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## Kill Lists

### Ideas of Order in the Pamphlet

Erschienen in: Listen | Lists

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Few literary genres have had as erratic a fate as polemical literature: since the advent of the printing press and a 'reflexive' public sphere, polemical literature has been widely read, often reviled, sometimes censored, mostly appreciated by 'ordinary' readers, and generally neglected by academic reading publics. In fact, pamphlets and manifestos are not only central genres in political modernity, they are also highly efficacious social operators: they shift territorial boundaries, enforce normative changes, institute behavioral expectations, and assemble coalitions across entrenched social groups and classes. However, judging by the scarcity of academic literature on the subject, we know next to nothing about the powers attributed, rightly or wrongly, to literary polemic. At a time when literary disciplines are challenged daily to justify their very existence and subjected to unrelenting economic pressures, this disinterest is a missed chance to demonstrate the relevance of scholarship in the humanities. What can we learn from these polemical texts?

Simplifying radically, polemical literature can be described as a more or less coherent aesthetic and political tradition, not least because it has made recurrent use of a few distinct formal devices. Among these, lists and enumerations figure prominently. From Martin Luther's 95 Theses (1517) to Filippo Marinetti's *Fascist Manifesto* (1919) and from the leaflets of the movements opposing apartheid in South Africa to the founding documents of feminist internet politics<sup>1</sup>, lists have structured contentious claims and

formalized political demands. Yet two particular uses of list-making are tied almost exclusively to the province of radical, short-form pamphleteering. Both remain, I argue, viable modes of opposition to the pressures which public universities in general, and the humanities in particular, have been assailed with in recent years.

The first of these uses of list-making is featured in the most notorious *Fin de Siècle* pamphlet, Émile Zola's "J'accuse...!", published in 1898. Written in support of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, who had been falsely accused of communicating French military secrets to the German Embassy and subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment, Zola's pamphlet was instrumental in swaying public opinion in favor of a retrial and amnesty. Yet it was not the first pro-Dreyfus text written by Zola. In the months leading up to "J'accuse...!", Zola had actually published no fewer than five impassioned open letters, none of which had any significant impact on public opinion. What, then, was different about Zola's final pamphlet?

The answer is, in fact, almost self-evident: for the first time, Zola drafted a list of the *individuals* guilty of the condemnation of Dreyfus:

A photograph of a handwritten manuscript page from Émile Zola's 'J'accuse...!'. The page is numbered '36' in the top right corner. The text is written in cursive and includes the following paragraphs:

taquable.

J'accuse le général de Pellieux et le commandant Ravary d'avoir fait une enquête scélérate, j'entends par là une enquête de la plus monstrueuse partialité, dont nous avons, dans le rapport du second, un impitoyable monument de ~~tranquille~~<sup>naïve</sup> audace.

J'accuse les trois experts en écritures, ~~les~~<sup>les sieurs</sup> Belhomme, Varinard et Couard d'avoir fait des rapports mensongers et frauduleux, à moins qu'un examen médical ne les déclare atteints d'une maladie de la vue et du jugement.

J'accuse les bureaux de la guerre d'avoir mené dans la presse, particulièrement dans l'Éclair et dans l'Écho de Paris, une campagne abo-

Manuscript page of Émile Zola's "J'accuse...!", Credits: [gallica.bnf.fr/](http://gallica.bnf.fr/) Bibliothèque nationale de France.

“I accuse Lt. Col. du Paty de Clam of being the diabolical creator of this miscarriage of justice, [...] I accuse General Mercier of complicity, [...] I accuse General Billot [...], I accuse General de Boisdeffre and General Gonse, [...] I accuse General de Pellieux and Major Ravary, [...] I accuse the three handwriting experts, Messrs. Belhomme, Varinard and Couard”<sup>2</sup>, etc.

The list goes on. While previous pro-Dreyfus writings justly incriminated the bourgeoisie, the penal system, or the rampant antisemitism of the Third Republic, “J’accuse...!” *named names*. Lists can always be expanded, as can the retroactive identification of the individuals who participated in this miscarriage of justice. Hence, Zola’s argument is a metapolitical one: the symbolic economies of liberal democracies, always keen to cloak their interests in the garb of grandiose abstractions (“freedom”, “*liberté*”, “justice”, “rational debate”, etc.), often have *non-symbolic* consequences. Citizens get deported. It is not “justice”, the penal system, institutions, or “discourses” that are guilty of Dreyfus’ imprisonment and banishment, but rather Messrs Paty du Clam, Billot, Boisdeffre, Gonse, Pellieux, etc. As natural persons, they can be brought to court, prosecuted, and condemned. Three weeks after the publication of “J’accuse...!”, Zola was himself convicted of criminal libel. QED.

