

FEATURED COLLECTION: WOMEN IN *UNDERCURRENTS*

Undercurrents was a countercultural magazine published in England on a (loosely) bi-monthly basis from 1972 to 1984.¹ It was founded by Godfrey Boyle and designed by Sally Boyle, both of whom continued to be credited until 1979. The magazine was principally a medium for sharing **radical** views on science and technology, but it also explored how **alternative energy** intersected with social ideas including **co-operatives** and activism. The liveliness of *Undercurrents*' opinionated columns and crookedly pasted cartoons and diagrams captured the zeitgeist surrounding alternatives in the 1970s and 1980s. For its editors and contributors, alternatives to fossil fuels were not only viable but had the potential to shake up how social life and labour were organised.

The magazine's manifesto, "Science with a Human Face", describes how *Undercurrents* grew out of its creators' frustrations with the perceived failure of mainstream science to adjust technology to people's needs (UC01, 1972: 1). Alternative energy represented more than just options besides the **status quo** of a centralised energy system or using fossil fuels. As one contributor put it, 'radical energy technology must have a radical economic, political and social environment to back it up' (UC02, 1972: 2). *Undercurrents* connected alternative energy to finding alternative ways of using energy in day-to-day life. What day-to-day life entails, however, can be substantially skewed by someone's experience of race, class, and gender.

The magazine's publication coincided with the rise of **second wave feminism** and the **Women's Liberation Movement**. Feminist and alternative energy movements shared goals of self-determinacy and self-reliance, but often found themselves at cross-purposes (UC04, 1973: 5). Women were continuously involved in the production of *Undercurrents* as editors, typesetters, and distributors, but to a lesser extent as contributors. It was not until 1978 that *Undercurrents* ran a special issue on women and energy, where the editor acknowledges that women and their part in technology had been an 'area of exclusion' (UC29, 1978: 1) for the magazine. This article aims to provide an overview of how *Undercurrents* integrated the ideas, concerns, and work of women into its coverage of alternatives.

What Does Alternative Energy Mean for Women?

Throughout its run, *Undercurrents* wrestled with the ambition to deviate from the status quo and the reality of remaining inequalities which led many women to feel that alternative technology was still 'dominated by men' (UC29, 15). As early as 1973, an article by Lyn Gambles titled 'An Undercurrent of Chauvinism' criticised the way that the alternative energy movement ignored the

“If all the women in the alternative science and technology movement end up weaving all the rugs, and the men end up building all the windmills, then no-one will be liberated.”

– Lyn Gambles, *Undercurrents* 4
(Spring 1973)

technology and politics of the Women’s Liberation Movement (UC04, 1973: 5). Technologies like contraception and abortion provided women with more opportunities to be independent, such as undertaking higher education or seeking employment.² Birth control, however, did not cause an immediate shift in how women’s labour and technical competencies were perceived. Gambles’s article suggests that the alternativity of alternative energy is contingent on the equal participation of women and men in work from rug-weaving to windmill building.

When another contributor, Ruth Elliott, wrote an article about the history of women’s labour in August-September 1976, she began by revisiting Gambles’s article and observed that there had been very little debate in the three intervening years. The need for Elliott’s article to eventually reiterate the argument for thinking of ‘alternative social relations as alternative technology’ (UC17, 1976: 36) implies that alternative technology – at least as it was being represented and reported in the magazine – had not consistently integrated women’s concerns.

Acknowledgements of how *Undercurrents* and alternative technology failed to sufficiently represent women’s issues do not mean that they were absent altogether. Features, cartoons, and adverts provide insight into how and why women were organising politically during the 1970s and 1980s.³ For instance, childcare was a particularly prominent topic for women contributors. In a special issue on Women in Co-Ops, the magazine provided space for women to report on their experiences and priorities, such as running creches ‘so that everyone can do waged work’ (UC41, 1980: 15). Sustained curiosity about how alternative technology could reshape parenthood reflects one of the central demands of the first annual Women’s Liberation Conference in 1970 for free 24 hour childcare. The impact of familial commitments on producing the magazine can be seen at times. In ‘How Can Men Co-Operate?’, the byline includes an aside that the article was finished by an ‘Undercurrents hack’ after the author was ‘interrupted by [...] having a baby’ (UC46, 1981: 31). Similarly, the contents page of UC07 credits Joy Watt for handling subscriptions and distributions before ‘dropping out to make her contribution to the population explosion (a girl)’ (UC07, 1974: 1). *Undercurrents* provided a medium for women to organise and report on feminist and ecological campaigns, but also to publicly criticise and poke fun at the alternative energy movement.

“Alternative Alternatives”: Cartooning Communes in Jo Nesbitt’s *Alice’s Alternative Adventures with AT Man*

One of the defining features of *Undercurrents* is its energetic appearance. Its pages are full of pasted photographs, doodles, diagrams, and cartoons. Jo Nesbitt is a British illustrator who contributed comics to issues 29, 31 and 36, where she satirised gender roles in **communes**. For Nesbitt and many other women contributors, communal living and working arrangements were not the panacea for gender inequality they had hoped.⁴

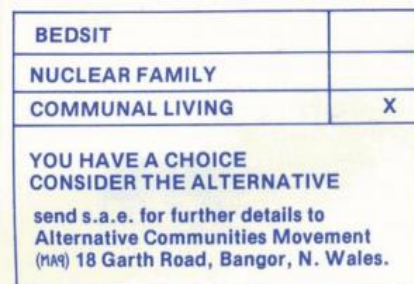


Figure 1 Ballot-style advert from UC39 (April-May 1980)

Nesbitt's comic in UC29 wittily describes how **essentialist** ideas of work pervade both traditional and alternative living situations, leaving women disadvantaged in terms of options and time for creativity. As feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir notes, 'the housewife wears herself out running on the spot' (2011: 539). The comic depicts Alice, a woman fed up with 'slaving away day in, day out for one blooming man and three blooming kids' (panel 1), getting swept away from her nuclear family to live in a communal squat by the parodic superhero, AT Man. She soon realises that housework has not been redistributed equally between men and women, and the comic's circular narrative closes on Alice's final complaint that she is now 'slaving away day in, day out for five blooming men and fourteen blooming kids' (panel 13).



