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Who's afraid of the political novel? An introduction

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Abstract

Our purpose in this introduction and in the research project The Cartography of the Political Novel (Caponeu), to which this collection belongs, is not to introduce a new category that complements – or opposes – other established genre designations such as the engaged novel or the thesis novel. Rather, it is about examining the relevance of the term 'political novel' anew. Why do we consider it important, both as a tentative genre and as a politically productive and dynamic social phenomenon, both in its past, its present and – predictably – in its future? While recognising the current scholarly interest in the inherently political nature of all writing, we argue that certain novels, unlike many others, benefit from being more directly designated as political novels.

Keywords

political novel, the politics of literature, novel, politics/the political

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Against Political Literature: In their provocatively titled book, *Contre la littérature politique* (see 1), six authors who are among the most far-left writers on the French literary scene express their distrust of a buzzword that has become ubiquitous in academic and media criticism – 'political literature'. This rejection is not a defence of an apolitical literature that sits firmly in its ivory tower and is entirely devoted to art for art's sake, but rather a criticism of the systematic use of an adjective that loses its meaning when it is associated with any form of literature that can be vaguely described as progressive and pretends to make the invisible visible and the unheard audible. It shows how much the term 'political literature' has come into fashion – and how problematic it is.

In the present context, the 'political novel' is no longer one that "does not dare to speak its name", as Susan Rubin Suleiman points out is the case with the "ideological novel" (2 on page 4), but, on the contrary, it is one that proclaims itself and is praised as such. Far from being just the latest outcry of sales-oriented self-promotion, novels such as *Kissani Jugoslavia* (2014) by Pajtim Statovci, *Our Life in the Woods* (2017) by Marie Darrieussecq, *Clavicle* (2017) by Marta Sanz, *Assembly* (2021) by Natasha Brown and *Ada's Room* (2021) by Sharon Dodua Otoo not only testify to the continuing relevance of the novel but also mark a politicisation of literature that is not unprecedented in the history of novel writing itself. As the above titles suggest, contemporary literature is revisiting various subgenres and literary styles and may also be revitalising certain political legacies to meet the needs of different groups of readers. Literary movements and aesthetic legacies as diverse as high modernism, critical realism, *littérature engagée*, autofiction and various forms of utopian and dystopian writing are emerging anew.

Our purpose in this introduction and in the research project The Cartography of the Political Novel (Caponeu), to which this collection belongs, is not to introduce a new category that complements – or opposes – other established genre designations such as the engaged novel or the thesis novel. Rather, it is about examining the relevance of the term 'political novel' anew. Why do we consider it important, both as a tentative genre and as a politically productive and dynamic social phenomenon, both in its past, its present and – predictably – in its future? While recognising the current scholarly interest in the inherently political nature of all writing, we argue that certain novels, unlike many others, benefit from being more directly designated as political novels. This leads us to reformulate a famous question about works of art: "There are political novels – how are they possible?"[1]

The political novel. What does this term imply? What reading does it require? Which critical tools does it rely on? And above all, what difficulties does it pose? We want to take a critical look at a designation that raises numerous methodological and theoretical problems and that appears all the more problematic – but also, we hope, fruitful – because the definition of the political is continually changing, constantly including new objects at the risk of excluding others. Rather than being a universal category, the designation 'the political novel' is in fact highly polemical. In trying to determine the relevance of an expression that is both consensual and problematic, we are confronted with Stuart Hall's statement about popular culture. To rephrase it for our purposes, we could say that we "have almost as many problems with 'the political' as we have with the 'novel'. When you put the two terms together, the difficulties can be pretty horrendous" (4 on page 72; qtd. in 5 on page 1).[2] So how should we proceed when each component of our research object proves problematic: the – political – novel?

