PRETTY PAMPHLETS

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> "The relationship between the crimes and the torments is never anything but poetic." Friedrich W. J. Schelling: *Ueber Dante in philosophischer Beziehung* (1803)

Few literary genres have been as neglected by formal literary aesthetics as the pamphlet. It is often – and almost always in an offhand manner – considered a preeminently instrumental mode of address which particular social actors employ to achieve specific ends in a given sociopolitical context. Beginning with the mutual involution of the Reformation, the progressive globalization of trade, and the advent of the printing press,[1] the pamphlet has been a literary genre and format that populations turn to – both as authors and readers – whenever they wish to crystallize political wills into political institutions,[2] i.e., whenever they aspire to transpose "statements of desire"[3] into statements of fact.

Historians of the public sphere and literary theorists alike have usually underlined, if anything, the material or transcendental[4] dimension of pamphletary aesthetics, pointing either to the "physical composition, ephemeral duration, and commodity seduction"[5] of pamphletary texts, or to their gesturing toward messianic social ends, their paradoxical social functionalization as mechanisms of political stabilization,[6] their dependence on specific infrastructures of reproduction and circulation, their agency as originators of counterpublics,[7] and their historical function as vectors of economic rationalization.[8] Here, a large segment of the critical tradition posits the sociopolitical efficacy of the pamphlet while bypassing the aesthetic conditions of possibility of this efficacy itself.

Can the sociopolitical efficacy of pamphletary literature be conversely attributed to its immanent, stylistic, or illocutionary features? Does the political agency of pamphletary literature largely depend on the pamphlet *as* literature, that is, more generally, on the "literariness" of the pamphlet as a polemical statement? Here, correlations between aesthetic properties and sociohistorical effects

1 Carla Hesse: "Economic Upheavals in Publishing", in: *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775–1800*, ed. by Robert Darnton, Daniel Roche, Berkeley: University of California Press (1989), pp. 69–97.

2 Throughout this text, I use "institutions" in the broad sense of instituted representational schemes of political norms proposed, among others, by Cornelius Castoriadis. Generally: Cornelius Castoriadis: "Institution of Society and Religions", in: idem: *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, trans. by David Ames Curtis, Stanford: Stanford University Press (1997), pp. 311–330.

3 Roland Barthes: "The Adjective is the 'Statement' of Desire", in: idem: *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1991), pp. 172–176.

4 Here understood in its non-Kantian sense.

5 Nicholas Thoburn: "Communist Objects and the Values of Printed Matter", in: *Social Text* 28/2 (2010), pp. 1–30.

6 Benoît Bréville: "Pétitionnaires de tous les pays", in: *Le Monde diplomatique* (August 2020), p. 28.

7 Michael Warner: *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York: Zone Books (2002), pp. 65-123. See also: Andreas Reckwitz: *Das hybride Subjekt: Eine Theorie der Subjektkulturen von der bürgerlichen Moderne zur Postmoderne*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp (2020), pp. 169-185.

8 Andrew Pettegree: *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation*, New York: Penguin (2016), pp. 22–35.

are often affirmed, sometimes loosely extrapolated from empirical studies,[9] rarely substantiated by close attention to the material itself, and never properly theorized at a scale commensurate with their object.

There are, in fact, several historical arguments to be made against aesthetic reductionisms – transcendental, immanent, and materialist alike. Notably, modern pamphletary literature emerged against the backdrop of a formal aesthetics that predominantly sought to secure the legitimacy of aesthetic pursuits in social settings that increasingly codified behavioral expectations[10] and increasingly constrained socially divisive statements.[11] This is still the case today. From Immanuel Kant to Luc Boltanski, legitimate preoccupation with the beautiful pivoted on various attempts to regulate deviations from socially beneficial ends (the classical triumvirate of *freedom*, *autonomy*, and *truth*) and to do so *positively* by defining the specific moral, epistemological, political, or social utility ("affordances") of aesthetic pursuits. Pamphlets have historically tended to reaffirm this coupling in a particular way, simultaneously upsetting *both* prevailing aesthetic norms and competing conceptions of the desirable political life whenever they successfully triggered large-scale discursive events in the public sphere. Since the Reformation, short-form polemical literature has therefore tended to pull the aesthetic rug out from under instituted conceptions of socially beneficial ends, and vice versa. Hence, aesthetic reductionisms fail to grasp the constitutive bivalence of pamphletary literature.

In this article, I will make the argument that both literary and social historians should take the full measure of what can be best thought of as a series of minute anomalies in the history of aesthetics. From the early sixteenth century onwards, the pamphlet has unleashed its negativity against both the *beautiful* and the *good* and introduced aesthetic problems and styles which literary theory has come to take for granted since the late twentieth century. As a crucial historical modality of the politicization of literature and the literarization of the political,[12] pamphletary literature has fundamentally altered the kind of questions literary historians ask about literature.

