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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2ph4601g>

ISBN

978-90-04-40962-0

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Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.1163/9789004409811_016

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Notes on Seghers and Adorno: Marxism, Postfascism, and the Question of Culture

Abstract This essay examines the positions outlined programmatically in “Cultural Criticism and Society” and other texts by TW Adorno in the immediate postwar period in relationship to the contemporary cultural political positions of Anna Seghers, a figure who was not Adorno’s direct interlocutor, and who is seldom discussed in association with him, but with whom Adorno shared a number of concerns. Grappling with similar issues of the conflicted role of culture in an antagonistic society, the complicated relationship between the form and the message of a work of art, and the representational crises imposed by the catastrophic finale of the Thirty Years War of the twentieth century, Seghers arrives at a very different understanding of the urgency of the cultural in essays like “Aufgaben der Kunst (1944),” “Der wichtigste Ismus (1948),” “Glauben an Irdisches (1953),” and her addresses to the German Writers Congresses of the late 1940s and early 1950s, all of which stress in various ways the necessary role of culture in the ideological re-orientation of the German people after fascism. The second part of the essay moves beyond this comparison of explicit positions of postwar cultural debates, and reads Seghers Caribbean stories, written in the late 1940s shortly after her return to Germany, as meditations on the global legacy of European Enlightenment and revolution in ways that unexpectedly resonate with the theses articulated by Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their contemporaneous *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Rather than staging this comparison as an arbitrary confrontation of a positive program articulated by Seghers versus Adorno’s suspicion of aesthetic and political representation, this paper will attempt to take both positions seriously as reactions to the necessary and problematic role of culture in the postwar, postfascist moment.

In “Reconciliation Under Duress,” his 1958 polemic against Georg Lukács, TW Adorno dismisses the attempts of Lukács and Bertolt Brecht to “widen the concept of socialist realism... so as to make room for works that rise above the level of despicable trash” as symptomatic of both writers’ self-imposed subordination to Soviet orthodoxy.¹ Adorno sees socialist realism, and realism itself, as a rearguard action of an intrinsically affirmative understanding and practice of culture, of a fetishized concept of culture that he most directly addresses in his 1949 essay “Cultural Criticism and Society.” Adorno’s positions are indeed often compared to those of Lukács, who famously denounced him as a denizen of “The Grand Hotel Abyss,” perhaps due to

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Reconciliation Under Duress,” in Theodore Adorno, et. al. *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate Within German Marxism* (London and New York: Verso Press, 1977), p. 152.

the former's renunciation of the notion of a progressive pedagogical vocation for the arts.² Rather than recapitulate that debate, this essay will look at the positions outlined in some of Adorno's texts of the immediate postwar period in relationship to the contemporary cultural political positions of Anna Seghers, a figure who was not Adorno's direct interlocutor, and who is seldom discussed in association with him. Grappling with similar issues of the conflicted role of culture in an antagonistic society, the relationship of culture to nation in the ruins of the Third Reich, and the representational crises imposed by the catastrophic finale of the twentieth century's Thirty Years War, Seghers arrives at a very different understanding of the urgency of the cultural in her postwar essays, speeches, and publicity. This essay thus largely side-steps the debates between realism and modernism that have framed critical juxtapositions of Adorno and his GDR interlocutors, be they Lukács or Brecht, to examine that ways in which both Adorno and Seghers positioned themselves as critics of the revival of a narrowly construed German national culture in the wake of the National Socialist regime, advocating in very different ways for an embrace of international cultural trends in a postfascist Germany. I am interested here in the particular moment of interregnum, which I consider to be largely from the mid to late 1940s, as the frayed Popular Front cultural politics of the war years give way to the confrontations of the Cold War. This period found both Seghers and Adorno in transition; Seghers in Mexico City until 1947 and Adorno in Los Angeles until 1949.³ Nevertheless, at least since 1944, both figures had begun to publically speculate on the possibilities and stakes of cultural life in a postfascist Germany. In

² Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, translated by Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), p. 22.

³ For an account of Adorno's exile in California, see Part III of Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009). For Seghers's exile period, see chapters 10 through 12 of Christiane Zehl Romero, *Anna Seghers. Eine Biographie 1900-1947* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2000).