Firstly, the novel. Its immense formal plasticity, bordering on indeterminacy, is one of the characteristic features of the novel as a genre. It is the "genre of what is without genre" (6 on page 29; see also 7), "the other of all genres" (8 on page 78) or even the "end" (9 on page 137) of the genre. In the words of the French writer Pascal Quignard, the novel "degenerates" (8 on page 78). Even the somewhat intuitive consensus on the novel as a long fictional narrative in prose is (once again) wavering. In France, for example, the Prix Goncourt for the best novel of the year recently has been awarded to books that completely dispense with the fictional mode and the voluntary suspension of disbelief.[3] The fact that such books are still labelled as novels is less an indication of their genre characteristics than a signal of their role in the market and, accordingly, the size of the readership they appeal to. As Franco Moretti emphasises, the novel is "always commodity and artwork at once" (10 on page ix; see also 11 on page 125).

If the noun 'novel' is so imprecise, does the adjective 'political' capture the salience of the literary phenomenon whose characteristics we are attempting to outline here? Since its modern conception, the novel has been celebrated for its ability to integrate different forms of expression and praised for its "participation in historical becoming and in social struggle" (12 on page 331) – or criticised for potentially "foment[ing] ambitions for social advancement that would threaten the established order" (13 on page 144). Through its ability to resonate a polyphony of voices, the novel has not only expressed the aspirations of the "intellectual proletariat" (13 on page 144) but has also demonstrated its adaptability across ideological boundaries (left and right, grassroots and authoritarian, subversive and constructive) and within different political systems, historical epochs and social classes. This formal and ideological flexibility has cast the novel an emblem of modernity – a genre that captures the irreversible fragmentation and the accompanying sense of "transcendental homelessness" (14 on page 41)

[1] In the original: "There are works of art – how are they possible?" (3 on page 9).

[2] In the original: "I have almost as many problems with 'popular' as I have with 'culture'. When you put the two terms together, the difficulties can be pretty horrendous."

[3] The winners of the Prix Goncourt in 2017 and 2022 are good examples of this shift. *L'Ordre du jour* (*The Order of the Day*, 2017) by Éric Vuillard is described as a *récit* and recounts several historical episodes from the beginnings of the Third Reich in the 1930s. *Vivre vite* (*Live Fast*, 2022) is an autobiographical story in which Brigitte Giraud describes the circumstances surrounding the accidental death of her husband.

experienced by its subjects. The novel is thus the literary form that takes up a demythologised world given over to politics and its divisions.

In this way, it maintains a privileged connection to politics. It gives voice (or can give voice) to a multiplicity of viewpoints that question dogmatic and authoritarian positions. This is the core of Jacques Rancière's "politics of literature" (15), which remains one of the guiding concepts of literary studies. By decoupling the politics of literature from "the politics of writers and their commitments" or "the way they represent social structures or political struggles" (16 on page 53), Rancière argues that literature makes politics *as literature*. Only as literature, and not as a proxy of other sorts of politics, is literature able to do politics, that is, it "makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise" (16 on page 30). It thus expands the range of themes, entities and events worthy of representation and discussion. Because of its ability to make a polyphony of voices resonate far beyond the authors' original or explicit intentions, and because of the attention to the world that this genre displays, the novel is always-already involved in sustaining or reshaping the "distribution of the sensible" (17). As such, it is considered by many theorists to be an essentially democratic genre (see 18 and 19). This would lead to the conclusion that the novel is inherently political. And this is precisely the point where the problem with the 'political novel' arises. The adjective 'political' not only becomes superfluous, making 'the political novel' a tautology that merely emphasises what is already inherent. It also conflates the specificity of literature with the exigency of politics.

We believe that this disengagement of literature from traditional notions of authorial intention and the politics of representation, while intellectually compelling, poses two major challenges. First, it leaves open the question of how to distinguish a political novel from an apolitical novel (is a decidedly apolitical novel even possible?). Secondly, it ignores the fact that some novels are indeed coded and decoded as political precisely because they correlate with the politics of their authors and/or are orientated towards or negotiate broader social and political struggles. Rancière's separation of the politics and activism of writers from the politics of their literature undoubtedly represents a pivotal point in the development of the classical concept of engaged literature. While this shift expands the understanding of literary potential, it also obscures the meaning of politics itself.

