

# NEW YORK OBSERVER

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## **NO ROOM FOR NIETZCHE: ROUTLEDGE DECONSTRUCTS**

Routledge, the hip cultural-studies publisher that for years has walked the fine line between academic respectability and modest commercial success may be losing its balance. “Word is out!” one ex-employee recently said. “Routledge is going down!”

Well, not quite. But the past year has been one of queasy turmoil in the West 45<sup>th</sup> street office of Routledge, one of the world’s largest academic publishers, just behind St. Martin’s Press and Cambridge University Press. The company changed hands last October: its new president, Colin Jones, has pressured a number of employees to leave and some of Routledge’s most prominent authors are anxious about the company’s future. To make matters worse, Routledge is battling many of its own employees, who are being represented by the United Automobile Workers union.

Sever former employees accuse Mr. Jones of trying to “dumb down” Routledge, the house where intellectual tongue twisters such as Bell Hooks’ *Outlaw Culture*, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, and Stanley Aronowitz’s *Death and Rebirth of American Radicalism* have traditionally found a warm home. One of Routledge’s new authors, is decidedly more accessible: Dr. Ruth Westheimer.

In the last week of February and first week of March, all four of Routledge’s editorial assistants quit. One of them, Alan Weider, said, “Routledge is spiritually dead. There’s a dearth of creative people, and it’s becoming more paper-pushing kind of people, which is in line with =what the president wants.” He added, “There are people in the editorial department who wouldn’t know Judy Butler from Judy Blume.”

Commenting on recent books signed by Routledge, a current employee said “There’ inferior versions of good books from the last few years – really easy to parody. Live Sex Acts, which is in the spring catalogue, is just uncritical essays followed by interviews with prostitutes – absolute junk and a total misuse of theory.”

Well-known feminist poet and critic Bell Hooks, who has published three books with Routledge, said she was losing patience. They’ve been trying to get me to sign things, but I’ve been trying to figure out what’s going on there. I’ve been calling there for the past two weeks, and no one has answered my calls.”

Mr. Jones responds to critics by saying he has been on a mission to save a company where morale was on a downward spiral. When he joined last year, he said, “Routledge seemed to be going down the tube.” Indeed, Routledge has been subject to massive cost cutting before Mr. Jones signed on. On March 26, he sent a two-page letter

to Routledge writers, outlining the company's differences with the union and assuring writers that "We also want to continue our relationship with you as we build Routledge."

### **NO 'NUDIES'**

Routledge's success – its New York and London offices produce about 700 books a year—has been attributed to its ability to distribute on a large scale risky books other academic presses weren't willing or able to publish. "They were at the forefront of intellectual changes happening in higher education, and they were able to take advantage of the crossover status between academic and trade publishing," said Linda Nicholson, who published an anthology of feminism with Routledge and edited its "Thinking Gender" series. The house derived much of its power from the fact that it was backed by a corporate sugar daddy instead of a university, with its attendant committees and politicking. Until June 1996, Routledge was being funded by International Thompson Publishing Corporation, which has investments in larger-profit publishing companies such as legal publisher West Publishing Inc. and business publisher Chapman & Hall. Thompson let Routledge do what it wanted. "We could have been publishing nudies for all they cared," explained one former Routledge editor.

But Routledge kept its pants on. Its particular strength was "cultural studies": books such as Eric Smoodin's *Disney Discourse* and Cornel West's *Keeping Faith*. . .  
*(for the rest of the article please see NYOBSERVER.COM)*