the second half of the essay, I will move to a brief discussion of the ways in which Seghers's Caribbean story cycle, composed largely upon her return to Germany, resonates with key arguments in Adorno's famous co-written text *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Already in March 1945, Adorno gave a lecture at Columbia University entitled "What National Socialism Has Done to the Arts," in which he outlined a cultural genealogy of German fascism and provided a précis of the effects of the National Socialist regime on German cultural life with an eye toward the arguments that he and Horkheimer would elaborate in the culture industry chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. That work, given its American context, focused more narrowly on the integration of culture and entertainment under the twin signs of the market and Fordist industrial production, such that entertainment becomes a mimetic adaptation to the rhythms of labor and production, based in the consumption of sequential and standardized elements.⁴ The Columbia talk presupposes the insights of the culture industry chapter, but situates them in a German context, where Adorno implies that the industrialization and marketization of culture is less advanced than in the United States, while remaining nevertheless decisive. Adorno's key argument in this talk is that the neutralization of culture through the market, here "demonstrated in the field of music but noticeable in every aspect of German life," led to what he describes as a "de-cultivation" of the middle class and a "barbaric severance between serious artistic production and universal tastes."⁵ In this situation, Adorno writes, "instead of being a decisive means to express fundamentals about human existence and human

⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 2002), pp. 108-9.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, "What National Socialism Has Done to the Arts," in *Gesammelte Schriften 20.2, Vermischte Schriften II*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), p. 417.

society, art has assumed the function of a realm of consumer goods among others.”⁶ This has consequences far beyond the realm of culture narrowly construed, since “the idea of compelling and objective truth, however differentiated its artistic and philosophical expression might have been, is inseparably bound up with the idea of humanism,” adding, “German humanism was the most substantial counter-tendency against violent nationalism.” No longer would middle-class youth lie awake, as had the young Adorno, listening “passionately and surreptitiously” to parents and friends playing the *Kreutzer Sonata*, and “it is this lack of experience of the imagery of real art, partly substituted and parodied by the ready-made stereotypes of the amusement industry, which is at least one of the formative elements of that cynicism that has finally transformed the Germans, Beethoven’s own people, into Hitler’s own people.”⁷ After tracing this development through the work of Wagner and Strauss, Adorno describes the National Socialist period itself as a “freezing of styles.”⁸ National Socialism, then, does not so much install an aesthetic tendency, but is itself a fixing and functionalizing of culture. Finally, Adorno enumerates “four of the deeper-going tendencies towards a survival of the fascist spirit in the arts”: 1) the dissolution of art into manipulation and propaganda; 2) the reduction of the public to paying customers; 3) a tendency toward pseudo-collectivism; 4) the artificial preservation of European culture as a kind of national park.⁹ These are the constituents for a neutralization of culture, where neutralization can be understood perhaps in the sense not only of reification and the reduction of cultural objects to commodities lacking any other vital relation to their audiences than tools of social distinction or means of relaxation.

⁶ Ibid., p. 418.

⁷ Ibid., p. 419.

⁸ Ibid., p. 425.

⁹ Ibid., p. 426-9.

The liberal appeal to humanism as a cultural firewall against fascism may have distracted Adorno's American audience from the fact that he was arguing, more or less, that the result of fascism was to bring Germany further along toward the cultural level of the United States, albeit not all the way and not entirely successfully, as we will see. An essay published shortly after Adorno's return to Frankfurt in 1950, "Die auferstandene Kultur," [Culture Revived] returns to this thought. Praising the intensity of West Germany's postwar intellectual scene, Adorno notes the need for contemplation and isolation in the wake of National Socialist fantasies of folkish community, but spots out something retrogressive in this intellectual earnestness as well:

Die deutsche Gesellschaft war nicht so durchorganisiert, dass die großen ökonomischen Mächte den Geist in eigene Regie genommen und die Individuen geistig enteignet hatten. In gewissem Sinne stellte der deutsche Faschismus den Versuch dar, solche Enteignung unter dem Namen der Integration "schlagartig," wie das verruchte Wort lautete, nachzuholen. Diese Integration ist misslungen. Daraus ergibt sich ein Zustand, der hinter dem allgemeinen Zug der hochrationalisierten Gesellschaft zurückgeblieben ist.¹⁰

If Adorno is here arguing that the cultural policies of the National socialist regime represented an attempt to affect the neutralization of culture through political force rather than market coercion, it is also important to bear in mind that, as Timothy Bewes points out

¹⁰ "German society was not so thoroughly organized that the great economic powers could take intellect under their own direction and spiritually expropriate individuals. In a certain sense, German fascism represented the belated attempt to achieve, by storm, as the pernicious phrase had it, this kind of expropriation under the sign of integration. This integration has failed. The result is a condition that lags behind the general trend of highly rationalized modern society." Theodore W. Adorno, "Die auferstandene Kultur," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 20.2, p. 455.

