Manifesto as Theory and Theory as Material Force: Toward a Red Polemic

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The manifesto is writing in struggle. It is writing on the edge where textuality is dragged into the streets and language is carried to the barricades. It is writing confronting established practices in order to open up new spaces for oppositional praxis. In the manifesto, more than any other genre, the sign becomes, to use Voloshinov's words, "an arena of the class struggle" (23). This is another way of saying that the manifesto is the genre of change-writing, of transformative textuality and the textuality of transformation.

As such, the manifesto and its polemics are the privileged discourses of all social and cultural contestations—from surrealism to communism. Although I will focus mostly on the left (especially Marxist manifestos and polemics), I would like to begin with some general observations on the features of the manifesto that make it an effective and necessary form for engaging social and cultural practices-in-dominance.

The manifesto and polemic are, as might be expected, marginalized in mainstream discourses and treated in the academy and knowledge industry, in general, as modes of non-knowledge. This is because they are critique-al acts that cut through the reified layers of ruling ideas masquerading as "common knowledge." The manifesto demonstrates that the "common" is, in fact, not at all common and that the ideas and practices advocated by the common are knowledges and practices that serve a particular class. Marx and Engels, for instance, write in the opening movement of the Manifesto of the Communist Party,

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms: Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. (90)

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In these sentences, they unpack the bourgeois myth of classlessness and implicate all social practices in class struggle. The effect is to put class and class struggle in the forefront of social struggle. This, of course, is "mere polemic" as far as the ruling classes are concerned.

Or take the manifesto of the "Situationist International # 6" (August 1961):

If it seems somewhat ridiculous to talk of revolution, this is obviously because the organized revolutionary movement has long since disappeared from the modern countries where the possibilities of a decisive transformation of society are concentrated. But everything else is even more ridiculous, since it implies accepting the existing order in one way or another. (63)

The manifesto is aimed at de-writing "revolution" as a thing of the past and rewriting it as a viable strategy for the present. The point is to lay bare the assumptions that ridicule revolution as impractical and show that what is called practical is merely what works within the dominant system. In a more militant mode, "A Manifesto of Italian Futurism" states,

We want to deliver Italy from its gangrene of professors, of archaeologists, of guides and of antiquarians. . . . The oldest among us are not yet thirty; this means that we have at least ten years to carry out our task. When we are forty, let those younger and more valiant than us kindly throw us into the waste basket like useless manuscripts! (qtd. in Howe 170–71)

Although these are different registers of manifesto and polemics, they are all militant change-writings: they are all aimed at transformation of the existing social organizations.

The manifesto, in other words, is the space in which concrete social contestations are articulated as abstract ideas. It puts in question the existing economic and social arrangements and intervenes in the alienated forms of knowledges and practices that have, by the agency of power, become familiar and commonsensical and thus have assumed the shape of natural modes of knowing and acting in the world.

The polemical is the discursive and critique-al register of the manifesto. It is aimed at implicating the natural in its social, economic, and historical conditions of production.

All effective knowledges are in a sense both manifestos and polemical. Freud's theories of sexuality are manifestos in the construction of a
new kind of subjectivity more suitable for the rising industrial capitalism. So is Foucault’s notion of discourse and the history of sexuality founded on it. However, it is not only radical changes in culture that propel manifestos. Einstein’s 1905 paper on “Special Relativity” contesting Newtonian absolute time and space is a groundbreaking manifesto in science, as is Heisenberg’s 1927 paper on Quantum-theoretic kinematics and mechanics in which he formulated his “Uncertainty Principle.” His scientific text is a manifesto indeed, for in it Heisenberg declares “We cannot know, as a matter of principle, the present in all its details,” thereby calling into question the very possibility of such fundamental concepts as causality and identity (qtd. in Jammer 330).

Some of these texts are now part of the Western canon. This is another way of saying that manifestos are produced by historical conditions and are not simply the result of individual “will” or the ideas of a rebel group. By the same token, there are manifestos that have not been absorbed into the canon, and their contesting critiques remain as active today as when they were written. Marx’s manifestos on capitalism, in which he contests the conditions of class relations and social inequality, are an example of this mode of continuously resisting manifestos. The mainstream resistance to these manifestos is no more a matter of authorial insight than is the canonic absorption of more favored manifestos—rather, the cultural incorporation or resistance to specific manifestos is an effect of the historical conditions with which they engage.