This somewhat trivial thesis has four non-trivial applications for literary history and aesthetics which I want to discuss very summarily in this essay. First, Kantian aesthetics provides a counterintuitive framework for the study of pamphlets as aesthetic forms, provided we grant some of Kant's own marginalia the weight they deserve. Second, Enlightenment pamphleteering often served as the medium of a highly generalizing critique of Enlightenment philosophy, pointing out the latter's dependence on precisely the aesthetic and rhetorical strategies it associated with the *Ancien Régime*. Third, literary aesthetics should pay attention

9 Generally: Karine Nahon, Jeff Hemsley: *Going Viral*, Cambridge: Polity Press (2013).

10 See also: Niklas Barth, Pierre-Héli Monot: "Negationen der Negationskontrolle: Eine Infrastrukturgeschichte polemogener Rede", in: *Medien der Infrastruktur*, ed. by Friedrich Balke, Bernhard Siegert, Joseph Vogl, forthcoming.

11 See also: Bertrand Binoche: *Écrasez l'infâme! Philosopher à l'âge des Lumières*, Paris: La fabrique éditions (2018), pp. 19–58.

12 Michel Hastings, Cédric Passard, Juliette Rennes: "Les mutations du pamphlet dans la France contemporaine", in: *Mots: Les langages du politique* 91 (2009), pp. 5–17, p. 5.

to the way its epistemic demands negate the very function of pamphleteering by demanding that authorship, agency, and meaning be attributed to texts whose anonymity, obliqueness and illegibility served specific urgent political functions. Finally, I draw on basic game theory to sketch out a hypothesis which allows us to think about the specific agency of pamphletary literature: the political power of pamphleteering is perhaps best thought of as the kind of "pressure" that results from statements becoming properly "common," that is, from subjects having knowledge of all other subjects' knowledge of a given political issue. I thereby reframe the concept this essay begins with – Kantian *sensus communis* – in terms of a game-theoretical *common knowledge*.

THE NAME

The status of pamphlets as "agitational objects,"[13] "communist objects"[14] or, much more loosely, as "*textes violents et agressifs*"[15] jars with the disputed (and almost certainly erroneous[16]) etymology of the term itself: in name, the *pamphilos* should be loved by all, end the propagation of eristic discourse, and reassert political commonality. In fact, however, the oppositional logic of pamphletary discourse has long served various factional groups intent on decomposing both orderly discourse and orderly aesthetic modes, and subsequently reconstituting political commonality around redefined political goals or socioethical stances. By achieving this antithetical motion of de- and recomposition, pamphletary literature underscores some of the defining fault lines of canonical aesthetics.

Kantian judgments of taste, for instance, depend on the suspension not only of "interest," but also of the historicity and contingency of the "sensus communis" on whose account aesthetic judgments always refer to universality (i.e., to what Kant calls the modes of "representation of everyone else"[17]). In this traditional reading of Kantian aesthetics, *sensus communis* (or the "public sense,"[18] in Kant's own paraphrase) is a reflective faculty: it takes account of the *extant* modes of representations and judgments of all others as a regulative ideal. Many of Kant's prominent commentators have justly taken issue with this highly reified understanding of *sensus communis*. In line with Johann Gottfried Herder's early forays into aesthetic historicism, Hans-Georg Gadamer criticized Kant for having emptied *sensus communis* of "all political content" and turning it into a "purely theo-

13 Gillian Whiteley: "The Allure of Pamphilos: The Radical Art of Pamphleteering", in: *Art, Politics, and The Pamphleteer*, ed. by Jane Tormey, Gillian Whiteley, London: Bloomsbury Academic (2021), pp. 5–28, p. 6.

14 Thoburn: "Communist Objects and the Values of Printed Matter" (2010), pp. 1–30.

15 Hastings, Passard, Rennes: "Les mutations du pamphlet dans la France contemporaine" (2009), p. 5.

16 Yvonne Bellenger: "Le pamphlet avant le pamphlet: le mot et la chose", in: *Cahiers de l'Association International des Études Françaises* 36 (1984), pp. 87–96.

17 Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Judgement*, ed. by Nicholas Walker, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2007), p. 123.

18 Kant: *Critique of Judgement* (2007), p. 123.

retical faculty," stripping it of its "genuine critical significance" in the process.[19] While it did retain its meaning as a "general civic quality" in England (Shaftesbury, Hutcheson), Kantian *sensus communis* was demoted to a mere "scholasticism of the basic faculties" in continental Europe.[20] Others, like Hannah Arendt or Jean-François Lyotard, tried to modulate the normative power of Kantian public sense. For Arendt, Kant missed the opportunity to explicitly frame his political theory in fully processual and communicational terms (i.e., in liberal ones): here, judgments of taste might have secured a public awareness of the contingency and historicity of *sensus communis* itself, thereby securing the political productivity of aesthetics for any liberal society oriented toward self-reflexivity.[21] Lyotard, for his part, throws out the baby with the bathwater and declares both "sensus" and "communis" to be "ungraspable" (what else? This is 1988, after all.) The historical and political modulation of the "community" which qualifies *sensus communis* thus comes at the cost of the intelligibility of community itself: aesthetic judgments can transform the community, yet by the same token the latter becomes "unintellected" and, in turn, "unintelligent."[22]

