with these amazing postgraduate students that have given up hope on being in a tenure-track job anytime soon, but they could probably write a great book. There are so many unemployed or underemployed PhD students right now.*

Jakob: But none of them will be able to make a living on a book they write for us. We can get amazing quality because people aren't depending on their money. The royalties are really small. So if that's not part of their career are they feasibly going to spend that much time writing a book that's not going to help you with our day job. We also want books by people who are connected to Universities.

Kheya: I think that can go both ways, though. Just because someone makes their living as a writer rather than an academic doesn't mean they won't try as hard. Sometimes people don't try as hard because they are comfortable in their academic job.

David: In general at Pluto we'd say we are an academic press. But some of our most successful books are written by journalists.

Anna: *The best thing I ever heard about Pluto was from one of your authors, Uri Gordon who wrote Anarchy Alive" He was a few years ahead of me and he said, "You publish your book with Pluto, and then you send off three articles on that same research for peer review journals." I think that's a really good piece of advice for junior academics.*

Ken: One of the good things that Zed do is paperbacks, so we can reach a wider audience. But if the decision is not between two academic presses, but between us and a big trade press it would be different. When I used to work at Random House we published Mark Thomas. He would say he just wanted to reach as many people as possible. An extract of the book got published in the Daily Mail. His idea wasn't about the integrity of the medium but getting your message across to as many people as possible. There are readers of the Daily Mail that he would never reach otherwise, a completely different audience. Naomi Klein got a lot of criticism for going with Harper Collins. I can understand wanting to reach a wide audience, but there are questions to be raised there.

Kheya: Would you say that one of the reasons authors go with radical presses is because of feelings of integrity or commitment to the medium?

Kika: There's definitely a debate around the purity of the process.

David: The fact is that Pluto or Zed can be amazed by a marketing budget like OR's but you go with a major press and that's probably pocket change. Look at the *Shock Doctrine*. I saw ads for it everywhere. They were on tubes. People are still talking about that book and I think, good for Naomi Klein. I mean frankly if a small press had a runaway success like that they might have to sell the rights to someone who could handle the marketing publicity and just take a royalty from it.

Jakob: That's why you need the personal connections. The press Paradigm in Denver, it's a really small independent press. And the guy who set it had a really close connection to Chomsky. So they started it up with a just a couple Chomsky books after he was already well known. It's so important for start-ups to have these connections, like we were saying with OR books. This made other authors open to going with them. They do leftist, liberal content.

Kheya: That's kind of how Verso started too. New Left Review was commissioned and edited a number of books which were then published by Penguin.

Final Course: how we write

David: We've talked a lot about what our brand identities means in terms of our politics. I think we also try to maintain certain standards in our writing that go beyond just our political standards.

Anna: *The only reason I know that academics don't go with progressive presses until their second book is because of their CV, their job, the tick boxes. I've never heard anyone say, "I'm going with this university press because they are going to do a much better job with my book."*

Jakob: There are commissioning editors at the bigger presses that don't even read all the books they commission because their targets are so high and they don't have time. I find that really depressing. The commissioning editor is supposed to have a long term vision for the book.

David: The pressures on commissioning editors at big university presses are really high and to do that job well takes a lot of time. Even at a small press, the targets are still high and we are talking about doing close readings of all these proposals and books. My view is that the commissioning editor should at least look at each page of a book. You are responsible for it.

Ken: At least at Zed most of the writing is pretty accessible so you can enjoy reading it as a lay reader. But I can imagine that if you're doing hardback-only academic monographs it could be quit gruelling reading book after book!

David: Also, if you are working on that high priced hardback-only model and you're happy selling a couple hundred copies to a library, the quality of writing

in most of those cases doesn't really matter. It's the originality of the research and the contribution to the field. This is different than in trade publishing where you are depending on word of mouth. In trade publishing you want people to read the book and enjoy it.

Kheya: This is actually a point I wanted to raise. We are making a distinction between "academic", "radical", and "trade". I think NLR would place itself as "intellectual" rather than "academic". It is radical too, but it's not the same as movement publishing. Another journal I work on is called *Upping the Anti*. It's a periodical and the articles are quite lengthy. It's written by activists, for activists and distributed within social movements networks. It looks like an academic journal, but has a different audience.