This difficulty in grasping and circumscribing politics is reinforced by the development of the concept of 'the political' in both political and literary theory. Detached from the traditional understanding of politics as organised practices represented by parties, trade unions, professional politicians or entire regimes (including democracy), 'the political', since its emergence in the 1980s, and especially in literary theory since the 2000s, has stood for a critical questioning of these practices (see 20; 21, esp. pages 227–228; 22; 23). It aims to break through their taken-for-grantedness and reshape politics from the perspective of the social margins, the oppressed subjects, the geographical peripheries and other invisible dimensions of the social. For example, Irving Howe's *Politics and the Novel* (1957) was praised in the late 1950s for defining the political novel as a novel "in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting" (24 on page 471; see 25). In the 1990s, however, this definition was scrutinised for its limitations and provoked questions such as that posed by William Sharpe: "But whose politics, whose novel, whose nerves?" (26 on page 207). Howe's focus on ideas, contexts and settings neglected what the discourse of the 1990s had already labelled "the politics of everyday life" (26 on page 207). Sharpe concludes his critique with a quote from Adrienne Rich: "The moment a feeling enters the body / is political. This touch is political" (26 on page 207). What is considered political evolves and resonates differently in different geographical and historical contexts. The clear-cut framework of politics – centred on the state, nation or class – is increasingly giving way to a broader, more fluid and ambiguous understanding of 'the political'.

Recent scholarly endeavours increasingly show how a broader conceptualisation of 'the political' enriches our understanding of literature, both historical and contemporary. Drawing on thinkers such as Jacques Rancière, Claude Lefort and Pierre Rosanvallon, these studies historicise the notions of politics/the political in the context of the twentieth century and the present. Focusing primarily on German-language literature, particularly contemporary literature (*Gegenwartsliteratur*), Immanuel Nover and Stefan Neuhaus provide a valuable framework for analysing the evolving meaning of 'politics' and 'the political' across linguistic, regional and historical boundaries. In *Das Politische in der Literatur der Gegenwart* (The Political in Contemporary Literature), they argue that contemporary literature no longer responds to political paradigms in the same way as Cold War-era literature, which often took clear positions in favour of or against identifiable ideologies. Instead, contemporary works engage in political discourse through strategies that are interpreted within the literary field as contributions to political dialogue *sui generis* (27 on page 12). In defending the political character of contemporary German literature, Neuhaus and Nover criticise what they call a "structural error of thought" (*struktureller Denkfehler*, 27 on page 5) in literary studies, namely the persistent belief that post-war literature (*Nachkriegsliteratur*) can indeed be classified as political, while contemporary literature is considered insufficiently politically engaged. In doing so, they join a broader international theoretical consensus which recognises the presence – and often the subtle traces – of 'the political' in areas not traditionally classified as political, thus challenging conventional boundaries and extending the reach of the politics of literature.[4]

However, the growing importance of the concept of 'the political' and its increasingly broad application do not neces-

[4] Less than five years after Neuhaus and Nover's publication, the consensus on the political nature of contemporary German-language literature has become so strong that hardly anyone would argue that this line of cultural production is apolitical, or feel the need to justify its politics in comparison to post-war writing – and yet its political nature is now recognised in the various calibrations of 'the political', not 'politics'. See 28.

