

**Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos and the Avant-Gardes** by *Martin Puchner*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2005, 320pp., Paper £14.95, ISBN 13: 978-0-691-12260-1, Cloth £38.95, ISBN 13: 978-0-691-12259-5

C.L.R. James has observed that 'The proletariat ... always breaks up the old organization by impulse, a leap ... The new organization, the new organism will begin with spontaneity, i.e., free creative activity, as its necessity.'<sup>1</sup> In *Poetry of the Revolution*, Martin Puchner shows this to be as true for the avant-garde as it is for the working class by a study of the manifesto as 'a decision for rupture' in both of these parallel traditions.<sup>2</sup> In his account of the manifesto's successive undoings and ruptures, both forms of manifesto appear as a continuity of discontinuity, where creativity and value are repeatedly constituted in relation to, but necessarily against, their earlier previous form. Almost as soon as the *Communist Manifesto* forms the genre, it begins to undergo a process of temporal, linguistic and geographical diffusion, and a drift into the realm of aesthetics as well as politics with the appearance of the avant-garde manifesto. It is then further transformed into speeches, performances, artworks and a diffuse 'manifesto-style' by the political avant-garde, the best example of which might be the famous one-line graffiti 'manifestos' found on the walls of Paris in 1968. Puchner notes that as such, 'the historicity of the avant-garde is an irony.'<sup>3</sup> But as he describes it, it is a productive irony.

In noting this process of becoming as rupture and undoing, Puchner flirts rather coyly with Deleuzian terminology, for example in describing the manifesto's successive transformations as 'the workings of repetition and difference.'<sup>4</sup> However, he shies away from any explicit account of this history in Deleuzian terms as a process of 'deterritorialisation' or 'becoming minor.'<sup>5</sup> But as we will see below, his hesitancy before these concepts as a means to understand the avant-garde, and his alternative choice of theoretical tools impacts upon his interpretation of the lineage of both the manifesto and the avant-garde.

The first section of the book deals with the genesis of the manifesto as genre by an interesting exploration of its religious origins in the millennial heretical writing of Thomas Münzter and Gerrard Winstanley. Puchner gives a revealing account of the genre's composition as the product of the direct political problematic of 'manifestation' and social transcendence, moving from various forms of incendiary tract and catechism towards the canonical form of the manifesto. This section of the book also presents an excellent textual history of the *Communist Manifesto* and its initial, quite literal, deterritorialization as it became through multiple translations an international text seemingly without origin. In the section on 'The Avant-Garde at Large,' Puchner tracks in great detail the further deterritorialization of the manifesto by the international dadaist movement, from a central statement by one (international) group at one time and place, to a generalised style and approach as it was



recomposed in different times and places by various groups. Puchner balances this account of the historical imperative behind the genre with close readings of the texts themselves. Besides his equally detailed discussion of the well-documented history of the surrealist manifestos, there are also interesting shorter accounts of Artaud's 'manifesto-theatre,' Huidobro's Latin American avant-gardism, and Russian left-wing futurism.

Given the explosion of theatrical avant-garde interventions and the production of political avant-garde manifestos in the 1960s, section five of the book, which deals with this period, is disappointingly shorter on history than the previous ones and does not take the opportunity to focus textually on the many avant-garde political manifestos of this period as well as upon the transformation of the role of the manifesto in this period of its deterritorialization. The reasons for this limited discussion at such a fruitful time for the avant-garde political manifesto and political theatricality are unclear. Puchner does however seem to rely heavily for source material on the limited selection in Peter Stansill and David Zane Mairowitz's collection *BAMN: (By Any Means Necessary): Outlaw Manifestos and Ephemera 1965-70*.

Puchner does mention a number of groups in passing such as the San Francisco Diggers, the Yippies and the Provos, but does not explore their use of the manifesto, even though the Provos produced an interesting declaration entitled 'What is the Provotariat,' which relied on Marx whilst breaking with him in announcing the rise of the new class of 'the provotariat.'<sup>6</sup> Other avant-garde political groups in this period also produced manifestos worthy of attention. The proclamations of King Mob in the UK, whose similar taking on of the position of a lumpen 'other' class took the form for them of a rhetorically overblown dada-influenced return to the form of the catechism (which, as Puchner describes in his first section, was a precursor to the manifesto), asserting that 'we are everything they say we are and we are proud of it. We are obscene lawless hideous dangerous dirty violent and young.'<sup>7</sup> Puchner also mentions the group Black Mask in one section,<sup>8</sup> and Up Against the Wall Motherfucker in another.<sup>9</sup> But he does not note that this was the same group, and that the name change was to denote an engagement with the very problem of the manifesto. The new group represented a move away from the textuality of theory and critique and towards an increased focus on directly manifesting their demands in theatrical and provocative direct action. Rather than the magazine series *Black Mask*, Up Against the Wall Motherfucker turned to militant direct action and only produced articles and pamphlets which facilitated their move 'Into the Streets' (as the title of one of these pamphlets declaimed<sup>10</sup>), by, for example, producing a guide to the organisation of an affinity group (a now ubiquitous term in activist circles which this avant-garde group coined). Kommune 1 in Germany took an alternative route, producing a hoax manifesto-pamphlet after a fire occurred in a Berlin department store, entitled 'When Will the Berlin Department Stores Burn?,' which made it appear that the fire had in fact been started by anti-Vietnam protestors.<sup>11</sup> This group introduced into the political realm the deterritorialization of the manifesto through irony and paradox, which Puchner notes that the