Yet it is Kant himself who, in an almost always neglected part of §40, provides the clearest solution to the proper politicization of *sensus communis*: weighing one's subjective aesthetic judgment "with the collective reason of mankind" is "accomplished by weighing the judgment, not so much with actual, as rather with merely possible, judgments of others" ("*nicht sowohl wirkliche, als vielmehr bloß mögliche Urteile*").[23] While Kant does not elaborate, the "judgments of others" are "merely possible," rather than "actual," for two palpable reasons. First, individuals do not have empirical, unmediated access to the judgments of others: Kantian *sensus communis* is a necessary fiction at least insofar as it depends on its active and uncertain reconstruction by individuals during the elaboration of aesthetic judgments. Second, and more compellingly, the judgments of others are "merely possible" because any community can be subjected to radical sociohistorical transformations, thereby predicating the imagination of a *sensus communis* on the most radical sociohistorical *uncertainty*. Here, Kant does provide some arresting comments. A footnote to §65 explains that in the case of a complete transformation, recently undertaken, of a great people into a state, the word *organization* has frequently, and with much propriety, been used for the constitution of the legal authorities and even of the entire body politic. For in a whole of this kind certainly no member should be a mere means, but should also be an end, and, seeing that he contributes to the possibility of the entire body, should have his position and function in turn defined by the idea of the whole.[24] Means and ends: Here, Kant is not referring to a metaphysical grounding of morals, but

19 Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*, London: Bloomsbury (2004), p. 25.
20 Gadamer: *Truth and Method* (2004), p. 25.
21 Hannah Arendt: *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1992), pp. 68-80.
22 Jean-François Lyotard: "Sensus Communis", in: *Paragraph* 11/1 (1988), pp. 1–23.
23 Kant: *Critique of Judgement* (2007), p. 123.
24 Kant: *Critique of Judgement* (2007), p. 203.

rather to their historical transpositions, i.e., to the American Revolution,[25] that "certain union," that "complete transformation... of a great people into a state."[26] In revolutionary times, aesthetic judgments are necessarily passed on highly uncertain terms, given the sudden suspension of any plausible "universality" to the benefit of factionality, dissensus, and the teleological constitution of a newly formalized community: Kant's post-revolutionary "state" (Kantian scholars sometimes wish to explore the implications of a "*dissensus communis*"[27]: this would be the appropriate setting). The formation of a new *sensus communis*, i.e., the formation of the very terms upon which individual judgments of taste may be *plausibly* universalized and referred back to a concrete political community, is itself the object of revolutionary politics.

Kant suggests that during revolutionary times, i.e., during times in which "organization" operates as a particular form of statecraft, causality is suspended insofar as the "position and function" of the individual and "the idea of the whole" are suddenly made mutually dependent. Both poles are trapped in a process of acausal,[28] hypothetical, and mutual definition, that is, a process of "organization" (§65). The individual hypothesizes a "whole" (the "entire body politic," i.e., a universalized referent), which in turn allocates a position and function to the individual. We must therefore underscore Kant's revolutionary caveat: the fabled "subjective universality"[29] of Kantian aesthetic judgments is an oxymoronic predicament *except in revolutionary situations*. Then and only then are subjectivity and universality *always potentially coinciding*, that is, they can be made to coincide by the mere aesthetic agency of an individual hypothesization of the whole, a hypothesization which may, in turn, be recognized by all others as both *plausible* and *desirable*.

THE THINGS

The pamphlet is the literary modality of this coincidence, historically as much as aesthetically. There is, of course, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776) and its antithetical motion of de- and recomposition of the *sensus communis*. It has, to my knowledge, never been noted that the pamphlet's opening paragraphs echo the dialectics of Kantian aesthetic judgments. Paine begins by framing pre-revolutionary events as unmediated impressions upon his subjectivity (the "sentiments," the "tumult," the "superficial appearance" of this "long and violent

25 On this point, see: Ortwin Graef: "'Sweet Dreams, Monstered Nothings': Catachresis in Kant and Coriolanus", in: *The Ethics in Literature*, ed. by Andrew Hadfield, Dominic Rainsford, Tim Woods, Basingstoke: Macmillan (1999), pp. 233–236.

26 Kant: *Critique of Judgement* (2007), p. 203.

27 See for instance: Josef Früchtl: "Sensus and Dissensus Communis: The Comedy of Democracy (Following Cavell)", in: *Aesthetic Investigations* 4/1 (2020), pp. 96–111.

28 In §65, "organization" stands in for "revolution", with Kant contrasting both terms with "causality", "it has nothing analogous to any causality known to us", in: Kant: *Critique of Judgement* (2007), p. 203. On this point: Diane Morgan: *Kant Trouble: Obscurities of the Enlightenment*, London: Routledge (2000), pp. 140–146.