sarily lead to a clear or even practical definition of political literature (or the politics of literature, for that matter). Michael Navratil notes that "no strict definition can adequately define what political literature actually is" (29 on page 196), and Neuhaus and Nover similarly concede that "the opening from politics to the political makes it impossible to provide a clear definition that can separate political from non-political texts" (27 on page 6). If the ubiquitous use of the substantivised adjective the 'political' in academic research, literary criticism, publishing and the media emphasises the high status of literature that touches on the political, this prominence does not imply a contemporary revival of the interplay between 'politics and the novel', as described by Irving Howe and characteristic of twentieth-century literary landscapes. Contemporary literature often positions itself as a representative voice for those neglected by political systems, appealing to empathy rather than questioning the structural causes of invisibilisation. The political dimension of such novels is seen in their ability to "repair the world" (30), fostering connections and creating a sense of a shared universe. This approach tends to reduce 'the political' to a consensus-oriented ethos that avoids conflict – a premise that invites criticism. This is precisely what the authors of the provocatively titled volume *Contre la littérature politique* argue against. The target of Alferi and colleagues' critique is not political literature *per se*, but the very dilution of the concept of 'the political' (see 1). They argue in favour of a literature that deals more directly and radically with the conflicts that permeate the social world. Building on this critique and looking not only at the French but at various local contexts in which the political novel currently circulates – as a brand, as a negative designation by a political regime or as a feature of the seemingly long-gone world of dissident writing – the question arises as to who determines which novels are considered political and, more importantly, on the basis of which definition of politics.

This questioning also allows us to scrutinise the assumed association of politics with progressiveness. Political novels do not inherently or exclusively promote progressive agendas. They can also reflect regressive and reactionary forces – whether covertly or overtly anti-egalitarian – and thereby legitimise forms of oppression, violence and exclusion. In essence, the acclaimed redistribution of the sensible does not necessarily promote more equality and freedom; it can also reinforce contrary tendencies. None of the texts in this collection are devoted to a novel epitomising an ideology that could be labelled as reactionary, nor to a novel supporting an existing political regime and its established order or any emerging neo-imperial constellations. The novels analysed here are instead highly critical. They denounce the immediate context in which they were written or raise fundamental questions about the political organisation of modern and contemporary societies, republics and democracy. This 'omission' is certainly due to the – fortunate, we add – peculiarity of the literary field, which for decades has been predominantly oriented towards inclusive and progressive writing practices and has displayed an emphatically critical view of traditions and regimes based on the exclusion and erasure of dissensual genealogies. In this sense, we acknowledge that there is an urgent need to turn our attention to contemporary literary production of the right and far-right spectrum, which seems to collaborate productively with political movements that take place outside the purely literary sphere (see 31). The political is not limited to what we would like it to be, a force that strengthens the collective and promotes emancipation.

Another critical problem with the inflationary use of the substantivised adjective 'the political' is the risk of its dehistoricisation – the indiscriminate application of 'the political' to different historical contexts without adequately taking into account the particular political, social, cultural, institutional and other circumstances that mark the appearances of political novels across times and spaces. In other words, it is important to examine how the politics of a certain geographic area or a historical era, including its ideological underpinnings, influence the emergence of 'the political' (as that other part of 'politics' that challenges its forms of rule) and how novels address, reflect and embed these dynamics in their plots and narrative structures. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the relationship between politics and literature in Europe has often been dynamic and at times extreme. In some cases, political regimes have suppressed dissident, subversive and even 'degenerate' novels,[5] while in other cases, novels that have challenged or rejected political authority have found unexpected public resonance and gained considerable political prominence. Within this complex relationship, novels have contested politics so thoroughly that even the most private, hidden or seemingly apolitical aspects of life have become fertile ground for the novel to assume the mantle of the political novel.[6] At the same time, however, there have also been cases where literature and politics have entered into a mutually supporting dialogue, assisting and influencing each other in profound ways.

