

Publishing as a Way of Creating  
*Wirklichkeit*





## **Smash Bourgeois Copyright!**

On 10 August 1973, Althusser's tragic end was still far off. He had received bad news from West Berlin and responded with an angry letter to the 'Gentlemen' – not 'Comrades' – of the tiny publisher Merve. The unauthorized translation of his essay *Freud and Lacan*, Althusser wrote, was an 'act of piracy' against which he would take legal action unless Merve retroactively offered him an 'appropriate' contract: 'Please understand the word "appropriate" in its fullest sense.'<sup>27</sup> The publishers must have complied, because three years later they published his essay again in a second edition. And yet purchasing rights generally went against their business model. Anyone who intended to feed the booming market for leftist movement literature with fresh text from abroad could not be overly scrupulous about niceties of copyright – anyone with zero seed capital, that is. Like other leftist publishers of that time, Merve began its existence with a hybrid business plan. There was a mission: to jump-start German Marxism out of its dogmatic standstill with boosts from Italy and France. There was a will: to man the printing press and the sales table in self-exploiting labour. And there was a historic opportunity: to earn the necessary small change with bootleg reprints. In an article on bootleg

printing for the 'Mass Communications' volume of the *Enciclopedia Feltrinelli-Fischer*, the Merve collective wrote in 1974:

The bootleg printing movement which arose at the beginning of the student movement (late 1966) in Berlin communes and political groups has expanded rapidly, not least thanks to the advanced technical means in use (offset printing). The number of groups producing Red books for the black market will have been about 25 in 1973. The number of reprinted titles was about 1000 by the end of 1971, with print runs varying between 200 and 6,000 and prices between 0.30 and 18.00 deutschemarks. Some titles have been printed in 20,000 to 30,000 copies. The prices overall are 40% to 60% below those of official printings. The reprinted texts continue to be primarily Marxist and psychological/psychoanalytical texts. The slogan 'Smash bourgeois copyright' stands for the literature producers' radical thesis that 'under the present socio-economic conditions of the culture and consciousness industry, "intellectual property", the ownership of artistic, literary and scientific work, mainly serves not the development of society as a whole, but the maximizing of capitalist profits'. A bootleg printing of 120 pages in 2,000 copies can be printed, with a working machine and with average skill, in 40 hours, gathered and bound in another 80 hours, with material costs of about 800 marks.<sup>28</sup>

The story of the 'literature producers' mentioned in the article may illustrate the mood in the industry. At the 1968 Frankfurt Book Fair, the leftist publishers, authors and booksellers had joined together in a syndicate. Two years later, they adopted their first set of resolutions. In addition to an appeal on economic grounds for the production of 'proletarian reprints', the paper contained an accusation that the federal government in Bonn was producing grey literature of its own and scattering it over East Germany as anti-socialist propaganda. 'Uncopyrighted bootleg printings produced expressly for this purpose have been transported to the GDR by balloons and rockets. This total manipulation of literature has led to the denunciation of the educational function of all literature.'<sup>29</sup> Literature as a political scandal: the episode is an exhibit in the case brought by the '68 generation against the fine arts. The bootleggers' resolution does not indicate

what titles were pirated by the government; that information must be slumbering in the intelligence service archives, if anywhere. Konsalik? Ernst Jünger? Arthur Koestler? There has not been any government statement on the issue.

Attacks on copyright began long before the digital age. In the 1970s, the pirates' political motives were no secret.<sup>30</sup> The Merve collective was initially one of the groups supplying the West Berlin market with bootleg books. In addition to Althusser and other contemporary authors of avant-garde theory, the Rotaprint offset machine clattering in the empty shop in Steglitz also churned out law books and classics of Marxism – Karl Korsch, Walter Benjamin, Sergei Tretyakov, Ernst Ottwalt, ... – as grey literature without a proper copyright notice. The merchandise was marketed in the left-wing bookshops and at the second-hand bookstalls in front of Freie Universität – much to the dismay of German publishers, who heaped lawsuits on the copyright pirates.<sup>31</sup> Some said that the feeding troughs of the illegal book trade generated millions, and financed such underground endeavours as the Red Army Faction, but such apocryphal figures were, at best, extrapolations by the political adversary. Where the reliable statistics ended, the paranoia of the seventies took over.<sup>32</sup> It was possible, however, to make a living by bootleg publishing. The Merve collective participated in the grey market until its own books sold well enough to finance themselves; once that point had been reached, they produced only official titles with the Merve rhombus on the cover.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, manoeuvring around copyrights remained a part of the business model. Even today, Merve is said to hold few rights, so that its assets are almost nothing but the 'Merve' brand.

Wirklichkeit Books, founded in 2019 in Berlin, publishes books to find words, images and actions for a new actuality. The programme includes titles by young artists and writers side by side with historic positions relating to poetry, play, language and art. Publishing is understood as an experimental and joyful act that engages with the travel of ideas and is seen as a way of creating *Wirklichkeit*.

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