Those struggle-texts and change-writings by Freud, Foucault, Einstein, Heisenberg, and Nietzsche are all manifestos and polemics written against the cultural contradictions of capitalism. Those struggle-writings by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, and Luxemburg all engage not merely the cultural contradictions of capital but also its very founding class contradictions: the exploitative relations of capital and labor.

Marginalizing the Manifesto, Rejecting the Polemical
In the circles of ruling knowledges, the manifesto and the polemic have always been represented as forms of “crude” thinking or more often as non-thinking: as dogmatic pronouncements that are, to make the matter worse, written in an even “cruder” language. In the dominant clichés, the manifesto is formulaic, badly written, and an embodiment of hostility. For example, Foucault, whose early works were exemplary polemics, now, as a new Master of hegemonic knowledges, decries polemics, declaring that the polemicst “wages war” against “an adversary, an enemy” and aims at “abolishing him” (“Polemics” 382).
Mainstream critics have always tried to marginalize the manifesto and polemical writings by appealing to the "subtle," the "understated," and the "ironic" as marks of thoughtfulness, reflectiveness, and complexity. Manifestos, of course, always transgress norms and either implicitly or explicitly show that subtlety is not so much the quality of thoughtful writing as it is the ideology of the normative. Brecht, perhaps more than others, has made this point clear through his practice of *plumpes Denken*, what Walter Benjamin annotates as, "coarse thinking" (199–200). The manifesto is the space of Brechtian "coarse thinking"—a demystification of the subtle and the ironic and a demonstration of how these seeming marks of thoughtfulness are, in fact, obscuring strategies and diversions that direct attention away from why a point is made to how it is articulated. Subtlety focuses on the "procedures" of writing and occludes the writing's historical purpose and social interventions. In contrast, coarse thinking foregrounds the manifesto's interventionist writing.

The common dismissals of the manifesto and the polemic have erased—from the scene of social contestation—all those ideas that can provide a debate over priorities and have substituted the noncontroversial, the non-offending for conceptual daring and intellectual risk-taking. In a recent overview of cultural and literary criticism in the United States today, Richard Woodward writes that one can no longer find a robust exchange of ideas. Quoting novelist and critic Dale Peck, he says it has all become a "game" filled with

friends blurbing friends through their agents and editors, reviews couched in tepid praise out of fear over payback. 'It's a terrible time to have an opinion, and a terrible business to have an opinion in . . .''

The polemic is now, like critique, summarily dismissed as "negative," as "trashing" and as anti-social. Woodward, continues,

Amazon.com could teach everyone a thing or two about eliminating the critic. Who wants interference from opinionated voices when you can launch a title with puffery from in-house cheerleaders or the author's friends and relatives? (Amazon once asked me to review a book. I agreed but told them I disliked it. They promptly withdrew the offer, admitting they were looking for 'something positive.')

The discursive threat that the mainstream feels from coarse thinking is, in part, caused by the fact that the "crude" in the manifesto works as a strategy for confronting the hegemonic. Coarse thinking is an integral
part of all intellectual interventions. Subtle thinking, which is naturalized as deep thinking, is always a mode of conservative intellectual consolidation and part of the mainstream’s attempts to manufacture consensus.

The genealogy of “coarse thinking,” in its materialist sense, can be traced in modern and contemporary thinking back to Marx and Engels (who not only opposed the Young Hegelians for fetishizing the subtle but also rejected the very practice as a mode of scholasticism) up through Brecht (who taught audiences “coarse thinking” as a resistance against bourgeois sentimentality represented as subtlety) and now continuing in some contemporary leftist writing, although it is increasingly under attack.

Most mainstream attacks on the manifesto and the polemic, as I have already indicated, are conducted under the alibi of “subtlety” and “style” against “crude” thinking. But, in actuality, these are not so much questions of “style” as they are instances in the larger social struggles over social priorities among contending classes.