29 Kant: *Critique of Judgement* (2007), p. 43.

abuse of power"). He then asserts he has "studiously avoided every thing which is personal among ourselves."[30] The first salvo of Paine's text is as clearly binary as Kant's aesthetic treatise, whatever the historical reasons for this parallelism. Yet this distinction soon collapses, in turn mimicking Kant's revolutionary caveat: in time, Paine's collective subject ("ourselves," "Common sense will tell *us*"[31]) simultaneously becomes an authorial *pluralis modestiae*, a Republican We, and a universal referent (the "mankind" both Paine and Kant call upon throughout their respective texts). Paine presents a *sensus communis* to which the author has unmediated access precisely because it is a performative object: the common sense of *Common Sense* is affirmed, rationally demonstrated, and declared to be universal by the text itself. As is Paine's reading counterpublic, specifically as a "kind of social totality" that "exists by virtue of being addressed" (Warner).[32]

A less immediately obvious example is nested in the fifth chapter of the Marquis de Sade's barbaric *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (1795, also translated as *Philosophy in the Bedroom*). A mock pamphlet "bought outside the Palace of Equality [...] straight from the press," entitled "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, if You Would Become Republicans," is read aloud by the libertine Dolmancé during the political and sexual education of 15-year-old Eugénie. A rare example of a fictional pamphlet in canonical literature, "Yet Another Effort" straddles two versions of the same republican *sens commun*. On the one hand, Sade invokes popular power as the only legitimate source of Republicanism: The French Revolution is the natural effect of renewed popular political vigor. On the other, Sade invokes the metaphysical failings of the Revolution: If all references to God ("an idea without object" and a "hallucination"[33]) have not been expunged from the post-revolutionary State, it may not properly be thought of as a republican one. Should Republicans decide to dispense with transcendental foundations of morality, however, they would then be brought to condone

> *prostitution, incest, rape,* and *sodomy.* We surely must not for one moment doubt that all those known as moral crimes, that is to say, all acts of the sort to which those we have just cited belong, are of total inconsequence under a government whose sole duty consists in preserving, by whatever may be the means, the form essential to its continuance: there you have a republican government's unique morality. Well, the republic being permanently menaced from the outside by the despots surrounding it, the means to its preservation cannot be imagined as moral means, for the republic will preserve itself only by war, and nothing is less moral than war. I ask how one will be able to demonstrate that in a state rendered immoral by its obligations,

30 Thomas Paine: "Common Sense", in: *Common Sense and Other Writings*, ed. by Jason M. Opal, New York: Norton (2012 [1775–1776]), p. 3.

31 Paine: "Common Sense" (2012), p. 33.

32 Warner: *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), p. 50.

33 I am quoting from the older but excellent translation by Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse. See Marquis de Sade: "Philosophy in the Bedroom", in: *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings*, New York: Grove Press (1965 [1795]), p. 304.



1 Thomas Paine, holding scroll "Rights of Man." Unknown, *Wha wants me* [sic!] (26 December 1792), Library of Congress.

it is essential that the individual be moral? I will go further: it is a very good thing he is not.[34]

Sade's fictional pamphlet has been the object of few interpretations, yet these have always been highly sophisticated, most of them centering on the philosophical foundations of libertine and atheist ethics. Yet I believe they miss the point

34 Sade: "Philosophy in the Bedroom" (1965), p. 314.

when they relate Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir* to Kant's ethics, rather than to Kant's aesthetics. While it is true, as Jacques Lacan argued, that the ethical "coherence" of Sade's pamphlet is "precisely the Kantian criteria [*sic*] Sade advances to justify his positions that constitute what can be called a kind of anti-morality,"[35] Sade demonstrates something altogether different: the republican *sensus communis* is a contingent, historical, and malleable referent that can undergo rapid transformations, whatever the internal coherence of its ethical norms.

This distinction is historically important because Sade, freely adapting entire passages from Baron d'Holbach and Voltaire, discreetly argues that the dialectic of the Radical Enlightenment is not only inconsistent, but also dependent on precisely the aesthetic and rhetorical strategies it associated with the *Ancien Régime*: revolutionaries wrongly predicated their moral and aesthetic sensibilities on a benevolent, near-reflexive, Rousseauist "*peuple*" that, for all practical purposes, had *plausibly* been abolished together with hereditary monarchy. Conversely, a post-Revolutionary Republic must necessarily take account of a new "representation of everyone else" (Kant), that is, quite literally, of a new "regime of representation" [36]: by coupling ethical values ("coherence," "clarity") to social outcomes certain to be rejected by the revolutionary population (the legalization of "*prostitution, incest*, *rape*, and *sodomy*"), Sade insists, as he does elsewhere in Boudoir, that brute rhetorical force must supersede argumentative quality. For Sade, in other words, there can be no Radical Enlightenment, only a process of radical oppositional politics in which pamphleteering (as a style and political logic) is the norm.