A second type of pamphletary list-making draws on the implicit aristocratism of the literary humanities, past and present. Theodore Kaczynski’s *Industrial Society and its Future*, widely known as the *Unabomber Manifesto* (1995), emulates the form and rhetoric of the learned treatises Kaczynski was reading in his Montana retreat. In 232 numbered and paragraphed chapters, Kaczynski imitates some formal aspects of philological commentary – the orderly lists, the footnotes, the fastidiousness – and contrasts two implied readerships.<sup>3</sup> The first consists of

people who are intelligent, thoughtful and rational. The object should be to create a core of people who will be opposed to the industrial system on a rational, thought-out basis, with full appreciation of the problems and ambiguities involved, and of the price that has to be paid for getting rid of the system (§187).

The second implied readership is the “fickle mob”: “On a second level, the ideology should be propagated in a simplified form that will enable the unthinking majority to see the conflict of technology vs. nature in unambiguous terms”<sup>4</sup>(§188).

Both a “renegade” and a “pedant” (the very pattern of the “paranoid style” in Richard Hofstadter’s classic essay<sup>5</sup>), Kaczynski attempted to capitalize on the latent political imaginary of much of the literary humanities, anno Domini 1995: the paragraphed list, Kaczynski’s own cipher for philological authority, along with the immediately recognizable references to the literary canon scattered across the manifesto, elicit the ostentatiously ‘intelligent’ readings of the *Unabomber Manifesto* that have constituted much of the critical literature on Kaczynski since 1995. The *Manifesto*, by way of its scholarly reception, hence proves what it set out to demonstrate: the literary humanities are a genteel enterprise that willingly discards the concrete political consequences of literary polemic. As such, literary scholars are both irrelevant as intellectuals and necessary as a demographic endowed with real political power. Give them a list, Kaczynski implies, give

them a few footnotes, and rigorous typography, give them a *polite* philological task, entice them to read “with full appreciation of the problems and ambiguities involved” (§187), and they will consent to every partition of the body politic.<sup>6</sup> Nothing, it would seem, is as unequally distributed as political power and philological brilliance.



Shoes with fake soles worn by Theodore Kaczynski to mislead investigators. Credits: [U.S. Marshals](#).

In the early 1990s, when Kaczynski was drafting the *Manifesto*, in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, when the tide of poststructuralism had begun to ebb (imagine being an anti-communist in 1993...), Derrida, ever the entrepreneur, caved in to the renewed interest in historical materialism and published *Specters of Marx*. A pinnacle of conservative experimentalism, the work made one point perfectly clear, if one point only: the democratization of higher education was no threat to the last stronghold of genteel scholarship that was learned textual commentary, which would henceforth make sure to “go beyond scholarly ‘reading’”, slay “mass-media culture”, and transfigure “the ordinary” (that is, the “scholarly”) into “someone” (that is, the *extra-ordinary* ones who tacitly understand that scholarly success paradoxically depends on conspicuous rejection of the “scholarly”, understood both as an “ordinary” social class and as an “ordinary” epistemic disposition). That, then, was Derrida fighting “neo-liberalism”<sup>7</sup> and calling the kettle black. *Specters*, in other words, was not only the kind of critical theory Kaczynski likely had in mind when he chose to address his readers as “intelligent, thoughtful and rational” people, but also the kind of critical theory that would serve as a political blueprint for the decades that followed.

In recent months, many younger German academics have at long last turned their backs on this kind of symbolic warfare and begun resorting to much more practical arguments to improve their ever-worsening working conditions. They have also begun *naming names*, as was the case, for instance, during the Twitter campaign #IchBinHanna. These names are their own. This is good, even a clear improvement on previous labor campaigns by German academics. Yet a glaring asymmetry remains: in the meantime, the far right has begun naming names too, yet instead of identifying themselves, they name the names of their opponents, sometimes going so far as to demand that lists naming purported opponents – for instance professors of Gender Studies in Germany – be drafted by the federal parliament.

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## References

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1. See for instance: Gloria, Hoffmüller, Julito et al. (2014): A feminist server manifesto 0.01. In: Manuel Schmalstieg, Bram Crevits, Viktor Kruug, eds. (2016): Manifestos for the Internet Age, (sine loco), Greyscale Press, p. 179-180.
2. I am quoting from the excellent translation provided by Shelley Temchin and Jean-Max Guieu. Émile Zola: "I Accuse...!" (2022), Link: <https://jean-max-guieu.facultysite.georgetown.edu/other-interests/english-translation-of-emile-zolas-jaccuse>
3. Kaczynski probably did not know Leo Strauss, who contrasted "exoteric" (or public) with "esoteric" (or private, secret) readings and readerships, yet the function of these partitions is similar. Strauss, Leo (1988): Persecution and the Art of Writing, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
4. All excerpts from the *Unabomber Manifesto* are quoted from the online resource posted by its original publisher, The Washington Post. The text is accessible here: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/unabomber/manifesto.text.htm>
5. Hofstadter, Richard (1964): The Paranoid Style in American Politics In: *Harper's Magazine*, p. 78-86
6. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/unabomber/manifesto.text.htm>
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