“neutralization is not a tendency to be lamented but an objective situation that demands and generates new artistic forms.”¹¹ Rather than bearing forth such new forms, postwar German culture, for Adorno, has rather the character of a curio cabinet. Indeed, Adorno finds something provincial in the attempts of intellectuals in the West to reconnect with a pre-fascist German culture, noting that “the approach to culture in postwar Germany has something of the dangerous and ambiguous consolation of the security of the province to it,” and comparing German intellectual debates in their uncanny anachronistic charm to the surviving buildings of medieval cities standing amidst the rubble of the recent air war. Warning that a fetishized veneration of “culture” risks the danger of making a new kind of *Blut und Boden* out of the classical *Erbe*.¹²

Adorno contrasts this subaltern veneration of the cultural heritage, which he describes as a form of “traditionalism without tradition,” with the intellectual and cultural fervor of the revolutionary period following the First World War, noting that the focus on the interpretation of the cultural heritage misses the urgent need for an intellectual reorientation after the National Socialist dictatorship and expresses a lack of critical insight into the present historical conjuncture.¹³ Expressionism, Adorno notes, “stood under the sign of hope for an immediately realizable socialism.”¹⁴ It is precisely the mediated but vital relationship of intellect to utopia that held in the 1920s that Adorno sees foreclosed in the FRG of the 1950s. “The paralysis of intellectual productivity is caused,” he writes, “by the fact that one is no longer collectively a political subject and therefore no longer undertakes anything unchained in intellectual

¹¹ Timothy Bewes, “Late Style in Naipaul: Adorno’s Aesthetics and the Post-Colonial Novel,” in *Adorno and Literature*, edited by David Cunningham and Nigel Mapp (New York: Continuum Publishers, 2006), p. 174.

¹² Adorno, “Die auferstandene Kultur,” p. 456.

¹³ Ibid., p. 457-8.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 460.

reflection.”¹⁵ If the frame of sovereignty is no longer national, but global, and is reflected through the world reach of the largely American culture industry, a critically utopian cultural practice that grasps the fact “that today... a state of the world is possible that no longer directs people as objects of processes occurring above their heads, but rather where they control united their own fate and thus become for the first time true subjects” can no longer base itself on the nation.¹⁶

This assertion provides a different angle on Adorno’s “Cultural Criticism and Society,” which is often reduced to its polemical closing phrase about poetry after Auschwitz. Bracketing the logic and legacy of that claim, I would like to briefly comment on the key argument of that essay, which has to do with the contradiction borne by culture as a dimension of social practice. Locating cultural criticism as an alibi for social exploitation in an echo of Herbert Marcuse’s famous essay on the affirmative character of culture,¹⁷ Adorno asserts, “all culture shares the guilt of society” as a practice that depends on the division of labor even as it ostensibly withdraws from class struggle and politics.¹⁸ As culture increasingly becomes “an extension of production,” it turns increasingly toward a dynamic of false immediacy and nostalgia. Against this reification of culture, marked by the four characteristics that he had sketched out in the above-mentioned essay “What National Socialism Has Done to the Arts,” Adorno proposes a sublation of cultural criticism into a dialectical criticism that would participate in the self-abolition of culture itself, which is to say, to reach beyond that very division of labor by holding up as an object of critique. “What distinguishes dialectical from cultural criticism is that it

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 463.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 464.

¹⁷ Herbert Marcuse, “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” in *Negations, Essays in Cultural Theory*, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press 1968).

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 26.

heightens cultural criticism until the notion of culture is itself negated, fulfilled, and surmounted in one,” Adorno writes.¹⁹ Cultural criticism must, in other words, turn its face toward the material conditions of cultural production, towards the mechanisms of exclusion and exploitation that are its condition of being, without for that reducing culture to an epiphenomenon of the social, to “superstructure.” “Cultural criticism must,” Adorno writes, “become social physiognomy,”²⁰ interpreting cultural productions as symptom formations to be used to seek out the weak spots in the ideology that society has itself become.²¹

The impasse that Adorno describes here is similar to that of cultural life in the early GDR, where the left avant-garde legacies of the early Soviet Union and Weimar Republic were castigated as proletcult and formalism, and where the national “Erbe” was institutionalized early on for both cultural and political reasons.²² One might argue that the problematic campaigns against formalism and cosmopolitanism represented heavy-handed attempts by the SED and some East German intellectuals to come to terms with the neutralization of culture.²³ Already in the Expressionism debate of the 1930s, the warning of Hanns Eisler and Ernst Bloch about the dead-end alternative of Hollywood type mass culture versus “*Oberlehrer Klassik*” [school master classicism] articulates the impasse of a cultural landscape fissured into a transnational vernacular mass culture on the one hand, and into an increasingly monumentalized and state-sanctioned

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

²¹ Ibid., p. 31.

²² On the point, Stephen Brockmann, “The Postwar Restoration East and West,” *New German Critique* 42:126 (Nov. 2015), pp. 69-90.