The diversity of (political and economic) contexts, the different interpretations of 'the political' and the ongoing debate about what should be labelled a novel all contribute to the inherent instability of the political novel. This is all the more true as the political novels presented in the Caponeu Digital Map lack any recurring formal features. If the political novel were a straightforward genre category, its strict definition would require the identification of common formal or thematic elements as well as specific references to a particular time or cultural and geographical context. Instead, the novels analysed in our project resist conforming to existing norms or paradigmatic texts that can confirm or deny their classification into a single category. In

[5] To illustrate: Norman Manea's *Plicul negru* (*The Black Envelope*, 1986) was subject to the strict censorship of Romania's communist regime, which eventually forced the author to leave the country for good in 1986; Pier Paolo Pasolini's literary (and cinematic) work is famous for its not only subversive but also visionary potential in the years before the gay and lesbian movement, and his unfinished novel *Petrolio* (*Petrol*, published posthumously in 1992) is sometimes associated with the still unexplained motives for his assassination in 1975.

[6] Milan Kundera's *Žert* (*The Joke*, 1967) serves as a prime example. The story of how a student's private joke turns his life upside down reflects the political realities of post-1968 Czechoslovakia. Written in Prague in 1965, the book's publication was delayed by censorship until 1967, only to be banned in 1968 after the Soviet Union crushed the Prague Spring. The author eventually left Prague and Czechoslovakia in 1975 and settled in Paris.

this respect, the political novel stands in stark contrast to what Suleiman calls "authoritarian fictions" (2), i. e. fictions characterised by repetitive structures and narrative devices (exemplarity, coming-of-age and antagonistic structures, redundancy) that become tedious across different works. It would be difficult to find such repetitions, whether formal or thematic, in the novels discussed in this collection. "It is one thing to say that a novel produces political effects, and another to assume that it shares structural features with other novels that might best be treated collectively under the label of the political novel", Zvonimir Glavaš observes[32]. The versatility of the political novel certainly sheds a different light on Robert Frost's couplet quoted by Jonathan Culler in his introduction to literary theory: "We dance round in a ring and suppose, / But the Secret sits in the middle and knows" (33 on page 55). The characteristics of the political novel, however, are not so predetermined that they 'sit in the middle', just waiting to be discovered by diligent philological experts. To refer to Paul Kincaid's analysis of the challenging genre of science fiction to describe the political novel:

> What constitutes the warp and weft of [the political novel], therefore, is endlessly subtle and intricate, made up at times of more things than we can readily identify. Which is why what makes [the political novel] is so hard to pin down, but what is [the political novel] is so easy to recognize. (34 on page 417)

Much like the novel as a genre, which is best understood as "variable rather than constant" (35 on page 272), the political novel can be seen as a series of works that merely share certain family resemblances.

The impossibility of constituting the political novel as a literary genre should not deprive us from the possibilities and fruitful analyses that this category opens up. We are convinced that it is useful, not only in academia, but ideally beyond literary specialists. Special attention to novels that not only touch on the political but also deal more directly with certain political themes and issues seems necessary to us – on the one hand, to avoid a dilution of political literature as in Rancière's politics of literature and, on the other hand, to still find *a political approach* to novels that are not explicitly committed novels or in which political figures and events do not "dominate the plot" (11 on page 3). We consider the term 'political novel' as a comprehensive category which encompasses both literature that is explicitly intended to make a political statement or serve as an ideological tool – an aim that is often criticised as a reprehensible form of instrumentalisation, even though some contemporary authors express a desire to influence social dynamics through their writing (see 28 on page 858) – as well as novels that achieve their political incisiveness through subcutaneous, micropolitical, even "opaque" (36) work with omissions, tacit resonances and silences on topics traditionally perceived as political. The political novel is therefore best understood as an umbrella term that encompasses various literary phenomena in which politics and the novel overlap.

As an interpretative framework, the 'political novel' echoes the endeavour to uncover the "political unconscious" (9) of a literary text but also goes beyond this to focus on the ways in which a political novel reflects on and engages with political concerns, as well as the ways in which its particular politics are perceived by different readers and audiences. It presupposes that the political dimension of the novel does not lie exclusively in the declared intentions of the author but can arise independently of these intentions and possibly in opposition to them, and sometimes only becomes clear in retrospect. Of central importance here is the contextual positioning of the novel within the circumstances of its creation and reception, the use of certain literary forms to calibrate political themes and the readings that are promoted or discouraged by these forms.

