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Bettina R. Lerner, *Inventing the Popular: Printing, Politics, and Poetics*. London and New York: Routledge, 2018. xii + 190 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$140.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4094-3676-8.

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For reasons that will be obvious to anyone who has been paying attention to recent American politics, there was a worldwide upsurge in Google searches for the terms “popular” and “populist” in November 2016.[1] Although we have been warned against putting too much stock in algorithm-based search engines,[2] the numbers point to a hunger for more information. Bettina Lerner’s monograph, which revisits the origins of popular culture, could therefore not have come at a better time.

Lerner’s aim, however, is not to make old things relevant for modern readers, but to bring new consideration to a corpus of texts that, although large, important, and fascinatingly complex, has remained at the margins of literary studies. This type of digging into the archives has been going on for some time. Ever since, at least, Margaret Cohen made her convincing argument for a reexamination of the female-dominated sentimental novel,[3] other literary historians have been inspired to do the same for other groups of works excluded from the canon. One can think of Janice Best’s and Nicole Corbett’s recent critical edition of the wildly successful--yet largely forgotten--1850 melodrama, *Jenny l’ouvrière* [4] or Valerie Stiénon’s careful literary analysis of popular science-fiction.[5] Indeed, an increasing number of scholars are looking beyond the canon in order to reconfigure society and culture as they were being experienced by everyday people who lived in them.

The goal that is set in *Inventing the Popular* is not to “restore prominence” or “confer added value” to a corpus that is often ignored by literary and historical scholars, but instead to “reassemble the network of multitudinous and contradictory affiliations and repudiations their writers professed” (p. xi). However, by carrying out the latter, she necessarily brings new critical attention to authors who have been swept to the sidelines of literary history. Indeed, working-class literature was disparaged by realists like Flaubert seeking to claim the literary field for themselves;[6] by critics like Sainte-Beuve who saw it as a symptom of the cheapening of literary labor;[7] and even by social Romantics who claimed to support proletarian authors, as is demonstrated throughout the monograph. Lerner is particularly interested in what she calls “the expressive communities” (p. xii) that formed in the face of these challenges. The membership of these communities--which included both relatively unknown laborers like Jules Vinçard, Agricole Perdiguier, and Reine Garde, as well as professional poets and novelists like Alphonse

de Lamartine, George Sand, and Eugène Sue—was quite dynamic and often contested. Lerner, however, does not shy away from this complexity, seeing it as evidence of the worker-writers' force as legitimate and self-aware actors within the broader literary community.

Throughout the monograph, Lerner engages thoughtfully with the work of Jacques Rancière, who remains an intellectual giant in the field of working-class French literature. Beginning with his *Révoltes Logiques* (1975-1981), Rancière has modeled critical engagement with working-class writers in a way that avoids the reductionism that may befall Marxist historiographies.[8] Rancière was committed to reading working-class literature on its own terms, and Lerner is a worthy successor to this project. Nonetheless, she distinguishes herself ably, and, just as Rancière allowed us to consider such texts beyond the Marxist focus on material conditions of class, Lerner helps us to see them without the Rancierian lens of deconstruction. For example, even as she accepts Rancière's assertion that the founders of the workers' press of the 1840s may not have been as politically or aesthetically radical as we'd like to believe, she nonetheless insists on the very centrality of "the printed word" to their goal of promoting "individual and collective demands for social and aesthetic reform" (p.16).

Inventing the Popular is composed of five chapters, plus a short introduction and an epilogue. The chapters are organized not by chronology but by networks. Each deals with a specific community of working-class writers, ranging from polyphonic newspapers and anthologies, to more intimate—if troubled—friendships, such as the one between Alphonse de Lamartine and the seamstress Reine Garde. Indeed, relationships are at the heart of this story. Each chapter may be seen as a case study of how working-class writers positioned themselves in relation to more famous authors like Sue, Sand, and Lamartine. Through close readings of their works, Lerner demonstrates that worker-writers saw themselves not simply as protégés, but as equal actors in the literary field. What's more, by looking at the works written by bourgeois authors during their engagement with working-class writers, she demonstrates that the flow of influence between the two groups was not one directional but highly reciprocal.

