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Author

Bivens, Hunter

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Brecht and German Studies

I would like to begin this essay with a quote from Bertolt Brecht's antifascist pamphlet

"Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth":

The great truth of our age (recognition of which does not yet achieve anything, but without recognition of which no other truth of importance can be found) is that our part of the globe is sinking into barbarism because the conditions of ownership of the means of production are being held onto with violence. What use is it to write something courageous which shows that the state into which we are sinking is barbaric (which is true), if it is not clear why we have ended up in this state? [...] We have to tell the truth about the barbaric conditions in our country, that the measures which will make them disappear can be taken, namely those which change the conditions of ownership.¹

Helen Fehervary takes this quote as paradigmatic for Brecht's understanding of the role of antifascist art in her 1976 article on history and aesthetics in the work of Brecht and his putative successor Heiner Müller. For Fehervary, Brecht's approach to this problem was one shaped by classical humanist notions of enlightenment. Brecht gathered together reason, historical optimism, and modernist aesthetics in his struggle for "the great truth." By the 1970s and the onset of the postmodern, all three of these aspects of the Brechtian project would seem to have lost their force, and Müller responds with an aesthetics of

¹ Bertolt Brecht, "Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth" in *Brecht on Art and Politics*, edited by Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles (London: Methuen, 2003), 155-156.

entanglement and “inundation.”² And yet the “great truth” that Brecht evokes in the passage above insists upon our own moment with a force that it has not had since the 1930s, at least in Europe and North America. In the period since the global economic downturn of 2008, the “great truth” of capitalist property relations and the violence of maintaining them is refracted through a global politics of austerity, migration crises, the resurgence of authoritarian populism, and various forms of racialized precarity— all against the backdrop of an unfolding ecological catastrophe. In the face of the utterly contemporaneous barbarism of the present, Brecht may be a figure who presents strategies less for enlightenment than for *disentanglement*, for critical and scholarly work that helps us intervene into the world by taking sides and parsing out the bewildering entanglement of our own fraught present. This essay sketches Brecht’s impact on the development of German Studies as a discipline in the United States, and then briefly comments on the contemporary understanding of what German Studies is and does in the US academy and what Brecht might have to do with that. In other words this essay is intended neither as an overview of Brecht scholarship in the North American or German (East and West) academic contexts nor as review of Brecht in performance or performance studies. Rather, the question I will follow is what kind of notion of academic work the various incarnations and evocations of Brecht and Brechtian practice have authorized in the US.

The history of the academic reception of Brecht in the US intertwines with the formation of a specific sort of German Studies in the early 1970s. Institutionally

² Helen Fehervary, “Enlightenment or Entanglement: History and Aesthetics in Bertolt Brecht and Heiner Müller,” *New German Critique*, no. 8 (1976), 80-109: 96.

speaking, this came at a moment of crisis for German Departments. As Peter Uwe Hohendahl puts it, “National Defense Education Act money was running out and... at more or less the same time, language requirements were abolished at many colleges.” The turn to an interdisciplinary model of German Studies, introducing the study of film and popular culture, and Marxist and feminist perspectives was in part a response to “the perceived threat that German Departments might lose their secure place in the humanities.”³ The late 1960s marked a turn in another way as well. After World War Two, research and teaching in North American Germanics was shaped by New Criticism and its methodological contemporary in the Federal Republic, work immanent analysis, both of which were concerned with questions of form and poetics and tended to exclude social and historical issues.⁴ By the late 1960s, an alliance of German émigré academics like Jost Hermand and Hans Mayer and young Germanists politicized by the Civil Rights and Antiwar movements of the 1960s emerged to transform research in the discipline.⁵ Young Germanists in the US aligned with the New Left and shared an interest in a Marxist-oriented critical theory with the West German student movement. This led to a politicization of German Studies in the 1970s that brought Marxism, feminism, the Frankfurt School, the study of the GDR, and, of course, Bertolt Brecht to the fore.⁶

As Sara Lennox was to put it later, “Brecht...” was in these years “generally considered by the Left as the single writer whose works can be regarded, from the

³ Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “General Introduction,” in *German Studies in the United States: A Historical Handbook*, ed. Peter Uwe Hohendahl (New York: MLA, 2003), 14.

⁴ Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “From Philology to the New Criticism,” *German Studies in the United States*, 229.

⁵ Sara Lennox, “Oppositional Criticism: Marxism and Feminism, 1970-80,” in *German Studies in the United States*, 231-242, 231.

⁶ Lennox, “Oppositional Criticism,” 235.

standpoint of both form and content, as authentically Marxist”⁷ and was in the process of being discovered or rediscovered in various ways by the US and West German New Left, critical intellectuals in the GDR, and globally as part of the anti-imperialist struggles of the long 1960s. The first international conference on Brecht occurred in East Berlin in February of 1968, but the next year John Fuegi and Reinhold Grimm organized a seminar session on Brecht at the Modern Language Association’s 1969 annual conference.