²³ On the campaigns of the early 1950s in the GDR against formalism and cosmopolitanism (terms used to describe artistic techniques we would identify now with mid-twentieth century high modernism) in art, literature, and culture, see chapter two of Werner Mittenzwei, *Die Intellektuellen. Literatur und Politik in Ostdeutschland 1945-2000* (Leipzig: Verlag Faber & Faber, 2001).

high culture on the other, with gestures to national cultural heritage often reduced to the level of commodity kitsch.²⁴ Given the hollowing out of national cultures in the face of what might be called the increasing organic composition of capital in the cultural sphere itself, i.e. the increasing part played in cultural production by technology and finance,²⁵ Adorno's advocacy of the European high modernism of Schoenberg and Beckett might have less to say to us—now or in the 1950s—than do the attempt of figures in the GDR, like Anna Seghers, or Brecht for that matter, to imagine alternative modes of cultural practice that look to refunction that practice itself as a participatory tool for collectively remaking social life. Rather than restoring Germany's cultural tradition, these figures maintain a fidelity to the notion of art as a social intervention, as Seghers put it in her 1944 essay "Aufgaben der Kunst"²⁶ [the Task of the Arts]. Indeed, her postwar addresses, essays, and articles, not to mention prose cycles like the Caribbean stories, mark a sustained attempt to break through the deadlock of Hollywood and *Oberlehrer Klassik* through a foregrounding and questioning of the possibility of a *popular* culture in modern, industrialized societies, based on the rich textures of everyday life, of suffering, resistance, and survival. Indeed, Seghers had, since the beginning of her career, aligned herself with what Michael Denning has described as a working class and plebeian global

²⁴ Ernst Bloch and Hanns Eisler, "Die Kunst zu Erben," in *Zur Tradition der deutschen sozialistischen Literatur. Eine Auswahl von Dokumente 1935-41*, edited by Alfred Klein (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1979), p. 415.

²⁵ On this point, Jasper Bernes. *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

²⁶ Anna Seghers, "Aufgaben der Kunst," in *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben. Band XIII: Aufsätze, Ansprachen, und Essays 1927-1953* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1980), p. 170. This is a stance, I might also add, that had its material basis in socialist construction, even in its impoverished East German instantiation, and was maybe not available to Adorno in what he himself described as the American colony of the Federal Republic. See Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School. It's History, Theories, and Political Significance*, translated by Michael Robertson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 406.

culture that shadowed the global cultural idioms of high modernism and commodity aesthetics, a “worldwide movement of plebeian artists and writers to create a proletarian culture, a socialist realism.”²⁷ A founding member of the German *Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller*, Seghers belonged to the first generation of this movement.

Seghers’ literary polemics in the postwar period are capacious in their concerns, but I would like to circle back on the question of what sort of notion of literature as a social act are to be gleaned from them. First of all, as she wrote in “Aufgaben der Kunst,” literature’s vocation is one of social pedagogy, to search out the “Angriffspunkte [...] , von denen aus er die Mentalität der faschistischen Jugend von ungeheuerem Wahn, von lügenhafter Verkrampftheit in Herrschaft und mechanischen Gehorsam befreien kann.”²⁸ An aspect of this pedagogical vocation is not only to awaken a sense for “*dignité humaine*,” but also to contribute to a popular re-attunement to social contradiction and the political in a broad sense, to a “Bewußtmachung von Konflikten” [making conscious of conflict], as she put it in “Volk und Schriftsteller” (1942).²⁹ While Seghers broadly endorsed notion of the people behind the cultural politics of the Popular Front, and later the SED’s cultural politics in the 1950s, her construction of a German tradition, and here she and Brecht were close in their positions, always emphasized the conflictual aspects of national tradition, especially in the German case. Already in 1935, and soon thereafter in her correspondence with Lukács,³⁰ she had opposed the cultural policies of *Oberlehrer Klassik* with

²⁷ Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (New York: Verso Press, 2004), p. 32.

²⁸ “...points of contact from which to liberate the mentality of fascist youth from its monstrous delusions, from false conceptions, from an uptight imperiousness and mechanical obedience.” Anna Seghers, “Aufgaben der Kunst,” p. 170.

²⁹ Anna Seghers, “Volk und Schriftsteller,” *Aufsätze*, p. 116.