Using the category of the political novel, we aim to promote and develop a historically nuanced, geographically and ideologically fine-tuned approach that encompasses the full span of the relationship between the novel and the political: the broader political frameworks that shape and intervene in the normative world in which a novel is produced, and the political novel as a mode of negotiating politics, a way of (de)instituting it from a critical, parallax, even revolutionary perspective. If the former is the "path of the object" (9 on page ix), namely the historical constitution of "the things themselves", as Fredric Jameson famously puts it, then the political novel emerges as "the path of the subject" (9 on page ix). It consists of a specific perspectivisation of an object, an invitation, even an instruction, to see in a certain way. This invitation does not necessarily come from the authors, but also from editors, critics as well as professional and empirical readers,[7] sometimes belatedly and in contexts that differ significantly from those in which the novel was originally written.

This integrative approach that takes both paths into account allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the fruitful interplay between social and literary forms. It examines the political, economic and social paradigms that define the aesthetic coordinates within which a novel is created and explores how these paradigms shape its literary forms – in other words, how "the sociality of form" (37 on page 49) manifests itself in the work. In sum, we argue that the term 'the political', as it is currently used, needs to be revived not only as the opposite of 'politics' but as a marker of *politicisation*. Only by considering the specificity of certain political novels in terms of their potential to politicise and thus accelerate the political realm (38 on page 76) or to problematise the consensus that promotes the status quo can 'the political novel' retain its analytical utility. By giving the adjective political the strongest possible meaning, we also want to examine how political novels contribute to our understanding of politics. In what ways might they redefine it? How do they intersect with other discourses that are collectively experienced or remembered as political transformations? In particular, how do they reflect broader shifts in perception that are simultaneously reshaping our political forms of coexistence? If political novels capture or articulate critical turning points, shift perspectives and resonate with new

[7] We prefer not to contrast professional readers with non-professional audiences, but rather with empirical readers, i. e. the readers we really are in our everyday reading habits and practice (see 39 on page 165).

and emerging political and aesthetic regimes, through what formal, stylistic or discursive strategies do they achieve this?

By focusing on this dynamic process, we aim not so much to find a definitive definition as to forge an interpretative and praxeological approach that emphasises social (and economic and cultural) dimensions – such as pragmatic interests, ideological aspirations, strategic provocations and marketing strategies (see 40) – over purely narratological or thematic analyses. We therefore propose the following:

> The political novel is a set of practices through which a novel is coded and decoded as political within a specific constellation of circumstances – epistemological, historical, literary, national, political and linguistic. It is identified less as a particular genre than as a dynamic process of becoming and transformation that involves the reappropriation, repositioning and reorganisation of different circumstances.[8]

At this point in our reflections, the political novel emerges less as a genre defined by specific norms and more as an interpretive framework – a lens through which one engages with a text as a political object and makes it the subject of a debate (beyond purely literary analysis) that can raise awareness or simply provoke discussion.[9] Neither this introduction, nor this collection, nor the broader work of The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe aim to establish a definitive classification of the political novel as a genre. Instead, the collection seeks to initiate a dialogue about an alternative and, in the most constructive sense, "disposable" (41 on page 110) canon of works that have been, are or could be read and discussed as political novels. Without aspiring to create a comprehensive and definitive archive of past or present political novels, this collection invites readers to approach novels as political experiences. Such experiences evoke and appeal to particular emotions, foster (or undermine) specific loyalties or suspicions and, in some cases, explicitly advocate for various forms of emancipation. Ultimately, this is an invitation to read novels politically.