The most concerted attacks on the manifesto now are from the neoliberal market forces that are attempting to exclude ideas from the lives of citizens and in their place introduce fantasies of consumption and sentimentality. In his recent book, The Business of Books: How International Conglomerates Took Over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read, André Schiffrin describes how Alberto Vitale, an international banker who was brought in to replace one of the chief editors at Random House, wrote a memo in which he ordered, “Pantheon would no longer publish political works.” Pantheon, which used to publish books like Foucault’s History of Sexuality, one of the supreme polemics of postmodern writings, nowadays publishes books like How to Win at Golf... Without Actually Playing Well.

The attack on the manifesto and polemic, however, is not limited to blacklist the genre of manifesto and its writers in the traditional academy or by big global publishing cartels. The new academy of the “post” is equally active in trying to marginalize the manifesto and the polemic even though—as I will demonstrate in my discussion of Foucault—the “post” academy itself came into power through its own manifestos and polemics against Sartrian Existentialism, Levi-Strauss’ structuralism, and humanism, in general.

In Polemicization: The Contingency of the Commonplace, Benjamin Arditi and Jeremy Valentine, deconstruct the polemic for its decided interventions. In its place, they put a mode of contingency and undecidability that evades closure. For them an effective polemic is not
one that marks class struggle as the dynamic of history but instead one that renders the category of history itself an open-ended discourse. Their main point is that “Polemicization is aleatory” (vii). It is a mode of overdetermined textuality whose formation and outcome are unpredictable. In theorizing the polemic as undecidable, they treat it more as an internal re-balancing of conflicting issues rather than an intervention in the existing order.

The manifesto and its polemic, from this deconstructive perspective, are simply practices for re-activating questions and not for making any decisions. “Polemicization,” they write, “reveals the undecidable status of decisions” (126). This is a formalist understanding of the manifesto and polemic. Such a hermeneutic view, in the name of a resistance to closure, is itself a closure, reducing everything to a circular series of isolated language acts. As they write, the “contestation of representation remains within representation itself as that which falsifies it” (xii). As a language act, the manifesto turns the “certain” into the “uncertain” and is itself turned into an “uncertainty.” The “outside” and “inside,” in other words, become supplementary and not oppositional. This is seen as putting foundations into dispute. But this is a move that comes close to textual transcendence and ends up a-politicizing foundations that are not simply epistemological but class-based.

True polemic, then, for Ariditi and Valentine, is a resistance to the closure of the commonplace and demonstrates that the commonplace always already “exceeds” itself and, as such, does not have any decidable meaning. Marxist polemic—which is critique-al of this hermeneutic approach and works to demystify the commonplace as a site of class politics—is itself marginalized as a dogmatic closure. We are back again to the play of the subtle seen as effective intervention into the closural and the marginalization of “coarse thinking” as a transgressive, antibourgeois mode of writing.

**Foucault and his (Anti)Polemics**

So far, I have suggested that the manifesto is a vigilant form of intervention into existing knowledges and that attempts to dismiss the manifesto and the polemic as modes of non-knowledge are closely tied to power. To illustrate this, I would like to very briefly examine the trajectory of the manifesto and the polemic in the writings of Michel Foucault, who begins by writing manifestos and polemics when he is on the margins attempting to open new spaces of knowledge and social practices. His own change-writings range from his early “archeology of the human sciences” in the
Order of Things to his genealogical rewritings of "monumental history" and power-knowledge regimes in the History of Sexuality, vol 1., which is an exemplary polemic. It is a series of injunctions against the repressive hypothesis and for what he calls, his "new 'economy' of power" in "regimes of truth" ("Truth" 61). But Foucault ends up bitterly opposing the polemical as unethical after he is, himself, installed as a new Master of hegemonic knowledges.

In an interview shortly before his death, Foucault denounced polemics at great length, claiming that the polemic is "a parasitic figure on discussion and an obstacle to the search for the truth" ("Polemics" 382). "Has anyone ever seen a new idea come out of polemic?" he asks (383). But the polemic, as I have already shown, is, in fact, a necessary practice for generating new knowledges. Foucault parodies polemic as imitating "wars, battles, annihilations, or unconditional surrenders, putting forward as much of one's killer instinct as possible" (383). He warns it is "really dangerous" to pursue "truth by such paths." As proof of these dangers, he cites "the debates in the USSR over linguistics or genetics not long ago," thereby reviving that old bogeyman of bourgeois science—"Lysenkoism"—as "the real consequences of a polemic attitude" ("Polemics" 383). But what Foucault is doing here is substituting dogma for polemic. Lysenkoism is a textbook case of the institutionalization of dogma in the dominant regime of power-knowledge relations. It is quite the opposite of polemic, which is oppositional struggle-writing against hegemonic ideas.