What political theory does "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen" ultimately propose? How does the *aestheticism* of Sade's critique of the Revolution modify revolutionary conceptions of the state? In effect, nowhere does Sade more clearly agree with Kant than in his theory of revolutionary statecraft. For both Sade and Kant, the revolutionary state is a political organ solely devoted to its own preservation, i.e., to its own kind of political *conatus*.[37] For Kant, a spontaneous, a-causal "organization" such as that of the American Revolution is the only situation in which the contradiction between individual judgments and the totalizing "representation of everyone else" is potentially resolved. The state emerges out of this coincidence and strives to maintain its existence. For Sade, too, a "revolutionary state" must remain an oxymoron as long as it depends on reified referents: from the moment it dispenses with a transcendental foundation for morality, it must either dispense with morality altogether (and condone *prostitution*, *incest*, *rape*, and *sodomy*), *or ground morality in a new aesthetics, that is, a new regime of* "representation of everyone else." In *Boudoir*, perhaps as much as in as in the imaginary of

35 Jacques Lacan: "Kant with Sade", in: *October* 51 (1989), pp. 55–75, p. 59.

36 Stuart Hall: "Introduction", in: *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. by Stuart Hall, London: Sage Publications (1997), pp. 1–12, p. 8.

37 The question of whether Kant ever read Spinoza is an old one; it was recently raised again by Omri Boehm. Sade almost certainly did read Spinoza, yet primarily understood him as a "virtuous atheist", with all the amusing contradictions this must entail from a Sadian perspective. See Omri Boehm: *Kant's Critique of Spinoza*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2014), pp. 405–417.

the Revolution at large, the pamphlet is the *explicit* literary medium of this twofold regime change.

THE EMPTY CHAIR: PAMPHLETEERS AS A RECURSIVE PUBLIC

Popular lyrics and tunes, jokes, gossip, unofficial currency, and grey literature are often co-created or recreated as they circulate. Consequently, few scholarly works achieve the kind of fine granularity needed to attribute basic properties to these diffuse objects (authorship, original context, intention, popular reception, etc.). Literary and social historians usually struggle to give an account of the concrete social existence of very high-circulation cultural artifacts.

Pamphlets are a relative exception to the rule. Because pamphlets have been the object of systematic surveillance, censorship, preservation by legal authorities, and cataloging by police forces since the early seventeenth century,[38] they also represent an immense, if fragmentary, archive of global polemical texts and sentiments. We simply know more about this kind of grey literature than we do about any other.

One paradoxical consequence of this archive is that it reveals an extreme murkiness when it comes to most of the things historians and theorists usually want to know about literary texts. This is the case for the authorship of pamphletary texts, which is unknown or, more precisely, a Rumsfeldian "known unknown" in most cases. Their successive reproduction and modification by readers further muddies their original intent and context, sometimes to the point of complete indecipherability. Finally, their popular reception is either obscure in content (as publicly expressing opinions on polemical utterances often entails political risks), or, much more recently, overwhelming in scope (as ordinary readers have posted an enormous body of colloquial literary and political criticism online since the very early 1990s).[39] We know that we cannot know what we usually want to know about literary texts – such known unknowns are precious, if negative, signposts for literary historians. In fact, the canonical pamphlets – Martin Luther's *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* (1517), Émile Zola's *J'Accuse...!* (1898), Paine's *Common Sense* (1776), Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto* (1967) – are anything but representative of the genre at large, precisely because such properties can, and have long been, attributed to them.

Yet this misapprehension has been central not only to the study of pamphletary literature by historians and theorists, but also to governmental control of seditious speech since the mid-eighteenth century. Under Louis XV, police were mobilized daily to capture the authors of antimonarchical odes and pamphlets. Robert Darnton has analyzed one of these cases in detail. After the arrest of a medical student in possession of a seditious poem, police forces mapped the circulation of the text:

38 The emphasis is on the *systematic* nature of surveillance by dedicated institutions.

39 On the history of the "reading public", also see: Stefan Collini: *The Nostalgic Imagination: History in English Criticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2019), pp. 126–155.

> [...] as the investigation broadened, the picture became more complicated. The poem crossed paths with five other poems, each of them seditious (at least in the eyes of the police) and each with its own diffusion pattern. They were copied on scraps of paper, traded for similar scraps, dictated to more copyists, memorized, declaimed, printed in underground tracts, adapted in some cases to popular tunes, and sung. In addition to the first group of suspects sent to the Bastille, seven others were also imprisoned; and they implicated five more, who escaped. In the end, the police filled the Bastille with fourteen purveyors of poetry [...]. But they never found the author of the original verse. In fact, it may not have had an author, because people added and subtracted stanzas and modified phrasing as they pleased. It was a case of collective creation; and the first poem overlapped and intersected with so many others that, taken together, they created a field of poetic impulses, bouncing from one transmission point to an-other and filling the air with what the police called "mauvais propos" or "mauvais discours," a cacophony of sedition set to rhyme.[40]