The collection is divided into two parts. The first consists of texts that reflect on the category of the political novel in general, containing questions raised from different angles that emphasise its current importance: What forms does (can) the political novel take (Zrinka Božić[42])? What relationships does it establish (or not) with its readers (Zvonimir Glavaš[32])? How does it shape our perceptions, reinforcing or criticising the hegemonic manipulations that forge them? Is it able to open up new emancipatory horizons? (Tomasz Mizerkiewicz[43])? To what extent do feminist readings contribute to shaping or renewing this category (Mirela Dakić[44])? Beyond the examples and theories mentioned, these contributions have the merit of considering the political novel as a framework for analysis that sheds new light on classical questions of narratology and literary theory. This is evidence that 'the political novel' invites us to think afresh about questions that recur whenever we take an interest in the novel genre.

The second part is devoted to case studies. Proposed readings of Vladan Desnica's novel *Zimsko ljetovanje* (*The Winter Summer Vacation*, 1950), Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1951), Michał Witkowski's *Lubiewo* (2005) and Pierre Michon's *Les Onze* (*The Eleven*, 2009) take up the challenge set at the end of this introduction, namely to read novels politically that are not systematically or primarily considered as such. The contributions authored by Marina Protrka Štimec[45], 46 Paul Stewart, Błażej Warkocki and Nenad Ivić[47] testify to the analytical relevance of the category of the political novel, as they often focus on aspects that have previously been neglected in the reading of the works mentioned. They show what an actualising and politicising reading can contribute to the interpretation of a novel.

The spectrum of texts identified as political novels by the authors of this collection and of the Caponeu members in general is astonishingly diverse. It includes realist novels, fragmented narratives with autobiographical elements, self-reflexive and meta-reflexive fictions, first- and third-person perspectives and, finally, both widely accessible works and niche publications. Some of these texts are explicitly orientated towards Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of engagement, while others actively reject it; some are assertive, others are characterised by ambiguity and contradiction, revealing a broad spectrum of differences. However, this diversity by no means guarantees that all the political novel's intentions and the forms that it can take are represented. While there are some significant works included, the texts traditionally emphasised by theorists of the political novel – those that have formed the canonical core of the genre over the last century – are notably absent.

The heterogeneity of texts and approaches in this collection does not represent all the possibilities contained in the concept of the political novel, and many modalities remain unconsidered. Therefore, rather than smoothing over the many differences between these texts and the respective analytical frameworks, the individual contributions examine how they can be interpreted through a political lens – whether they are traditionally perceived as politically engaged or typically analysed within a political or ideological framework. This reflects our collective research aim as scholars – to interrogate what the term 'the political novel' means today, in 2025, and how this understanding relates to themes that have historically been excluded or marginalised from mainstream political discourse but which have now shifted to the centre of contemporary analyses.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No data associated with this article.

[8] An earlier, similar version of this explanation was included in the application proposal of the Caponeu project (Horizon Europe, Grant agreement ID: 101094658).

[9] Our research project involves several book clubs and reading events (notably in Berlin, Cambridge, Poznań and Zagreb), providing an opportunity to see to what extent the proposed novels, presented as political, provoke debate and discussion.

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✔ **Lucie Amir**
Université de Grenoble Alpes, France, France

The essay *"Who's Afraid of the Political Novel ? An introduction",* serves as an introduction to a collection dedicated to the relationship between literature and politics. It forms part of a European project focused on mapping the "political novel."

Acknowledging the contemporary inflation of the label "political" in literary criticism, it proposes to wager on the conceptual fruitfulness of the category and to delineate the features of a "political novel". The authors suggest conceiving it not as a genre, but rather as an approach to reading novels — a "politics of literature" to borrow a conceptualization widely used in Francophone academic contexts (Belgium, Canada, France), though barely mentioned in the essay. They thereby introduce a series of case studies that explore the different aesthetic realities encompassed by the label "political novel".