dadaists had initiated in the avant-garde manifesto. In similar terms the Metropolitan Indians, an important group within Italy's Autonomia movement, made playful theatricality an integral part of their slightly later 1977 manifesto, which in the very moment of fixing their demands and identity in a text, refused seriousness, recuperation and fixity by adopting the voice of the 'Red Indians' from the Western cinema matinees of these activists' childhoods, against the 'big chief paleface' members of the government.<sup>12</sup> Their manifesto refused to be territorialized, calling for serious changes as well as for 'historical and moral reevaluation of the dinosaur Archeopteryx, unfairly constructed as an ogre.'<sup>13</sup>

The second half of Puchner's section on the 1960s is devoted to the Situationist International. Though noting that the SI never produced a manifesto, he argues that:

The situationists had been rewriting the *Manifesto* all along through an avalanche of texts ranging from short and provisional manifestos to longer treatises such as *Society of the Spectacle*, whose 221 numbered paragraphs combined the equally numbered bullets of avant-garde manifestos with the historical sweep and theoretical aspirations of the *Manifesto*.<sup>14</sup>

Though rightly emphasising the SI's reliance on style by focusing on their use of *détournement* and their occasional writing on language, Puchner focuses on *The Society of the Spectacle* as the SI's emblematic text. It has certainly become their most canonical text, at least in the academy. However, the SI produced other texts that are much closer to the form of the manifesto. *The Society of the Spectacle* is mostly concerned with the task of critique, extending the arguments of Marx's critique of the commodity-form and Lukács' critique of reification into a new historical context. It was in these terms that Guy Debord described it as modelled on *Capital* rather than on the *Manifesto*. By contrast, Raoul Vaneigem's less studied *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, often seen as a companion text to *The Society of the Spectacle*, is the text in which the SI turn to the manifesto's positive task of revolutionary transcendence, and attempt to manifest and encourage an alternative and an opposition to the society they have critiqued. Alternatively, the *Decline and Fall of the Spectacle Commodity Economy* was perhaps at the time the most widely distributed and translated Situationist text, and so took the form of a defining statement as it attempted to see manifest in the Watts riots a portentous sign of a spectre of a new kind of revolution. In a discussion of manifestos, these texts would have perhaps provided a more productive focus than Debord's famous critique.

Puchner's final chapter discusses the New York journal *TDR*, and its attempts to produce special 'manifesto issue' editions. Puchner also discusses Hardt and Negri's *Empire* as a contemporary manifesto. The account of *TDR*'s development and its problematic relation to the manifesto is detailed and valuable, but in contrast to the previous chapters, there is a turn



here to institutionalised manifestos in the world of academic publishing. The previous chapters dealt with an independent, antagonistic avant-garde, which was of course by nature outside of existing institutions, at least to begin with. Puchner notes that 'the late 1990s witnessed a resurgence of the manifesto in the debate about globalisation,'<sup>15</sup> but makes no reference to this beyond *Empire*. Examples of such contemporary manifestos which are equally a meeting point of the political and the aesthetic are readily available: from the highly poeticised manifesto-proclamations of the Mexican Zapatistas, where their textual productions, distributed via the internet, became an essential and even primary part of their material struggle, and a founding point in the manifestation of the global justice movement;<sup>16</sup> to Hakim Bey's *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*<sup>17</sup>, a text emerging from an avant-garde literary scene which also became in the mid 1990s perhaps the single most influential text for the emergent global justice movement; to even *The Hacker Manifesto*<sup>18</sup>, a short manifesto which marks a return to the catechist form (it is also known by its first title, 'The Conscience of a Hacker') and was an important and influential text for the 'electronic avant-garde,' written by Lloyd Blakenship after his arrest and published in the hacker e-zine *Phrack* in 1986.