Located at the intersection of popular dissent and police surveillance, the pamphlet sits uneasily alongside the vast transformation of modern statecraft into what anthropologist James C. Scott has described as "High Modernism," i.e., a system of governance through legibility and simplification typical of increasingly centralized societies. The standardization of units of measure, the legal framing of literary authorship, the centralization of administrative management, the later Hausmannian emphasis on straight lines, and, most importantly, the identification of disenfranchised political subjects through the attribution of surnames all contributed to the "legibility" of the body politic by the state: "an overall, aggregate, synoptic view of a selective reality is achieved, making possible a high degree of schematic knowledge, control, and manipulation."[41] Against the backdrop of a drive toward a synoptic grasp of the ensemble, the pamphlet can best be understood as an "assemblage of enunciation"[42] in which social agents interact functionally so as to protect their personhood from reprisal. In return, these agents obtain a tacit poetic license to intervene aesthetically and poetically in the objects they circulate.[43]

Christopher Kelty has provided a fragmentary interpretive model for the kind of mutual interpenetration of social theory and hermeneutics at play here. Discussing cypherpunks, sysadmins, bloggers, and coders, Kelty describes communicational groups "whose defining characteristic is recursive in nature: a group constituted by a shared, profound concern for the technical and legal conditions of possibility for their own association. I call this mode of association a 'recursive

40 Robert Darnton: *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press (2010), p. 11.

41 James C. Scott: *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1998), p. 11.

42 Marco Deseriis: "On the Symbolic Power of Shared Pseudonyms", in: *Seachange* 6/1 (2015), pp. 51–62, p. 59.

43 Deseriis: "On the Symbolic Power of Shared Pseudonyms" (2015), p. 59.

public'."[44] Publics are "recursive" when they become and remain possible through the explicit discussion of their material and discursive conditions of possibility. A comparable attention to the conditions of production of the very means of both communication and association – always considered two sides of a single problem – is present throughout the history of pamphleteering, one of whose defining features is perhaps an unbending focus on the articulation of publicity and communicational safety. Such an emphasis on the phatic dimension of communication must inflect the way scholars perceive these texts. As Kelty observes, any assertion as to the properties of a specific communicative setting (such as the "openness" of the Internet, or the "risks" posed by dissident statements) is "not an ontological claim" about the way this setting *is* "so much as it is a hermeneutic and prescriptive one that is focused on maintaining a particular moral order, or if it proves absent, a plan for achieving it."[45]

We must therefore consider the unavoidably metapoetic, metacommunicational, and metapolitical dimension of pamphletary literature: when pamphleteers write, they are also always writing about the legal, habitual, and communicational norms that prohibit them from writing using non-pamphletary media. This feature crystallizes as an ethical problem for literary theorists, who must consider the way their work participates in the High Modernist program of instituting "legibility" precisely where loopholes, silences, anonymity, lapses, in a word, *illegibility*, fulfills both an aesthetic and a political function.

This problem has been the object of sustained attention in disciplines concerned with communication among disenfranchised populations. (What, for instance, is the political cost of spelling out "encrypted" or "disguised"[46] communication among peasants in the Global South to highly educated audiences in developed nations?) While the pamphlet has been associated with resistance to state centralization and surveillance since the mid-eighteenth century as the main socially sanctioned form of collective authorship, more recent examples abound. These cases not only reveal the fragile foundations that pamphletary literature provides to such forms of political agency, but also the concrete political stakes literary criticism and theory must explicitly consider whenever they participate in instituting legibility in place of functional opacity.

In 2008, 303 Chinese dissident intellectuals signed the "Charter 08" manifesto. The text – one of the great liberal statements of the twenty-first century – demanded the end of one-party rule, the separation of powers, an independent judiciary, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, free markets, and the guaranteeing of human rights in Mainland China.[47] One of the conditions of possibility of such demands in the context of a highly centralized authoritarian state was a multiplication of signatories and, in turn, a blurring of

44 Christopher Kelty: "Geeks, Social Imaginaries, and Recursive Publics", in: *Cultural Anthropology* 20/2 (2005), pp. 185–214, p. 185.

45 Kelty: "Geeks, Social Imaginaries, and Recursive Publics" (2005), p. 200.

46 James C. Scott: *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1990), pp. 136–182.

47 The original text was translated into English by Perry Link and is available on the website of *Reporters sans frontières*, https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/Charter08.pdf.

authorial responsibility. While the text of the Charter was not attributed to any author in particular, Chinese authorities banned the pamphlet hours before the text's publication, arresting at least seventy of the original signatories, subjecting some to torture, and singling out writer Liu Xiaobo as the main author of the Charter. Liu Xiaobo was sentenced to eleven years' imprisonment, during which time he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize – with the Nobel Committee awarding the prize to an empty chair in Oslo. Did Liu Xiaobo actually write the Charter? The question is moot, given that the assemblage of enunciation that undersigned the text was produced as a collective body of authors by Chinese dissidents. The enforcement of legibility by a centralized state therefore came at the cost of making this enforcement itself the object of international public attention, a catastrophe in a society whose cultural norms strictly prohibit "airing the family's dirt outside" (家丑往外扬).[48] The Nobel Committee, on the other hand, acted recklessly, despite Liu Xiaobo's unquestionable merits as an author and political actor: the Prize brashly undersigned the reductive attribution of the Charter to its most prominent co-author.