³⁰ See Georg Lukács, “A Correspondence with Anna Seghers,” in *Essays on Realism*, edited by Rodney Livingstone and translated by David Fernbach (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980), pp. 167-197.

its focus on Goethe and Schiller, to the lineage of Hölderlin, Büchner, Günderode, and Kleist, figures who wrote “Hymnen auf ihr Land, an dessen gesellschaftlicher Mauer sie ihre Stirnen wundreiben” [hymns to their country, while they scraped their foreheads raw against its societal walls].³¹ To bring out aspects of struggle and resistance embedded in the amber of the German cultural heritage is for Seghers also to seize upon a historical hermeneutic to illuminate the present, for, as she asks in her address to the first German Writers’ Congress in 1947, what is the present truth about Germany? Is it “die Bilder von Korruption, von Hunger, von Auflösung moralischer und intellektueller Werte,” [the images of corruption, of hunger, of the disintegration of moral and intellectual values] that shocked Seghers upon her return to Berlin,³² or was it “die Beispiele von heroischen Opfern, von Widerstand gegen den Hitlerfaschismus” [the examples of heroic victims, of resistance to Hitler-fascism]? Seghers continues, “wie war das eine möglich, wenn auch das andere möglich war” [how was the one possible, when the other was possible]. Her answer is that “das Richtige der Bewegung auf die Zukunft, das auch in diesen Widerstandspunkten enthalten ist” [the correctness of the movement toward the future, which is also contained in these points of resistance], is both difficult and necessary to represent, because “etwas Dynamisches in das Statische eines Bilds hinein muß” [something dynamic must enter into the static quality of the image].³³

Many of Seghers’ polemics in the postwar period can be read as warnings against the neutralization of culture in the GDR, which paralleled, but also differed from, the situation that Adorno faced in the west: the reduction of art to manipulation, the passive attitude of the public

³¹ Anna Seghers, “Vaterlandsliebe,” *Aufsätze*, p. 37.

³² See, for example, Seghers’s correspondence collected in the volume *Hier im Volk der kalten Herzen. Briefwechsel 1947*, edited by Christel Berger (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuchverlag, 2000).

³³ Anna Seghers, “Der Schriftsteller und die geistige Freiheit,” *Aufsätze*, 266-7.

as cultural consumer, and the fetishizing of Germany's classical heritage. At the same time, there were powerful counter-currents in the GDR, and to bring out this dynamic movement, Seghers often searches outside of the German, or indeed, European context, for models of cultural production and reception that challenge the hierarchies of high and low culture, of culture as an articulation of the division of mental and manual labor, and the fissuring of cultural and social, not to say, political practice. Thus, in her 1947 essay "Die gemalte Zeit" [Painted Time] Seghers holds out the revolutionary Mexican fresco movement of the 1920s, which depicted popular history in a visual idiom combining classical and vernacular, as a model for a post-capitalist cultural practice that at the same time overcomes the division between "tendentious" and "pure" art that dominated discussion in the early Cold War years. These images "provide their moment so purely," Seghers writes, "that it becomes timeless."³⁴ As Kurt Batt has argued, Mexican folk art recurs throughout Seghers's work as a model for a non-alienated form of activity, but without harkening back to a kind of nostalgia for a pre-industrial pastoralism. During her years in the GDR, Seghers wrote short pieces on Diego Rivera, Pablo Neruda, Nazim Hikmet, Jorge Amado, and other non-German writers, many of whom she corresponded with closely. Rather, texts like "Das wirkliche Blau" [Benito's Blue], her 1967 story of a rural Mexican potter on the search for his specific blue,³⁵ or even "Glauben an Irdisches" [Faith in the Terrestrial] with its evocative description of French workers replacing the windows of the *Sainte Chapelle* and the rebuilding of Warsaw by Polish workers,³⁶ show culture as part of the collective work of social reproduction, of building worlds of work and meaning, and express the "Ineinander und

³⁴ Anna Seghers, "Die gemalte Zeit," *Aufsätze*, p. 218.

³⁵ Anna Seghers, "Das wirkliche Blau," in *Erzählungen 1967-1980. Werkausgabe II/6* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2005).

³⁶ Anna Seghers, "Glauben an Irdisches," *Aufsätze*, 272-81.

Nebeneinander von Nützlichem und Schönerem, von Kunst und Arbeit” [imbrication and simultaneity of the useful and the beautiful, of art and labor], that she wished to see secured in a socialist society.³⁷

At the same time, essays like “Große Unbekannte” [Great Unknowns] (1947/8) and Seghers’s Caribbean stories of the late 1940s evoke the Latin American and Caribbean revolutionary struggles of the nineteenth century as privileged examples of the resourceful persistence of subterranean cultures of resistance and memory involved in transmitting revolutionary experience across the generations to create a vital oppositional tradition,³⁸ that dynamic element that appears so fleeting and precarious in postwar Germany. “Große Unbekannte,” published during the winter of 1948, provides long biographical sketches of the Venezuelan revolutionary and forerunner of Simón Bolívar, Francisco de Miranda, and the leader of the Haitian revolution, Toussaint Louverture, for a German readership that Seghers sees as amputated from global emancipatory movements and traditions, particularly Latin American and Caribbean revolutionary movements.³⁹ It is to these geopolitical and cultural foci that Seghers will continually return throughout her career. Perhaps her most sustained meditation on the imbrication of Caribbean and European revolutionary traditions is the cycle that has come to be known as the Caribbean stories. These stories depict the interval between the slave uprisings on the islands of the Antilles around the time of the French Revolution through the attempted re-institution of slavery in the French Caribbean by Napoleon and the struggle against this re-