The first chapter reads more like an extensive introduction, where Lerner brings her readers into the relatively unknown world of worker-writers through the lens of a much more familiar text: Eugène Sue's international hit, *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-43). Throughout the analysis, Sue's "miserabilist narratives of working-class suffering" (p. 44) will serve as something of a foil to the nuance and authenticity that Lerner finds in the worker-writers' texts, so it is fitting that his nostalgic portrayal of popular story-telling should open the monograph. Additionally, this chapter is where Lerner sets up her theoretical apparatus. Recognizing that many of the texts in her corpus can be difficult to read "as literature" (p. 16), she leads us through several possible strategies for analyzing non-canonical works: Immanuel Kant's pure taste, Jürgen Habermas's universalist conception of the public sphere, Pierre Bourdieu's map of the nineteenth-century literary field, Rancière's affect-centered deconstructionism, and Lauren Berlant's intimate public sphere. Although Lerner promises to hold "these diverse theoretical approaches in tension with one another," she admits that her real interest is in "the social bonds [the workers'] texts produced and revealed" (p. 23). Indeed, throughout the book, what concerns Lerner most is relationships: the overtures and compromises made by individuals seeking a sense of connection and community in social discourse.

In chapter two, Lerner tackles the somewhat confusing world of the Parisian worker press, teasing out the shifting alliances among the different currents of proletarian journalism. She

identifies two “waves” of the worker-press. The first was short-lived and could be characterized by satire and an “apparent disdain for street literature,” which fell into the trap of a certain elitism (p. 43). The papers of the second wave (1839-1850), however, were deeply aware of the stakes of literature, pushing back against mainstream depictions of poverty and the working classes and strongly “affirming workers’ right to express themselves as sentimental subjects in a space promising identification and reciprocity” (p. 49). Each of these papers expressed a wide variety of political and social stances, but with the help of Oskar Negt’s and Alexander Kluge’s concept of the “proletarian public sphere,” the somewhat overwhelming shifts in values, formats, and editorial boards become important signs of a readable social dynamic.

Chapter three occupies the center of the monograph, which is fitting, as the worker-poets discussed here are really the heart of the “alternative public sphere” that the work is focused on. Lerner shows that worker-poets like Savinien Lapointe, Jules Vinçard, and Charles Poncy saw themselves not as simple emulators of the romantic and popular poet Béranger, as some critics have suggested, but that they used his image and his notoriety to claim a valid place as participants in social discourse. Unlike Rancière, who imagines that worker-poets would have taken up the language and style of Romantic poetry as an act of resistance, Lerner interprets the worker-poets’ experimentation with a variety of forms and traditions as “an attempt to appropriate and manipulate the dynamic relationships between poetry, song, and other forms of lyric expression” (p. 63). In the final analysis, Lerner agrees with Rancière’s claim that these writers demonstrated “[a] kind of cultural diversity and expansiveness” which allowed them to recognize and appreciate one another’s distinct political and poetic positions (p. 89). Indeed, her careful readings of poems like Vincard’s “Aux goguettiers,” Lapointe’s “L’Utopiste,” and Poncy’s “Isly et Mogador” bring textual support to such a claim, by showcasing not only the variety of formal techniques they use, but also the complexity of thought that each contains.

In chapters four and five, Lerner dives deep into two literary friendships which exemplify the type of Berlantian intimacy that, as indicated in chapter one, characterized the community that Lerner’s worker-writers were cultivating. Each chapter focuses on the development of a friendly, if hierarchical, relationship between an established bourgeois author and an aspiring working-class one. Just as she has problematized the assumption that worker-poets were mere imitators of Béranger, here she takes a second look at the processes of admiration and emulation that are thought to have occurred between George Sand and Agricole Perdiguier and, later between Reine Garde and Alphonse de Lamartine. The simple narrative would have it that the working-class writer becomes the protégé of an established bourgeois author with a passion for social causes. However, Lerner shows that both Perdiguier and Garde had more influence on their “mentors” than this story implies. In chapter four, Lerner shows that the idea proposed by Rancière and others that working-class authors who fell under the protection of Sand were giving up a certain amount of their individualism and independence in exchange for her financial and critical support are misinformed and that a comparison of the different works by Sand and Perdiguier shows that the relationship was actually quite reciprocal. Indeed, Perdiguier’s accounts of the rites of *Compagnonnage* were crucial to Sand’s particular brand of sentimental socialism and its balancing of feminist and workerist priorities, whereby friendship—and not fraternalism or marriage—is “the ideal social relation through which to work out the conditions under which a more egalitarian society might be envisioned” (p. 110). In chapter five, Lerner turns her attention to another cross-gender, cross-class friendship, this time between Alphonse de Lamartine and Reine Garde. Lerner shows how, in his desire to position himself as the leader of “a new popular poetics” (p. 132), Lamartine saw a friendship with the working-class Garde as

a way to reach this audience. However, although Lamartine portrayed Garde as a “silent, readerly muse” (p. 133), Lerner’s analysis of the Aixoise poet’s work reveals a quite original poetic sense, which differs greatly from that of Lamartine and most other male Romantic figures by “reach[ing] outward to claim a broader emphasis on community, collectivity, and exchange” (p. 148) with a use of emotion that is “less the mark of a rarefied individual and less still a mirror into her own past” (p. 149). By underscoring the ways in which Garde and Perdiguier differ from their fictional avatars in Lamartine’s and Sand’s respective novels, and by pointing to their specific forms of poetic and political radicalism, Lerner rescues them, in a sense, from the class determinism of a Marxist reading.