POWER, PRESSURE

Pamphletary power is officious, para-institutional, and elusive as a scholarly object. Identifying and classifying agential relationships between polemical texts and sociopolitical effects remains a vexing enterprise in all but the few cases where a *single* pamphlet became the point of focus of a given public or counterpublic. How then can a theory of pamphletary agency be derived from the general historical processes outlined above, especially if we want to provide more robust answers than the formulaic tropes that have marked much of the scholarship on the pamphlet? Theories of factional power, that is, theories of the kind of power that derives from "pressure groups," have in fact suffered an appalling contraction in the wake of the hegemonic Foucauldian imaginary in the humanities. What used to be a lively intellectual tradition raging from Otto von Gierke to Émile Durkheim has given way to the most analogical of arguments. Let me then briefly return to a pre-Foucauldian paradigm and to a particular observation made by Mancur Olson in *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965) in order to grasp one of the particularities of pamphletary power. Olson famously noted that ordinary pressure groups are usually a "by-product" of other, more central activities:

> [...] large economic groups with significant lobbying organizations [...] are also organized for some other purpose. The large and powerful economic lobbies are in fact the by-products of organizations that obtain their strength

48 Pitman B. Potter, Sophia Woodman: "Boundaries of Tolerance: Charter 08 and Debates over Political Reform", in: *Liu Xiaobo, Charter 08, and the Challenges of Political Reform in China*, ed. by Jean-Philippe Béja, Fu Hualing, Eva Pils, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press (2012), pp. 97–118, p. 111.

and support because they perform some function in addition to lobbying for collective goods.

The lobbies of the large economic groups are the by-products of organizations that have the capacity to "mobilize" a latent group with "selective incentives." The only organizations that have the "selective incentives" available are those that (1) have the authority and capacity to be coercive, or (2) have a source of positive inducements that they can offer the individuals in a latent group.[49]

We can think of pamphleteers and their readers as *pamphletary groups* , i.e., as partisan groups that use polemical literature as a political vector. Pamphletary groups arguably deny Olson's highly influential theory in an interesting way. They are usually neither secondary to a common primary activity, nor do they have the capacity to coerce social actors into participation. They do, however, mobilize support by the distribution of positive inducements, ranging from the association with socioethical or cognitive goods (usually: associating with groups acting for "justice," "fair- ness," "equality," etc.) to the obtention of material or legal goods (usually: associating with groups campaigning for better wages or the acquisition of rights). Pamphletary groups therefore function as "pressure groups" *without having the capacity to back up promised incentives other than through the potential success of their enterprise*.

This, in turn, raises an interesting question of political heuristics: Under which circumstances would such a wager be reasonable for social agents? In which cases would the chance of obtaining promised incentives outweigh the risk of associating with a pressure group that cannot effectively guarantee the distribution of these incentives *ex ante*? One way to approach this question is to turn to game theory and its distinction between "common knowledge" (first introduced by David Lewis in 1965)[50] and "mutual knowledge" (first introduced by Stephen Schiffer in 1972).[51] In this seminal distinction, knowledge is said to be "common" when all agents know a proposition, when they all know that they all know this proposition, when they all know that they all know that they all know this proposition, *ad infinitum*. By contrast, knowledge is said to be "mutual" when all agents know a proposition, but do not know that all others know this proposition. Hence all common knowledge is also mutual knowledge. The reverse is not true.

I would argue that this distinction sheds light on a fundamental feature of the pamphlet as a vector of political power. In effect, the chance of obtaining promised incentives would only plausibly outweigh the risks of associating with a factional counterpublic when and only when agents can also reasonably assume that the *mutual* knowledge grounding their partisanship is also *common*knowledge. In other words, the incentive to support a factional proposition is dependent on the capacity of social agents to imagine this proposition as

49 Mancur Olson: *The Logic of Collective Action*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2002), pp. 132–133.

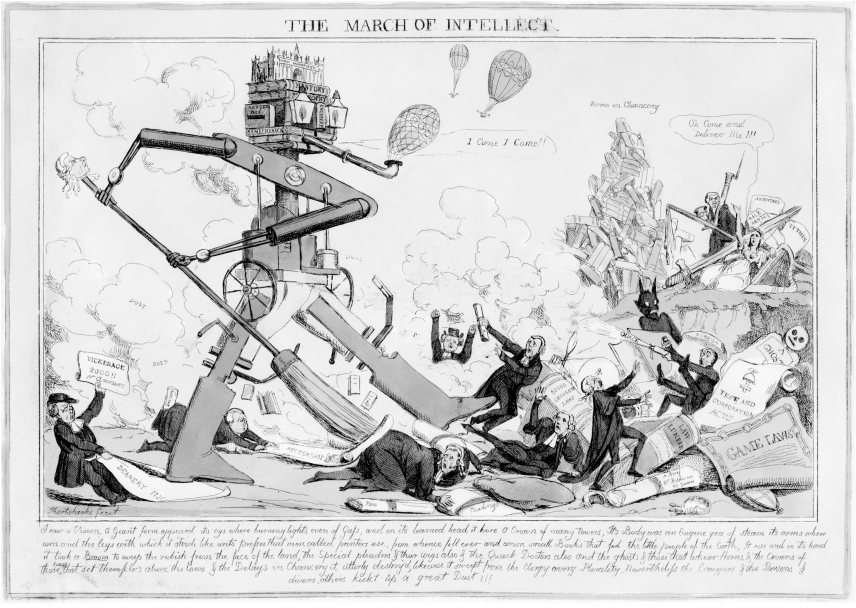
50 David Lewis: *Convention: A Philosophical Study*, Oxford: Blackwell (2002).