David: The question of audience is so important for authors. That's why we always ask on the proposal: Who are you writing for? Who do you think is your audience?

Ken: But no matter what subject the book proposal is for, most authors say they are writing for the general audience! When people list "anthropology, geography, history and the general public" it's actually not that helpful. If we don't have a clear idea of the speciality areas, we don't know what lists to send the title to. We want to know if you really think the general public is going to read your book.

David: It can actually make the author sound kind of clueless to assume their book is for the general public. Books like the *Shock Doctrine* or anything by Malcolm Gladwell are accessible to the general public because they make people think that they understand the world for the first time. They also have all these "Eureka moments" throughout them that you connect to.

Kheya: I think that is also a question of style. I went to a workshop by Naomi Klein several years ago. It was a relatively small workshop on political writing. She advised us to "Imagine you are writing as if it is the time before you came to your political understanding." I think that is excellent advice.

Ken: Yes, and if you are writing that way, then it is for the general public. But if you aren't writing like that, you need to know that and be clear about it.

Anna: *I'm not sure that academic authors always know when they are being clear or not! I wonder if we are often just delusional.*

Kheya: I do think that academics are so naturalised to a technical language that they become stylised to a certain kind of writing.

Ken: Yes, and when they've been working on something for three years, it's the most important thing to them. And usually they are only really talking to their colleagues, so they can't understand the context outside of their own academic bubble. It's almost like they can't understand why the general public wouldn't understand what they are writing about. It's kind of a naive arrogance.

Kheya: And then it gets pegged as anti-intellectualism, but it's more of an aesthetic revolt. For example, today I opened up an article in a journal and I just

couldn't make it through the first paragraph. "As we all know (Johnson page number...)" The first two words were a citation! I think the better you understand what you are trying to say, the easier it is to actually get it across in ordinary language. It's about picking the right words.

Ken: Any concept that is worth knowing can be explained simply. The thing I like about Zed is that our authors use case studies to illustrate ideas; they try to find the right words. Maybe I am being too harsh on academic writing, but sometimes I feel that there is a wilful need to obscure, to use the right language because they know they are talking to other academics and not to the public. IR [International Relations] theory is really bad for this. It's academics talking to other academics in theoretical language in a way that is increasingly disconnected from the real world. I think there is just something antagonising about using all of that self-righteous philosophical language. It's like "Extreme Philosophy." It's a really insidious system.

Kheya: I also feel like academics try to coin their own jargon because it's their claim to fame. It's not even because it condenses an idea, it's because they want to be known for it. Another thing is that in the past we had authors who would use pseudonyms and people just won't do that anymore. Now they'd rather publish something tamer to save their career, because they want that publication attached to their real name.

David: And that isn't about intellectual training; it's about careerism.

Kheya: I can understand why it is important as a part of academic training to show that you are reading the literature and that you can cite other people's writing. But after you get through the degree, who cares? I don't need to know that you read all of that.

David: I want to defend excessive citation for a moment. I think an author should be able to introduce other things they've read. You can discuss other texts to shed light on something and move on.

Kika: I also like when books have theory and case studies. When an author introduces a text I haven't read, I am glad the citation is there so that I can follow up on it.

Kheya: Yes, when it is genuinely adding something to the debate it's fine. My problem is when authors just list citations to show they have read or when they try to be theoretical but are not actually furthering our understanding of an issue. Why pretend?

Anna: *It's interesting to hear this because we are trained to speak technically, to cite extensively and to coin our own terms. When you take those citations and that language out, you risk no longer participating in the debates in your field. I think sometimes academics try to participate in both dialogues at the same time and that is where they fail to reach a wider audience. This is why I've started to take on Uri's advice about publishing a book with a progressive press and then publishing in journals where you can work through all of your*

technical theory. I think we can learn to take our research and separate it out like that; we can learn to do both things with it.

Ken: I agree. At Zed we are an accessible academic publisher. That's why I enjoy reading Zed's books. We understand that there are certain academic conventions, but our role is to push people away from being obscure. We want to bring authors to a wider audience, especially if they are writing an activist book that will be for the trade market. We'll spend time with those books to try to get the right tone.

Kika: On that note I think I need to go home—it's already midnight!

Anna: *Yes, let's leave it here. I think we've covered a lot in three hours! Thank you all so much for sharing your insights with me.*