Shortly afterward, the first Brecht Congress was held in Milwaukee, and the International Brecht Society was launched in December of 1971. Drawing from Brecht’s own ideas for a Diderot Society, the IBS and its publications, *Communications of the International Brecht Society* and *The Brecht Yearbook*, continue to be interdisciplinary, international, and committed to dialogue between academics and theater practitioners to facilitate of not only the study Brecht’s life and work, but also the relationship between society and the arts.⁸

Less directly Brecht-focused, but important to the political and methodological turn of German Studies was the journal *New German Critique*, which emerged in 1973 from discussions about the impasses of the New Left in the United States and the political and pedagogical possibilities of critical theory. *New German Critique*, Andreas Huyssen and Anson Rabinbach write, “would bring theory to bear on a dismal praxis, not as a set of dismal slogans or a ‘guide,’ but rather as a form of reflection that would inhibit, rather than propel, the spiral of violence and irrationalism that was taking control of the street

⁷ Sara Lennox, “Women in Brecht’s Works,” *New German Critique*, no. 14 (1978), 83-96: 83.

⁸ This account relies on Marc Silberman, “A Brief History of the International Brecht Society 1970-2016,” *The International Brecht Society*, http://www.brecht-society.org/ibs_history (accessed December 14, 2018).

politics of the New Left.”⁹ Brecht was fundamental to this project for two reasons. First, Brecht provided a model for an interventionist cultural and intellectual practice: “‘production’ was the big word in the early days,” Huyssen and Rabinbach recount, “not reading, and certainly not literature... Production of a journal, production in the classroom, production as a guiding principle in literary aesthetics. In this respect Brecht... loomed large.”¹⁰ Secondly, the journal’s early investigations into heterodox Marxisms were sustained through a deep engagement with the critical positions of socialist intellectuals in the GDR, who often understood themselves as drawing from and reacting to Brecht’s conflicted legacy in East Germany as a Marxist critic of actually existing socialism, but one who was also claimed and memorialized by the SED. “The Brecht debate in the GDR,” Huyssen and Rabinbach note, “became a prism through which we could view much more than the distortions of both the loyal opposition and the guardians of orthodoxy among the Brecht scholars in the East.”¹¹

The serious study of the GDR and its literature in the pages of *New German Critique* was also very much tied to the rise of feminism in German Studies. Sara Lennox relates the story of the beginnings of the Coalition of Women in German as a reaction to the “path-breaking” 1974 conference on the GDR at Washington University, “where male faculty members sat on chairs and female graduate students sat on the floor.”¹² The critique of Brecht’s treatment of women in his life and work was a common topic for feminism in German Studies, including Lennox’s own 1978 essay “Brecht and Women.”

⁹ Andreas Huyssen and Anson Rabinbach, “*New German Critique*: The First Decade,” *New German Critique*, no. 95 (2005), 5-26: 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹² Lennox, “Oppositional Criticism,” 237.

At the same time, the interest of many scholars affiliated with WiG in the wave of women's writing coming out of the GDR in the 1970s and 1980s sustained a socialist feminist politics and an ongoing "commitment to a left feminist analysis" in German Studies.¹³

I have dwelt on the early 1970s to empathize that moment's importance to a genealogy of German Studies today. It set the stage for both the theory wave and the cultural studies turn in German Departments in the 1980s and 1990s—not that these two developments should necessarily be conflated. Indeed, there are at present no theoretical or methodological approaches that could be said to hold for German Studies in a general sense. Instead, German Studies, as reflected in the *German Studies Review* and the programs for the annual conventions of the German Studies Association, has become a capacious study of "things German," drawing methodologically on deconstruction, cultural studies, new historicism, queer theory, postcolonial thought, and critical theory. As Sabine Wilke puts it in introducing a recent volume on eco-critical approaches, German Studies should be "construed broadly to include German literature, history, philosophy, anthropology, and culture in its European context and mindful of its global dimensions."¹⁴ While the interest in deconstruction foregrounded the importance of the study of philosophy in German departments, the turn to the inter-, trans-, and sometimes anti-disciplinary ethos of cultural studies has tied German Studies more broadly to work in the Humanities, forging connections between literary, political, legal, medical, social,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Sabine Wilke, "Introduction: Rethinking Literary History, Critical Reading Practices, and Cultural Studies in the Anthropocene," in *Readings in the Anthropocene: The Environmental Humanities, German Studies, and Beyond*, ed. Sabine Wilke and Japhet Johnstone (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1-14, 4.

scientific, and gender-specific perspectives.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the situation in German Studies in the twenty-first century has been shaped by the corporate restructuring of the US university. German Studies programs are increasingly forced to justify themselves according to market and administrative logics that are, as Benjamin Robinson points out, more interested in quantification and governmentality than they are in the institutionally subversive ethos of theory and cultural studies.¹⁶

Having reached this point, I am less interested in what this current conjuncture means for research and scholarship on Brecht, than I am in the Brechtian question of what and who is Brecht useful for? Obviously, Brecht will continue to influence work on performance, media, politics, and culture, on Brecht himself and his milieus and moments, and other areas. His expanded notion of the arts to include the sciences remains a touchstone for interdisciplinary work. Does this exhaust the uses of Brecht? Fredric Jameson's 1998 *Brecht and Method* argues that Brecht supplies us with a new notion of utility itself that, in its vision of "a world in which practice is entertaining, and which includes its own pedagogy as a member of the class it subsumes," renders Brechtian techniques uniquely adequate to revealing the latent possibilities for human practice, or productivity as Brecht might put it, in the seemingly seamless reification of the digital, postmodern world.¹⁷ Writing in 1993, at the height of postmodernism and poststructuralism and in the immediate wake of the fall of the socialist bloc, Marc

¹⁵ Jost Hermand, "The Development of Research from 1880 to the Present," *German Studies in the United States*, 266-275, 274.