Undercurrents' manifesto calls for technology to do three main things: 1) to provide small-scale sources of basics like energy, good, shelter, tools etc.; 2) to improve communication between communities; and 3) to 'relieve human beings of boredom and drudgery' (UC01, 1972: 2). Although the latter criteria alludes to the development of labour saving devices in the twentieth century, the manifesto fails to fully consider the gendered element of how drudgery is experienced. Domestic work often demanded a woman's 'total commitment, perseverance, physical strength, and energy.' (Tibbott and Thomas, 1994: 3). Despite the promise of liberation, women involved in alternative energy tended to 'perform 'back up' or 'service' roles' (UC17, 1976: 32).

While the women in Nesbitt's comic look after children and do laundry, the men seek out increasingly farcical intellectual pursuits. At first AT Man's comment that he needs to 'go see a man about a windmill' (panel 6) is innocuous. Inequality quickly becomes apparent when Alice

remarks that 'it must be great having your bloke share the childcare with you' and another woman in the commune replies that she 'wouldn't know really – I don't like to bother Fred when he's writing his book – it's called 'Alternative Parenthood: The Male Role in Childcare' (panels 8-9). Alice's attempt to organise a house meeting to discuss work sharing is met with dismissal by the men who are too busy writing dialectics about exploitation in the home or feel that 'the housework thing just isn't my trip' (panel 11). The silhouettes of the women at the house meeting in panel 10 contrast to the more detailed men in panel 11, which may symbolise how women were pushed into the background of alternative technology.



Nesbitt's comic reflects the sentiment of the issue's editor, who states that 'even within radical technology women (& men) have still to work hard in order not to find themselves in traditional roles again.' (UC29, 1978: 1). In UC46, similar power imbalances are described in co-ops. The Co-operative Movement, one contributor argued, 'cannot hope to provide any real alternative to existing ways of organising if in its attempts to remove worker/boss distinctions it ignores or reinforces discrimination against women' (UC46, 1981: 9). As with mainstream technology, where the work of women as labourers and inventors has been historically negated by the comparatively over-emphasised male worker (Devonshire and Wood, 1996: 166), many alternative energy projects reported or cartooned in *Undercurrents* struggled with gender inequality.

Conclusion

The way that *Undercurrents* represents women's issues is multifaceted. It highlights many of the social, political, and economic difficulties women encountered within radical technology, and the predominance of men writing on scientific topics entrenches this division. The types of articles written by women in *Undercurrents* suggest that women had a greater presence in

community organisation than in technical fields. This reflects ongoing trends where access to and understanding of renewable energy can free up women's time and allow them to take on roles as community mobilisers and part-time and full-time employees and entrepreneurs (IRENA, 2019: 57). For Elliott, women's involvement in alternative technology depended on encouraging women to 'develop confidence that through collective organisation and action they can challenge the status quo' (UC29, 1978: 19).

At the end of its run in 1984, *Undercurrents* merged with *Resurgence*, a magazine that *Undercurrents* created a joint issue with in 1975 and which continues to explore environmental issues today. The Mills Archive holds copies of the magazine's entire run, generously donated by David Elliott, a wind-power specialist who often contributed pieces to the magazine.

Endnotes

¹ Throughout this article, specific references to issues of *Undercurrents* will be abbreviated to UC [issue number, year: page] and given after quotations in the text.

² Women have always worked outside of the home. Exclusively performing housework was not a reality for many working-class women, especially for women of colour whose work has been consistently under-reported. The Mills Archive's catalogue and library hold various records about milling history, many of which allow women's labour in and out of the home to become visible. Contraceptive technologies and reproductive rights were nevertheless crucial for expanding opportunities by giving women greater bodily autonomy.

³ Ann Pettit's first-person perspective of the Greenham Peace Camp's co-founder about what being 'woman-led' meant (UC57, 1983: 20), a poster advertising a Day for Women at the Co-Ops Fair (UC46, 1981: 9), and an overview of feminist publishing co-op SHEBA (UC55-6, 1982: 36) are just a few examples of how women used *Undercurrents* to promote their organisations.

⁴ For an example of how women wrote about communes in *Undercurrents*, see UC29, pp.32-33, where three women write about their experiences of living and sharing skills in communes.

References

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KEY WORDS

Alternative Energy

Options for generating or using power that do not involve fossil fuels. Often meaning renewable energy.

Communes

A non-traditional living arrangement where a group of people live together and share responsibilities.

Co-operative (Co-op)

An organisation, such as a farm or business, that is run jointly by its members.

Essentialism

Believing that the nature of something is invariable i.e. that a type of person has a set of innate attributes.

Radical

A view that differs substantially from the mainstream.

Second Wave Feminism

A surge in feminist activity from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Status Quo

The current situation / the dominant beliefs and behaviours about politics, social life, or science.

Women's Liberation

A second-wave feminist movement that began in the 1970s, demanding independence and equal rights for women.

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IRENA. (2019). *Renewable Energy: A Gender Perspective*. Abu Dhabi: IRENA.

Tibbott, S. Minwell and Beth Thomas. (1994). *O'r Gwaith i'r Gwely: Cadw tŷ 1890-1960 (A Woman's Work: Housework 1890-1960)*. Welsh Folk Museum. Cardiff: National Museum of Wales.

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