The article stands out for its undeniable thematic and theoretical relevance. Its starting point is accurate: the term "political" has become ubiquitous in critical discourse, often underpinning vague and overused formulas ("political novel," "politics of literature"); at the same time, a significant number of recent publications already signal the emergence of a new critical moment — one that is both more militant and more reflexive regarding the political power of literature. The essay *Contre la littérature politique* is symptomatic of this trend, but it is actually only one among many publications released in 2023–2024, particularly in France, that the article (which seems rather centered on the Francophone world) could have addressed (Huppe 2023; Alferi et al., 2024; Andras & Harchi 2024; Lucbert 2024; Coste 2024).

The article's main weakness lies precisely in how it justifies the chosen category. The proposal to treat the "political novel" as an interpretive framework to be tested and evaluated is indeed stimulating, and the authors' intention to ground their approach in an empirical category is understandable. However, the very phrase "political novel" resists their project at the grammatical level: they wish to move away from rigid labels and approach the "political novel" as a way of engaging with texts, yet the concept they adopt reintroduces a classificatory logic. In other words, while the authors repeatedly state that they do not aim to define a genre, it is difficult to see how

the concept of the *political novel* can escape that logic — especially since the article implies that some novels are more deserving of the label “political” than others. As a result, the article maintains a certain ambiguity throughout in its scholarly positioning: is it proposing to study how novels are politicized, as it claims repeatedly, or is it endorsing a particular theory of the political novel and promoting a reading of texts through that lens? The choice of the term “political novel” which seems intended to support both aims at once, ends up obscuring the project.

In any case, the article would benefit from positioning itself more explicitly in relation to the concept of “politics of literature” — a notion developed precisely to study the political representations of literature rather than to define or promote a category of “political literature” (Denis 2006 ; Hamel 2014 ; recently discussed in academic research : Amir, Huppe & Jeusette 2025). Nor does the article provide a justification for the shift from the broader category of "political literature" to that of the novel — in other words, for the choice to concentrate its theoretical inquiry on the novel as such. I am also struck by the lack of clarity regarding the geographical and cultural grounding of the reflection in this introduction.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Contemporary literature, literature and politics, crime fiction,

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 23 August 2025

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Alina Bako
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Sibiu, Romania

The article offers a comprehensive exploration of the concept of the "political novel” and critically

examines the term by addressing its methodological issues, its evolving nature, and its significance in literary studies. The authors engage with a range of theoretical perspectives, drawing on thinkers like Franco Moretti, Jacques Rancière, Irving Howe, Stuart Hall, William Sharpe, Claude Lefort, Pierre Rosanvallon, Immanuel Nover, Stefan Neuhausand, Michael Navratil, Zvonimir Glavaš, Jonathan Cullerto interrogate the interplay between politics, literature, and the novel as a genre.

The article is structured in two parts: a theoretical discussion of the political novel and case studies of specific works, offering a nuanced approach to understanding this elusive category. The results of the Caponeu project are discussed, including the presentation of an interactive map resulting from the articles and research conducted within it.

The article emphasizes the importance of historicizing and contextualizing the political novel. It recognizes that the political is not a universal or static category but varies across time, geography, and ideology.

The second part of the article, with its analysis of novels like Vladan Desnica's novel *Zimsko ljetovanje* (*The Winter Summer Vacation*, 1950), Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1951), Michał Witkowski's *Lubiewo* (2005) and Pierre Michon's *Les Onze* (*The Eleven*, 2009) to demonstrates the practical application of the theoretical framework. These case studies illustrate how novels not traditionally seen as political can be read through a political lens, revealing new interpretive possibilities.

The selection of case studies, while insightful, is limited to a specific set of European novels. Including a wider range of texts from diverse cultural or geographical contexts could have strengthened the article's claim to a global understanding of the political novel.

By questioning the separation of literature from authorial intention and traditional politics, the article aligns with contemporary literary theory while pushing for a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes the political.

We recommend the article for indexing, as it provides a viable overview of the political novel, proposing novel and clarifying perspectives. The theoretical literature is complex and coherently constructs the concept, as do the references to the proposed case studies.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Yes

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Literary Studies, World Literature, Critical Studies

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.