¹⁶ Benjamin Robinson, "What Comes First in German Studies, German or Studies?" *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, vol. 75, no. 3 (2000): 229.

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London and New York: Verso Press, 1998), 3, 178.

Silberman also made a case for the continued relevance of Brecht as a corrective to poststructuralism as “a mode of difference that does not or cannot recognize conflict and contradiction.”¹⁸ Brecht’s approach to difference and dialectics, on the other hand, insists on contradiction and social change. This view of reality as complicated and messy, as dialectical and contradictory in ways that resist the terrors and temptations of closure, has its utopian dimension in what Brecht calls simply “living together” or “*das Zusammenleben*.” Silberman sees this mode exemplified in the prologue to *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, where “representation, aesthetics, and the work of the imagination become political acts with a use value comparable to labor” for Brecht’s collective farmers. “Brecht’s reformulation of the collective as the intersubjective ‘living together’ of a community,” Silberman writes, “stresses the positionality of the subjects who are constantly producing themselves as subjects through conflict and contradiction with one another.”¹⁹

If postmodernism is, as Jameson famously put it, “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” this cultural logic has for all of that not stood still. Mark Fischer uses the term “capitalist realism” to describe a situation in which the fundamental conditions of the postmodern still obtain, but where they “have now become so aggravated and so chronic that they have gone through a change in kind.”²⁰ For Fisher, this includes a foreclosure of alternatives to neoliberal governmentality, the severing of the connection to modernism that gave substance to appeals to difference, multiplicity and so forth, and

¹⁸ Marc Silberman, “A Postmodernized Brecht?” *Theater Journal*, vol. 45, no.1 (March, 1993), 1-19: 5.

¹⁹ Ibid, 11.

²⁰ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 7.

the lack of an outside to capitalism, which now even more than thirty years ago “seamlessly occupies the horizon of the thinkable.”²¹ The waning of affect that Jameson diagnoses in postmodernity turns into a proliferation of fear and cynicism in capitalist realism, with all of the intellectually and politically disempowering effects of those affects.²² In this situation, the utility of Brecht lies less in a methodology or a set of positions, but rather in a stance, a Brechtian *Haltung*, and indeed a stance of contradiction and antagonism.

I would suggest that Brecht helps us frame the task of German Studies, whatever its themes and methods, as a means of writing the truth *to* someone and *for* someone. Perhaps those aspects of Brecht’s *oeuvre* that have been least palatable to contemporary critics are perhaps what are most relevant today: his productivism and his commitment to class. These were the key terms of Brecht’s combative realism of the 1930s, but what I am empathically not calling for is a return to the productivist imaginary and the iconography of the male, white working class of nineteenth century industrialism or twentieth century Fordism. New work in Marxist, feminist, ecocritical, and critical race theory allows us to reconceptualize both labor and class, for example in certain iterations of critical race theory, concerned with “race as the modality through which class is lived,” as Stuart Hall famously put it,²³ and in Marxist-feminist theorizations of social reproduction. Capital is a regime for the production of laboring bodies, and it does so in ways that are gendered, raced, and classed, and this in complex, historically specific

²¹ Ibid. 8.

²² Ibid. 76.

²³ Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), 341.

ways. Complex transformations in patterns of capitalist accumulation have led to a situation where what Nancy Frasier describes as the background conditions for exploitation, that is to say reproductive labor, steps to the fore in the forms of precarious labor, service work, and the gig economy.²⁴ With this comes the recognition that, as Michael Denning puts it, “we must insist that ‘proletarian’ is not a synonym for ‘wage labourer’ but for dispossession, expropriation and radical dependence on the market. You don’t need a job to be a proletarian: wageless life, not wage labour, is the starting point in understanding the free market.”²⁵ If we conceive production as the work of relation and what Kathi Weeks calls “the common reproduction of life,”²⁶ including that of our world itself, and class as a general principle of the irreducible antagonism of capitalist society, this might provide some orientation and a realist attitude for work in German Studies in relation to the corporate university, authoritarian populism, and ecological catastrophe, and enable us to disentangle the disempowering logics of capitalist realism.

²⁴ On reproductive and feminized labor, see Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Extended Conception of Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 86 (2014): 55–72

²⁵ Michael Denning, “Wageless Life,” *New Left Review* 66 (2010), 79–97: 81.

²⁶ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 230.