Inventing the Popular can be read alongside several important works that have been published within the past several years. In particular, one can’t help finding parallels between this book and Anne O’Neil-Henry’s *Mastering the Marketplace* (2017).^[9] Although O’Neil-Henry looks at a different type of popular literature, where “popular” refers to commercial success, both scholars use Bourdieu’s concept of the literary sphere as a theoretical touchstone, one that must be complicated and problematized. Indeed, a theme that runs throughout *Inventing the Popular* is the many different ways that working-class writers tried to define themselves, within this literary sphere, against the outsized influences of Romanticism and social Romanticism. In this way, it takes up a theme that also structures Claire White’s and Marcus Waithe’s edited volume, *The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830-1910*, which focuses on major works that embrace a decidedly modern and un-Romantic work ethic of toil and travail.^[10] The volume includes a fascinating study of working-class collective biographies from mid-nineteenth-century Britain, finding the same strong sense of solidarity and community among worker-writers that Lerner finds in France, perhaps opening up the possibility of future comparatist, or at least transnational, avenues of research.^[11] Finally, Lerner’s excellent chapter on the worker press should be seen as an important continuation of the work begun by Thomas Bouchet and others in *Quand les socialistes inventaient l’avenir*,^[12] which demonstrates the important role that the sectarian and often short-lived newspapers of the mid-nineteenth century played in the French socialist movement.

Lerner is a master at signposting her writing, leading her readers through what will be an unfamiliar corpus for many. Through careful analysis she shows that these texts, although they may appear facile, are quite rich. This book, meticulously researched and with an extensive bibliography and thorough index, is a valuable resource for both historians and literary scholars. In particular, social and cultural historians interested in the discourse of pre-Marxist working-class formation (in the vein of William Sewell, Jr., Joan Scott, and Jacques Rancière, for example) will find new information and new sources. Additionally, the work will be of special interest to literary scholars working on the press and on cultural ephemera. The monograph also provides new readings of well-known texts like Sue’s *Mystères de Paris* and George Sand’s *Compagnon du Tour de France*. This work is suitable for a broad audience because Lerner is extremely transparent about her methodology. No term is taken for granted, no theory is used uncritically, and, as a result, this monograph contains useful tools for anyone interested in analyzing popular literature.

NOTES

[1] <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=popular> and <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=populist>. Accessed: 30 Oct. 2018.

[2] Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

[3] Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[4] Adrien Decourcelle and Jules Barbier, *Jenny l'ouvrière: drame en cinq actes*. Edited by Janice Best and Nicole Corbett (Ottawa: APFUCC, 2016).

[5] **Valérie** Stiénon, “Un roman de la rumeur médiatique. Événement, suspense et anticipation dans *Le Péril bleu* de Maurice Renard,” *ReS Futurae* 11 (2018). <http://journals.openedition.org/resf/1343> ; DOI : 10.4000/resf.1343

[6] In the epigraph to her Epilogue, Lerner cites Sénécal, the satirically ideological Social Republican in *L'Education sentimentale* (1869), pointing to Flaubert's disdain for the worker-poets.

[7] Sainte-Beuve, “De La Littérature industrielle” *La Revue des deux mondes* 19 (1839):675-691.

[8] Centre de recherches sur les idéologies de la révolte, *Les Révoltes logiques: Cahiers du Centre de recherches sur les idéologies de la révolte* (Paris: Solin, 1975-1981).

[9] Anne O'Neil-Henry, *Mastering the Marketplace: Popular Literature in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

[10] Marcus Waithe and Claire White, eds., *The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830-1910* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[11] Richard Salmon, “The Literature of Labour: Collective Biography and Working-Class Authorship, 1830–1859,” in *ibid.*, pp 43-59.

[12] Thomas Bouchet, Vincent Bourdeau, Edward Castleton, Ludovic Frobert, and François Jarrige, eds., *Quand les socialistes inventaient l'avenir, 1825-1860* (Paris: La Decouverte, 2015).

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