³⁷ Kurt Batt, *Anna Seghers: Versuch über Entwicklung und Werke* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1980), p. 215.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³⁹ Anna Seghers, “Große Unbekannte,” *Aufsätze*, p. 221-57.

institution, victorious, at great cost, only on the island of Haiti.⁴⁰ These texts, which demonstrate the collision between Jacobin claims to equality and freedom as they were articulated in the French Revolution, and the imperatives of the global capitalist market in which revolutionary France and its ostensible Antilles colonies were key players. In ways that resound strongly with arguments developed by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the Caribbean stories explore the contradiction between freedom and domination in the very crucible of capitalist modernity.

Seghers wrote the first two of these pieces, “Die Hochzeit von Haiti” [The High Days of Haiti]⁴¹ (titled with a critical nod to Heinrich von Kleist’s 1811 novella “The Betrothal in Santo Domingo”), which tells the story of the Jewish jeweler Michael Nathan, who becomes a confidante and advisor to Toussaint Louverture, and “Die Wiedereinführung der Sklaverei auf Guadeloupe” [The Re-Introduction of Slavery on Guadeloupe] between 1948 and 1949, shortly after her return to the GDR. These two pieces were published together under the title *Die Hochzeit von Haiti. 2 Novellen* that year, while the draft of a third piece in the cycle, “Das Licht auf dem Galgen” [The Light on the Gallows] remained a fragment until Seghers returned to it in the late 1950’s, publishing it in the prestigious East German journal *Sinn und Form* in 1960 and then together with the earlier two in a volume entitled *Karibische Geschichten* [Caribbean Stories] in 1962.⁴² These texts have been read by many critics, and perhaps not without

⁴⁰ Seghers would return to this terrain for her final prose cycle, *Drei Frauen aus Haiti*, published in 1980.

⁴¹ The title of the story is somewhat perplexing, since, if one followed the common translation of “Hochzeit” as “marriage,” it would translate literally as “The Marriage of Haiti,” which makes as little sense in German as it does in English. Furthermore, no marriage occurs in the story. Helen Fehervary suggests, based on the novella’s Jewish thematics, instead “The High Days of Haiti.”

⁴² For a discussion of the origins of these pieces, see Robert Cohen’s commentary to Anna Seghers, *Erzählungen 1948-1949. Werkausgabe II/3* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2012), pp. 187-226. For “Das Licht auf dem Galgen,” see Ute Brandes’s commentary to Anna Seghers,

justification, as exhibits of Seghers's Eurocentric and teleological Marxist orientation, as stories where the subjectivity of the slaves and rebels of the Antilles is subsumed into a white revolutionary and erotic project.⁴³ Others, including Heiner Müller, who brought "Das Licht auf dem Galgen" to the stage of Berlin's Volksbühne in 1980 as *The Mission*, have interpreted these stories in terms of Seghers's own ambivalence about the GDR or indeed in regard to the revolutionary project *tout court*. Thus, for Sonja Hilzinger, the Caribbean stories mark a turn in Seghers's *oeuvre*, under the sign of Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes in his secret speech at Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in 1956, from a poetics of failed revolution to one of the revolution betrayed.⁴⁴ Müller was likewise fascinated by the motif of treachery that is foregrounded by the Debuissou character in the story, stating "'Licht auf dem Galgen' ist ihre Auseinandersetzung mit dem Stalinismus: Napoleon/Stalin, der Liquidator der Revolution" ['Light on the Gallows' is her [Seghers's—HB] confrontation with Stalinism: Napoleon/Stalin, the liquidator of the revolution].⁴⁵ Inge Diersen expands Müller's observation to encompass the revolutionary conjunctures of the 1790s and the 1930s. "Wenn im 'Mutterland,' in der 'Heimat' der Revolution—damals Frankreich, im 20. Jahrhundert das Land des Roten Oktober—die Revolution untergeht, sinken die Aussichten der Unterdrückten in aller Welt."⁴⁶ In this sense,

Erzählungen 1958-1966. Werkausgabe II/5 (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2007), pp. 429-436.

⁴³ For examples of such readings, Arlene A. Teroaka, *East, West, and Others: The Third World in Postwar German Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), pp. 7-26 and Sigrid Weigel, *Bilder des kulturellen Gedächtnisses. Beiträge zur Gegenwartsliteratur* (Dümmen-Hiddingsel: tende, 1994), pp. 163-177.