Puchner also presents an interesting theoretical, as well as a historical, account of the manifesto. The manifesto is understood as a subjective moment of striving for objective historical verification:

How can empty words be turned into actions? To answer this question requires a particular form of Marxian speech act theory, one revolving around these concepts: (1) authority and its revolutionary challenge, (2) performative and theatrical speech acts, and (3) the context and position from which manifestos speak. The theorists who provide models for addressing these concepts are J.L. Austin, Pierre Bourdieu, Kenneth Burke, and Louis Althusser.<sup>19</sup>

Puchner focuses on Austin, looking at the manifesto as a speech act that lacks authority (in the sense of both governmental power and of objective truth or hegemonic social acceptance - in the manifesto these two senses are often aligned). However, the manifesto seeks authority from its subjective position by means of its theatricality, its performativity. He summarises and exemplifies the problem as follows: 'Now, after I finish this last sentence, there will be no more sentences; we will stop talking and writing and reading, and we will act, as soon as I have said this last sentence: now!'<sup>20</sup>

Having traced the origins of the term avant-garde to the Saint Simonists, in their assumption of a forward position in a supposed linear history, it would have been interesting to note the role of the manifesto as a tool of the vanguard or the avant-garde in correlation with Puchner's account of the manifesto's deterritorialization. Those groups who considered themselves avant-gardes or vanguards necessarily saw the manifesto as an ideological tool.



The task was to bring others to their forward-looking views, and to identify others who shared their position. This brings about the problem that Puchner describes of a performative subjective aspiration for authority and leadership by a text that, as yet, has none. The manifesto finds itself rather impotently shouting 'we own the future!' However, the manifesto's deterritorialization, its slide into misuse, irony and playfulness in the 1960s, comes alongside its use by extra-parliamentary groups who do not aim to hold and wield power, but who rather aim to deconstruct the existing power of capital and the state. What is worth noting about these movements in relation to Puchner's account of the development of the manifesto is that their reference point is often no longer Marx, or even surrealism, but dada. The lack of engagement with examples of manifestos from the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s such as those mentioned above becomes at this point a weakness for the book theoretically. The meaning of the manifesto, and especially its theatricality, changes in this period. As such, ideological conversion becomes less important, and the manifesto can be seen to serve as a means of enunciation for a subject who is *already* present and active, not as a means of bringing passive subjects into action. The manifesto no longer operates on the terrain of achieving power, but becomes a game with power, of making playful demands, of asserting real demands whilst avoiding recuperation by their apparent or partial fulfilment. In terms of the more or less Deleuzian trajectory which Puchner identifies but hesitates before, this is of course to move away from the 'plane of transcendence',<sup>21</sup> that is, the dialectical problem of moving from critique to action which Puchner discusses in relation to Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, to the 'plane of consistency',<sup>22</sup> a position of immanence where revolutionary subjects are not waiting to be brought into being, but are already present, active and autonomous.

We might note that the contemporary inheritance of the political avant-garde, which is arguably most present in the global justice movement in groups such as Crimethinc or especially Reclaim the Streets, whose performative action and adoption of the rhetoric of the manifesto is their direct inheritance, often turns back to the proto-manifesto (and pre-dialectical) traditions of the millennial heretics in which Puchner locates the origins of the *Communist Manifesto*. The back cover of the recent book of theoretical reflections on the resistance to the 2005 G8 summit, *Shut Them Down!*, carries, alongside its radical Deleuzian and autonomist reflections, a picture on its back cover of a banner held aloft at the protests which carries the words of the Digger Gerrard Winstanley: 'Words and writing were all nothing and must die, for action is the life of all and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing.'<sup>23</sup> The difference between this and Puchner's example of the problem of the relation between speech and action above is an ontological one. For these inheritors of the radical political avant-garde of the 1960s, speech does not come *before* action or inaugurate it, but accompanies it as reflection, or, in the case of *Shut Them Down!* and the other 'Reflections on...' texts which became a popular approach following Reclaim the Streets' events, embodies a form of knowledge produced by, within, and after the event.<sup>24</sup>



Those theorists who have attempted to understand this new movement, which has its roots as much, if not more, in the avant-garde than in Marxism, might provide us with an alternative means to understand the manifesto. In Puchner's examples of Austin's theory, speech is only actually productive and performative if it is backed by the government: for example, in marriage vows. The subjective noises of the manifesto are, by contrast, absurd and impotent. Austin's theory is pan-historical, but for a historical account of the contemporary relation of speech to action, we might turn for example to Paulo Virno's account of the virtuoso's performative 'immaterial labour' as productive, in *A Grammar of the Multitude*:

Thirty years ago, in many factories there were signs posted that commanded: 'Silence, men at work!' Whoever was at work kept quiet. One began 'chatting' only upon leaving the factory or the office. The principle breakthrough in post-Fordism is that it has placed language into the workplace. Today, in certain workshops, one could well put up signs mirroring those of the past, but declaring: 'Men at work here. Talk!'<sup>25</sup>

Here speech is (under certain historical conditions) productive of surplus value for capital, but may also be marshalled against it as a form of social production that is not powerless and utopian, but constitutive of the multitude's political refusal of capital. The production of a manifesto is, of course, one form of production that could be bound up with such constitution. As such, Virno notes a connection, rather than a disjunction, between performativity and the constitution of power from below, in essays such as 'Virtuosity and Revolution.'<sup>26</sup>

Puchner does however, recognise this theoretical problem as a possibility, and not as an impasse. His Marxian speech act may be an impossible demand, but it is nonetheless an imperative one. Puchner returns, at the book's close, to the difficult position of the determined subject who in turn determines history. The book successfully shows the manifesto as a cultural product of this 'balancing act': a material reality of which we must be theoretically and historically aware.<sup>27</sup> In his terms, we must 'inhabit this paradox,' as the manifesto itself does, for the future to be thought of as open.<sup>28</sup>

Gavin Grindon  
University of Manchester

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1 James, C. L. R., 'Notes on the Dialectic,' *Radical America* 4:4 (1974).

2 Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 22.

3 Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 212.

4 Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 41. See Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition* (trans. Paul Patton), London 1994.





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- <sup>5</sup> See Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London and New York, 2003, 291-92.
- <sup>6</sup> See Rosemont, Franklin and Charles Radcliffe (eds), *Dancin' in the Streets: Anarchists, IWWs, Surrealists, Situationists and Provos in the 1960s as Recorded in the Pages of Rebel Worker and Heatwave*, Chicago 2005.
- <sup>7</sup> Stansill, Peter and David Zane Mairowitz (eds), *BAMN (By Any Means Necessary): Outlaw Manifestos and Ephemera 1965-70*, New York 1999, 11. See also Vague, Tom (ed.), *King Mob Echo: English Section of the Situationist International*, Edinburgh 2000.
- <sup>8</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 212.
- <sup>9</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 220.
- <sup>10</sup> Hahne, Ron and Ben Morea (eds), *Black Mask and Up Against the Wall Motherfucker: The Incomplete Works of Ron Hahne, Ben Morea and the Black Mask Group*, New York 2006, 112.
- <sup>11</sup> See Berke, Joseph (ed.), *Counter Culture*, London 1969.
- <sup>12</sup> Katsiaficas, George, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonisation of Everyday Life*, Edinburgh 2006, 45.
- <sup>13</sup> Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics*, 39-40.
- <sup>14</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 222.
- <sup>15</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 44.
- <sup>16</sup> Cleaver, Harry, *The Chiapas Uprising and the Future of Class Struggle in the New World Order*, website, 1994 (cited November 2006), <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/facstaff/Cleaver/chiapasuprising.html>.
- <sup>17</sup> Bey, Hakim, T. A. Z.: *The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, New York, 1991.
- <sup>18</sup> Blakenship, Lloyd, *The Conscience of a Hacker*, website, Phrack.org archives, vol. 1:7, file 3/10 (cited November 2006), <http://www.phrack.org/archives/7/P07-03>.
- <sup>19</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 23.
- <sup>20</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 43.
- <sup>21</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 265.
- <sup>22</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 266.
- <sup>23</sup> Harvie, David, Keir Milburn, Ben Trott and David Watts (eds), *Shut Them Down!: The G8, Gleneagles 2005 and the Movement of Movements*, Leeds and New York 2005.
- <sup>24</sup> For other examples of this popular 'reversed manifesto' form which has become popular in the contemporary movement, see Reclaim the Streets, *Reflections on J18: Discussion Papers on the Politics of the Global Day of Action in Financial Centres on June 18th 1999*, 1999, [http://www.infoshop.org/octo/j18\\_reflections.html](http://www.infoshop.org/octo/j18_reflections.html) (cited November 2006), or anon, *On Fire: The Battle of Genoa and the Anti-Capitalist Movement*, One Off Press, 2001.
- <sup>25</sup> Virno, Paulo, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, New York, 2004, 90-91.
- <sup>26</sup> Virno, Paulo, 'Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus,' in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (eds Michael Hardt and Paulo Virno), Minneapolis and London 1996, 190-219.
- <sup>27</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 262.
- <sup>28</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 262.

