Modern Language Association Convention

5-8 January 2023, San Francisco

Brecht and Democracy (sponsored by the International Brecht Society)

Presider: Stephen Brockmann, Carnegie Mellon University

Respondent: Marc Silberman, University of Wisconsin-Madison

1) *Murder* as a Free Word

Astrid Oesmann, Rice University

In the historical context of national socialism and World War II, Brecht’s writings on democracy reveal the author’s frustration with the understanding of democracy as a theoretical principle and a form of government. In theory and practice Brecht detects a lack of clarity that promotes wishful thinking that proves debilitating in political emergencies. In the *Flüchtlingsgespräche* he roots the docility with which democracy in the Weimar Republic passively promoted fascism in ideological confusion that makes active intervention impossible. According to Brecht, democracy appears to be less violent than communism or fascism because it relies on economic conditions and thus quiet, less recognizable, and bloodless forms of suppression.

This paper will outline Brecht’s critique of democratic values and examine his response to ideological confusion when it comes to cause and effect in democratic systems. Brecht sees the cultural apparatus, and writers in particular, complicit in concealing democratic contradictions. The freedom of expression that democracy guarantees, is celebrated by writers as unlimited subjectivity: “Die Empfindungen von Leuten, welche mit Gewalt davon abgehalten werden Morde zu begehen, schildern sie als äußerst schmerzensreiche Empfindungen von Leuten, welche abgehalten werden, ihren Bedürfnissen zu genügen” (22:297). Brecht presents the complexity of human needs in his opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. He chose this genre to make “culinary consumption” content and form of the play, while examining specific situational behavior in teaching play (*Lehrstück*) style. This demonstrates ideological contradictions and possibilities of examination on a macro level and explores the possibilities of intervention during in political emergencies on a micro level.

Astrid Oesmann is Associate Professor of German and affiliate faculty member of Jewish Studies. She completed her studies in German literature and literary theory at Universität Hamburg, Johns Hopkins University, and Columbia University. Author of *Staging History* (2005) about Brecht’s theatrical experiments in examining political ideologies and co-editor of *Brecht und das Fragment* (2020), she is also a member of the *Brecht Yearbook* editorial board. She is completing a book-length study on “Masks, Politics, and the European Avant-garde.”

2) The Brink: Masses, Collectives, and Democracy

Theodore F. Rippey, Bowling Green State University

In this paper I frame Brecht’s thinking about masses and collectives in the second quarter of the twentieth century as an effort to perceive and grasp with greater precision the limited capacity of political systems and forms of state—democratic, socialist, or otherwise—to deliver on the promise of human emancipation and solve intractable problems of social injustice. Within this learning project, abstract conceptualizations of masses and collectives in theoretical fragments, letters, and journal entries and concrete experiments with collective and mass networks in art became ways of illuminating systemic deficits and contradictions and testing out alternatives. In this work, indexical exposure of social and political reality strengthened the capacity to envision alternative political forms that experiential routines under extant systems rendered imperceptible. Democracies therefore arguably functioned not as corrupt bourgeois foils to virtuous Marxist models but as experiments, the success and failure of which had to be assessed to achieve clear thinking about what might happen past the brink of democracy’s transformation or collapse.

Theodore F. Rippey is Interim Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Bowling Green State University. He holds a faculty appointment in the Department of World Languages and Cultures, where he began his career as an assistant professor of German after receiving his PhD from the University of Wisconsin – Madison in 2001. He has published on Weimar and exile literature and culture, sound and media in interwar Germany, Siegfried Kracauer, and German cinema. He is a former editor of *The Brecht Yearbook* and a contributor to the 2021 volume *Bertolt Brecht in Context.*

3) Herr Keuner and the Foundations for Incorruptible Democracy

Luke Beller, Johns Hopkins University

Bertolt Brecht’s aporetic short stories *Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner* tend to be overlooked as sources of his political thought in contrast to his poetry and dramatic works. Nevertheless, these stories offer a wealth of information concerning his dialectical approach to socialism, as well as what he meant by socialism—namely, a democratically controlled polity and economy. With a name that denotes a unity of opposites within the political sphere, Herr Keuner navigates a variety of socio-political situations as a rational, “thinking man” dedicated to praxis. Described by scholars such as Günter Anders, Walter Benjamin, and Benjamin Heinrichs as “unsympathetic,” “unreliable,” “artificial,” “unheroic,” and “cold,” Herr Keuner is not once defined as democratically inclined. However, being aware of the fluctuating movements of politics, Brecht made use of “eingreifendes Denken” to catalyze political change away from the fascistic, reactionary tendencies of capitalist society. Herr Keuner functions as one such catalyst: he portrays how one can become a nationalist in the face of war, informs the reader about what corrupts, depicts the way in which rights can be granted to the stateless with respect to cultural plurality, explains the arbitrariness of the legal system under capitalism, and insists on asking “[das Volk], ob es einverstanden ist, mit dem, was mit ihm gemacht wird,” which Brecht sees as a foundation of democracy. Through his utopian *Keunergeschichten*, Brecht offers us revolutionary wisdom in disrupting the contradictory nature of a contemporary politics resembling early twentieth-century issues, and moving toward a more just, democratic world.

Luke Beller received his BA in Classics and MA in German Studies at California State University, Long Beach. He began his PhD in German at Johns Hopkins University in Fall 2020. In the Summer of 2019, he interned in the Handschriften-Abteilung at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach. A 2020-2021 Fulbright Research Award allowed him to conduct a study of the figure of Socrates in Bertolt Brecht’s *Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner* at the Bertolt Brecht Archive. His broader interests include the drama and aesthetic theories of Friedrich Schiller and Bertolt Brecht, the intersections between German Enlightenment philosophy and classical Greek thought, and 18th-20th century aesthetic and moral philosophy.