⁴⁴ Sonja Hilzinger. "From Revolution Lost to Revolution Betrayed: Anna Seghers's *Karibische Geschichten*." *German Monitor* No. 43 (1998) 166

⁴⁵ Heiner Müller. *Krieg ohne Schlacht: Leben in zwei Diktaturen* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 1992) 297. Quoted in Diersen; see below.

⁴⁶ "When the revolution goes under in the 'motherland, in the 'homeland' of the revolution—France then, in the twentieth century the land of the Red October, the prospects of the oppressed throughout the world sink with it." Inge Diersen, "'Immer blieben die Engel aus am Ende' (Heiner Müller) Zur Thematik der verlorenen Revolution bei Anna Seghers," *Argonautenschiff 2*

Diersen sees these stories as a questioning of a specific contradiction of the political paradigm of the French Revolution: that between the revolutionary élan of the Jacobins and the great power politics of the French nation.⁴⁷

Seghers herself insisted on the importance of thinking about France and the Antilles, Europe and its colonies, as well as the present and the past, not only for this cycle of texts, but for her understanding of the position of the European left within a global revolutionary process. While working on the stories, Seghers met briefly with Aimé Césaire on the sidelines of the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defense of Peace in 1948 in the Polish city of Wroclaw, reading Césaire's comparison between the Holocaust and colonial slavery in his introduction to the volume of texts by Victor Schoelcher, *Esclavage et Colonialisation* [Slavery and Colonialism].⁴⁸ Seghers, although later insisting that the Caribbean stories should not be read as allegories for developments in postwar East Germany,⁴⁹ did in fact note at the time of their composition, perhaps ironically, "dass das ja geradezu erschuetternd aktuell fuer Berlin ist" [that this is shockingly relevant for Berlin]. Beneath this irony, however, is the concern with a literary grasp of "world market and colonial system" as well as the "struggle of a people for national independence."⁵⁰

Without having the space for a detailed reading of this cycle here, I would like to suggest in closing that while many accounts of this cycle focus in fact on the last piece, "Das Licht auf

(1993), p. 45.

⁴⁷ Marike Janzen follows this opposition between popular and national, or state, aspects of revolutionary processes in the Caribbean in her "Messenger Writers: Anna Seghers and Alejo Carpentier in the Cold War," *Comparative Literature* 62.3 (2010), pp. 283-301.

⁴⁸ Cohen, "Kommentar," p. 207. On the encounter between Seghers and Césaire, see also Christiane Zehl Romero, *Anna Seghers. Eine Biographie 1947-1983* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2003), p. 63.

⁴⁹ Cohen, "Kommentar," p. 204.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 191-2.

dem Galgen,” and the astutely portrayed political and ethical drama that it draws out, there is also a larger framing at stake in the cycle as a whole, and that is the political limits placed on a revolution emanating from a European center that is also the center of a world capitalist market that was, as the eighteenth century turned to the nineteenth, dependent on slave labor.⁵¹ This geopolitical and economic scenario is an undertone in all three stories, but one that is never far from the surface of these stories and forms the backdrop that forces the decisions and allegiances of their characters. These are stories of commitment and loyalty under the sign of an emancipatory project of universal human rights—the promise of Robespierre, who, as Michael Nathan recalls his speeches on the eve of the French Revolution in “Die Hochzeit von Haiti,” “hat sie noch nicht für sich selbst, und er will sie für alle, für Juden, für Indios, für Neger, für Mulatten” [did not yet have them for himself, and wants them for everyone, for Jews, for Indios, for blacks, for mulattoes]⁵²—that is in some sense already foreclosed at the moment of its historical enunciation. Nathan’s solidarity with Toussaint Louverture, who takes up arms for this fight, is manifested not in personal or political triumph, but in shared death, Nathan in his listless exile in London, Louverture in a French fortress. “Ihr Tod,” Seghers writes, “gleichzeitig an verschiedenen Enden der Welt, erscheint einem weniger rätselhaft, wenn man weiß, daß sie derselben Aussat entstammen” [Their death, at the same time on different ends of the earth, appears less mysterious if one knows that they sprout from the same sowing].⁵³ This is a solidarity that leaves no trace on the record of world history. The same could be said for the symbol of solidarity with which “Die Wiedereinführung der Sklaverei in Guadeloupe” comes to

⁵¹ See, for example, Robin Blackburn’s *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London: Verso Press, 1997).