As the new master of a current regime of truth, Foucault tries to preserve its hegemony by turning the search for truth into a "morality" that "concerns the relation to the other." He does so, on the one hand, by banning all critique-al polemic as a form of Stalinist dogma—and this from the former change-writer who had once called for "permanent critique" in his "What is Enlightenment?"—and, on the other hand, by allowing only carefully constrained dialog. The path of truth is now a "game" of "questions and answers," what he calls a "reciprocal elucidation," that he says, is "at once pleasant and difficult—in which each of the two persons takes pains to use only the rights given him by the other and by the accepted form of the dialogue" ("Polemics" 381–82). In the anti-polemical, in other words, the right to question is now bestowed by the very authority being questioned. The inquiry into truth is reduced to a safe conversation, a dialog, constrained by the acceptable bounds of the dominant "regime of truth" to which the participants must first agree in order to be granted the "right" to speak. Such a "right" certainly was
denied Galileo's polemics against the hegemony of church science by its clerical keepers. Questioning, for Foucault, no longer struggles to change what is, but instead is simply a "pleasant" game of "reciprocal" reassurance. Unlike Foucault, however, the polemic never leaves Marx's texts, which remain a continuous series of manifestos, of writings in struggle.

Return to Marx: The Manifesto as Root Knowledge

In contrast to Foucault's writings, which focus on cultural issues, treating them as more or less autonomous, Marx uses the manifesto to engage the fundamental conditions of social problems—that is, as the effects of the primary relations between labor and capital, which means, as effects of the class struggles between the two antagonistic classes. Unlike Foucault, Marx thus produces root knowledge. The first chapter of the first volume of *Capital* is exemplary of the use of the manifesto and the polemic to produce the critique-al understanding needed for social change. His argument is that value resides in human labor and that the accumulation of capital is the effect of the exploitation of human labor—an exploitation that has produced a commodity culture and reduced human relations to the fetishized relations among objects. The logic of capitalism, he argues later, is that "The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of capitalist over worker" (899). Marx's purpose is not simply a hermeneutic reading of labor or capital or class. Rather, he uses the polemic to produce the root knowledges needed for social change. Having marked the problem, he then argues in one of his other polemical texts, the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, that this regime will come to an end only in a society that inscribes "on its banner: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" (Tucker 531).

Toward a Red Polemic

To foreground the manifesto and the polemic today is one of the most urgent tasks of theorists and pedagogues in part because the manifesto and polemic desediment the settled discourses of culture and, in doing so, open up a space for the struggle for change. All root knowledges go beyond (re)describing the world; they interpret it to change it. The manifesto and the polemic are change-writing and, as such, they begin with the de-familiarization of the daily—the making strange of the habitual and the accustomed. The polemic is the suspension of the customary, and since the customary is always subtle, the manifesto, through its polemical pressure, introduces "coarse thinking" as an intervention into the commonplace and the commonsense.
“Clearly,” Marx writes in his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, “the weapon of criticism cannot replace the criticism of weapons and the material force must be overthrown by material force.” But, Marx continues, “theory also becomes material force once it has gripped the masses” (*Early 251*).

“Theory as material force” is the manifesto writing of our time—which I call, the red polemic. The red polemic turns theory into a force for social change by producing class consciousness. It does not simply produce a hermeneutic reading of class, nor does it advocate a “sentimental, utopian, mutton-headed socialism” (Tucker 142). Rather, red polemic is the root pedagogy of revolutionary collectivity, which is the condition of praxis for the “transcendence of private property” (Tucker 84). Red polemic is the pedagogy for the transformation of “everything existing” because, as Lenin argues, “Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement” (Tucker 19).¹

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**Notes**

1. A version of this text was published in Working Papers in Cultural Studies.

**Works Cited**


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