51 Stephen Schiffer: *Meaning*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1972).

a *potentially majoritarian* one, i.e., on their capacity to know that other social agents base their partisanship on the same knowledge, and that these agents know that all other social agents know that all other agents base their partisanship on the same knowledge, *ad infinitum*. For a factional proposition to become *plausibly incentivized*, social agents must have the capacity to assume that this proposition is common knowledge (and therefore a "potentially majoritarian" proposition at least to the degree that it may be considered "common"). Once more, and to phrase it in another disciplinary lexicon, pamphletary groups become efficacious pressure groups when they successful undermine what social psychologists call *pluralistic ignorance*, i.e., the mistaken belief that others do not share one's knowledge or beliefs.In fact, we have already discussed the major vector by which pamphlets convert mutual knowledge into common knowledge: they do so by circulating. I must insist on a crucial precision at this stage: circulation is not only an infrastructural and communicational event, but also a political and aesthetic one. By circulating, pamphlets make it plausible for social agents to assume that other social agents know that other social agents know, thereby making it plausible for social agents to assume their knowledge to be common knowledge, further mitigating the risks of associating with a (hitherto plausibly minoritarian) pamphletary group. In this sense, pamphlets acquire and produce political "pressure" or power by circulating *as* plausible grounds for political universalizations.[52] As such, the political power exerted by pamphlets can be understood as "pressure" against Power (because they make the commonality of mutual knowledge plausible to previously isolated, "pluralistically ignorant" social actors) and, in a nicely paradoxical fashion, as a sort of psycho-political "relief" for social agents themselves (as pamphletary circulation mitigates the anguish of pluralistic ignorance).

Additionally, this inherently political function of circulation further explains the efforts of police forces to control and mitigate the circulation of pamphletary materials: circulation makes political commonality plausible to all. It is therefore not pamphletary "knowledge" (or partisan "content") that is the primary object of state control, but rather the knowledge that knowledge about pamphletary "knowledge" is common to hitherto disparate social actors. Rather than gesturing toward literature's performative ability to create "the real," and rather than mythologizing the pamphlet's power to make history, we can now return to the rather humble, concrete "universality" that is plausible in the pedestrian terms of a literary-polemical event. There can be no question here of accessing universality in the literal, totalizing sense: pamphlets are predicated on the disunion and partition of the body politic. What the aesthetic experience of polemical literature does give access to, however, is a sense of the fragmentary,

52 David Bebnowski establishes connections between pressure and pamphlets on the grounds of the semantic overlap between "pressure" and "the press", as well as with respect to the German homonym "Druck" ("printing," "printed matter," "pressure"). David Bebnowski: "Mit Druckerzeugnissen Druck erzeugen: Flugschriften als Quellen für die Intellectual History der Neuen Linken als Konfliktgeschichte", in: *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 48/1 (2023), pp. 163–194. Also see his essay in this volume: "Pressing Social Orders."



2 Pressure, Power. Robert Seymour, *The March of Intellect* (ca. 1828), London: British Museum.

partial "kind of social totality"[53] that is brought into being by virtue of being addressed. In the context of polemical events, then, Kantian *sensus communis* is not common to all, but only common to some: whenever *sensus communis* refers to a "merely possible" (§40) universality *and* whenever a polemical text "contributes to the possibility of the entire body"[54] by hypothesizing a universality found to be plausible and desirable by other agents (§65), social actors may plausibly assume pamphletary propositions to be "common," but not universal.

53 Warner: *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), p. 50.
54 Kant: *Critique of Judgement* (2007), p. 203.

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REPRODUCING FREDERICK DOUGLASS

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MASS VIOLENCE IN PAMPHLETS

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5 Juliane Prade-Weiss, Mural in front of bombarded Serbian state TV headquarters, Belgrade (15 August 2021). © Juliane Prade-Weiss.
6 Juliane Prade-Weiss, Monument commemorating the death of employees during a 1999 NATO air raid (15 August 2021). © Juliane Prade-Weiss.
7 Unknown, *Querdenker* protesting anti-COVID-19 policies. © picture alliance / SULUPRESS.

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