⁵² Anna Seghers, “Die Hochzeit von Haiti,” *Erzählungen 1948-1949*, p. 19.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

a close, the white body in the mass of black corpses.⁵⁴ Finally, the “light on the gallows,” which the messenger Malbec perceives where the revolutionary Sasportas is hung after his mission, given him by the French Republic, of instigating a slave revolt on the British colony of Jamaica is revoked by Napoleon, is itself such a symbol.

The failures that Seghers describes in these stories goes, I would argue, to the core of what Adorno and Horkheimer describe as the dialectic of enlightenment, which is already overtaken by the brutal instrumentality of the capitalist world system when it emerges in its political form in the French Revolution. This logic of counterrevolution within the bourgeois revolution, despite its rhetoric of universal rights, is present almost as a power of fate in Seghers’s Caribbean cycle. Here it is worth quoting Adorno and Horkheimer at some length:

With the development of the economic system* in which the control of the economic apparatus by private groups creates a division between human beings, self-preservation, although treated by reason as identical, had become the reified drive of each individual citizen and proved to be a destructive natural force no longer distinguishable from self-destruction. The two principles combined in a murky fusion. Pure reason became unreason, a procedure as immune to errors as it was devoid of content. However, with the revolutionary avant-garde, the utopia which proclaimed the reconciliation between nature and the self, emerged from its hiding place in German philosophy as something at once irrational and

⁵⁴ Anna Seghers, “Die Wiedereinführung der Sklaverei in Guadeloupe,” *Erzählungen 1948-1949*, p. 116.

reasonable, as the idea of the community of free individuals—and brought down itself the full fury of reason.⁵⁵

In this passage, Adorno and Horkheimer similarly locate enlightenment's dialectic precisely in this contradiction between the claim of the individual to freedom and the "control of the economic apparatus by private groups," which in both Seghers's pieces and the historical record encompasses not only the labor power of workers, but the very lives of slaves, and this is still the case today in a world where regimes of unfree and servile labor seem to be on the rise. Seghers's portrait of slavery as integral to the rise of capitalism and the as the limit point of bourgeois ideologies of human rights also allows for a framing of the racial dynamics of her stories in terms surprisingly anticipatory of contemporary discussions of race in social reproduction theory, which sees the social institution of specific racialized and gendered laboring populations as "dependent subjects of expropriation" (rather than, as with waged workers, "free subjects of exploitation"), who have no rights and whose labor can be taken essentially for free, as an essential background condition for the expanded reproduction of capital.⁵⁶

Seghers's evocations of Latin America and the Caribbean, I would argue, should not be read as a turning away from the postwar German scene, but they should also not be seen as a kind of exotic allegory for the impasse of postwar Germany. Rather, they should be seen as serious meditations on the limits of a revolutionary solidarity without an anti-capitalist horizon, and not in a defeatist or fatalistic sense. Whether or not the revolutionary movements that

⁵⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 71. In the 1944 edition, "economic system" read more straightforwardly as "capitalism."

⁵⁶ See in particular Michael C. Dawson, "Hidden in Plain Sight: A Note on Legitimation Crises and the Racial Order" and Nancy Fraser, "Expropriation and Racialized Capitalism: A Reply to Michael Dawson," *Critical Historical Studies* (Spring 2016), pp. 143-178. Citations here from p. 169.

Seghers describes could have succeeded historically is also beside the point. Seghers provides a depiction of a project of emancipation that, despite the flaws of her own portrayal, nonetheless evokes the courage of that moment, precisely in the face of the historical illusions of her characters, and in this way attempts to provide a serviceable history of the revolutionary present in the context of the postwar struggles against colonialism and for socialism. Rather than pronouncing judgment on those struggles, we can read these pieces perhaps rather in the sense that Jamie Trnka argues that East German literature often engages with non-European locales, as “vital sites of knowledge production... and pivotal engagements with divergent European traditions.”⁵⁷ It is this attempt to conceive of a kind of “subterranean modernism,” to borrow a phrase from Denning,⁵⁸ that Seghers put into play against the neutralization of culture that Adorno diagnosed in both postfascist German republics. This is not the place to discuss the significance of this attempt for the present, but in a context in which, as Constantin Seibt has argued “austerity is the only political project that Europe has,”⁵⁹ it is worth recalling Heiner Müller’s assertion that “the so-called market economy has no answers to the questions that socialism had attempted to answer,” that is, “no one or everyone.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Jamie Trnka, *Revolutionary Subjects: German Literatures and the Limits of Aesthetic Solidarity with Latin America* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), p. 55.

⁵⁸ Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, 67.

⁵⁹ Constantin Seibt, “Die gefährlichste Idee Europas,” *Tagesanzeiger* 7/2/2105

⁶⁰ Heiner Müller, “Ein Loch auf der Strasse” in *Werke 8: Schriften*, edited by Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005), p. 489.