

# H-Net Reviews

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Joshua Clark Davis. *From Headshops to Whole Foods: The Rise and Fall of Activist Entrepreneurs*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. xiv + 314 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-17158-8.

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## The Business of Activism during the 1960s Era

University of Baltimore historian Josh Davis's *From Head Shops to Whole Foods: The Rise and Fall of Activist Entrepreneur* is an extremely welcome and insightful addition to the deepening historiography of 1960s-era activism. In the book, Davis uses head shops, black nationalist bookstores, feminist businesses, and natural food stores to explore the emergence of what he calls "activist entrepreneurs" in the 1960s and 1970s, unconventional businesses that strove to work within the terrain of consumer capitalism to "advance the goals of political change and social transformation" by "re-envisioning the products, places, and processes of American business." While divergent in some particular ways, these "small, politically informed, and often struggling shops" shared an emphasis on "social and political change, not profit, as their primary objective." They sought "autonomy and independence" from the broader "sickness" of "inequality, conformity, materialism, hypocritical moralism, and alienation" within US society that many within the New Left felt was a function of American business. Activist entrepreneurs, then, "conceived of their storefronts as antidotes to the alienation produced by America's dominant business and consumer culture," particularly the "homogenous, discriminatory, and spiritually bankrupt consumer culture of chain stores, modern industrial production, and multinational corporations." Espousing what Davis terms "participatory economics," a term he coined as a cousin to the more well-known "participatory democracy" of the Student Non-Violent Coor-

inating Committee and Students for a Democratic Society, these business owners believed that "citizens could regain power over their lives by making their daily experiences in capitalist society more humane, authentic, and even politically progressive or radical" (pp. 3-4).

The book is neatly divided into six chapters. The first, and most significant, lays out the "origins and ideologies" of activist entrepreneurs. The next four chapters successively analyze the ways black nationalist bookstores, head shops, feminist businesses, and natural food stores embodied this model. In each of these cases, Davis underscores how activist entrepreneurs disrupted traditional business practices by selling products they believed were linked to enlightenment and justice, creating "free spaces" that fostered movement culture and activism, and establishing more cooperative and egalitarian organizational processes. The final chapter delves into the "perseverance and appropriation" of activist businesses in the decades since the 1960s and 1970s, assessing their legacy and significance. It is a tight structure that roots an array of local stories within a compelling historical and theoretical framework, making it an accessible text for both scholarly and popular audiences.

There is, overall, a freshness to Davis's analysis that had me thinking in a variety of directions. Like Tanisha Ford's *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style and the Global Politics of Black Power* (2015), *From Head Shops to Whole Foods* importantly broadens our definition of "ac-

tivism” in this period and complicates our thinking about the role of business and consumerism in, as well as their relationship to, 1960s-era social movement politics. It would be interesting to extend Davis’s analysis to the coffeehouse movement of this period and, perhaps, farther afield, to some of the early entrepreneurial efforts that ultimately led to the digital revolution. And, more voices of those who frequented these businesses would have added even more insight about the purpose, use, significance, and impact of entrepreneurial activism.

Ultimately, this is a history that is fraught with often unresolved tensions that still confront activists today: Is consumer capitalism reformable, or is it a system of inherent, unavoidable, and insurmountable shortcomings? If activists decide to play on this terrain, rather

than strive to create a new one, how do they stave off cooptation? Is it possible to sustain an activist business over time? While he does not provide any definitive answers, Davis does not shrink away from these tensions, particularly in his final chapter. In the end, he concludes that while there are lessons to be learned and that activist entrepreneurs have been successful in creating political and social change on a “modest level,” “systemic change has proven elusive for them” (p. 245) Nevertheless, this history helps us imagine alternative business structures, economic goals, and definitions of success within the consumer capitalist model. As a new era of activist entrepreneurs swells in our own historical moment, *From Head Shops to Whole Foods* offers quite a bit of useful food for thought.

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