

Class into Race: Brecht and the Problem of State Capitalism

Todd Cronan

VICEROY. A pretty tale. But tell me, what's the point?

MISSENA. Instead of class war cleaving rich from poor / There's war between the Zaks and Ziks.

VICEROY. Ahah. Not bad.

—Bertolt Brecht, *Round Heads and Pointed Heads* (1936)

“Brecht’s sins were revealed for the first time after the Nazis had seized power,” Hannah Arendt writes in *Men in Dark Times* (1966). It was the “classics”—Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin—that “did not permit him to recognize what Hitler actually did.”

By 1935 or 1936 Hitler had liquidated hunger and unemployment; hence, for Brecht, schooled in the “classics,” there was no longer any pretense for not praising Hitler. In seeking one, he simply refused to recognize what was patent to everybody—that those really persecuted were not workers but Jews, that it was race, and not class, that counted. There was not a line in Marx, Engels, or Lenin that dealt with this, and the Communists denied it—it was nothing but the pretense of the ruling classes, they said—and Brecht, stolidly refusing to “look for himself,” fell into line.¹

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1. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York, 1983), p. 243; hereafter abbreviated *MDT*. The Bertolt Brecht essay originally appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1966. Arendt could cite in support of her position the fact that (as Edmund Silberner observed) Nazi anti-Semitism was not addressed at the 1935 Seventh World Congress of the Comintern. Arendt, of course, is taking aim not only at Brecht but at the whole range of so-called economic analyses of anti-

There is no doubt that Adolf Hitler's capacity to provide full employment posed an enormous problem for Marxist theorists.² If hunger and unemployment were the lynchpin of revolutionary action, then National Socialism's satisfaction of these basic human requirements—no hunger, no revolution—required something like a radical reinterpretation of Marxist categories (the Frankfurt school solution) or, for Arendt, a wholesale refusal of the project.³ The result was the same: the replacement of economic categories with political ones.⁴ The history and consequences of this replacement is the subject of this essay.

Friedrich Pollock's "State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations" of 1941—the canonical Frankfurt school document on political economy—stakes its claim on the notion that "capitalism could be in a position to satisfy all the elementary needs."⁵ And if that's the case, Pollock wondered, what differentiates "socialism from capitalism"?

Semitism before 1940. Some of the other "classics" Arendt is implicitly criticizing are Werner Sombart, *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben* (Leipzig, 1911) and Otto Heller, *Der Untergang des Judentums* (Wien and Berlin, 1931). As I will argue, Brecht's basic source was his friend and collaborator Ernst Ottwald and his book *Deutschland erwache! Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus* (Vienna and Leipzig, 1932).

2. Franz Neumann described the situation this way: "The achievements of the German economy are astounding. The abolition of unemployment, the increase in production, the development of synthetic industries, the complete subordination of economic activities to the needs of war, the rationing system before and during this war, the success of price control—these are achievements difficult to surpass. In that judgment all observers agree, but here the agreement ends" (Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* [New York, 2009], p. 222; hereafter abbreviated B).

3. This is not the place to explore Arendt's relation to Marxism at large. For her account of the "fundamental contradiction" of Marx's thought, see Arendt, "Labor," *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1998), pp. 79–135.

4. For useful accounts of the proximity of Theodor Adorno and Arendt see *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations*, ed. Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesha (Stanford, Calif., 2012). The Frankfurt school and Arendt found broad common ground on question of consumer society. As Arendt flatly puts it, "the spare time of the animal laborans is never spent in anything but consumption." The "gradual decrease of working hours," she contends, "has been rather overrated" because it has been measured against "exceptionally inhuman conditions of exploitation" (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 133, 132). The point being that the days of "exceptional" exploitation are over and, with it, the Marxist model of emancipation. For an important critique of Arendt's antibourgeois commitments, see Robert B. Pippin, "Hannah Arendt and the Bourgeois Origins of Totalitarian Evil," in *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (New York, 2005), pp. 146–67.

5. This phrase is spoken by Pollock in the midst of the 28 July 1942 seminar "Zu einem Referat über das Verhältnis von Bedürfnis und Kultur bei Aldous Huxley," in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12 of *Nachgelassene Schriften, 1931–1949*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Berlin, 1985), p. 574. Brecht was one of the participants at the seminar.

TODD CRONAN is associate professor of art history at Emory University. He is the author of *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (2013).

Government control of production and distribution furnishes the means for eliminating the economic causes of depressions, cumulative destructive processes and unemployment of capital and labor. We may even say that under state capitalism economics as a social science has lost its object. Economic problems in the old sense no longer exist when the coordination of all economic activities is effected by conscious plan instead of by the natural laws of the market.⁶

For Pollock, a consciously planned economy made the study of economics obsolete. Economics, as it was defined by the liberal tradition, dealt with the “unintended consequences of human action” and sought to find the “unintended patterns and regularities” that emerged in buying and selling.⁷ The problem was that Pollock was not a free market theorist, he was a Marxist, and the elimination of “unintended consequences”—a perfectly planned economy—was part of the point. Pollock’s friend and colleague at the Frankfurt school, Max Horkheimer, also saw how a totalitarian planned economy provided an inverted picture of freedom: “The anonymity of the market has turned into planning, but instead of the free planning of united humanity, it is the crafty planning of the archenemies of humanity.”⁸ If the economic problems had been solved, then socialism had presumably achieved one of its basic aims. What went wrong? Although National Socialism had abolished both the market and private property—so Pollock argued—the consequences of that fact were anything but emancipatory. Even though production under the Nazis was directed toward use rather than commodity exchange this reality did not serve “the needs of free humans in a harmonious society” but resulted in enslavement. As Moishe Postone argues, “this is the decisive point” for Pollock, a planned economy but one that was not socialist.⁹ Pollock stressed that state capital-

6. Pollock, “State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gehardt (New York, 1982), p. 87.

7. Friedrich A. Hayek, “The Results of Human Action but not of Human Design,” in *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (Chicago, 1967), p. 97.

8. Max Horkheimer, “The Jews and Europe,” trans. Mark Ritter, in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (New York, 1989), p. 90.

9. Moishe Postone, “Critique, State, and Economy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Fred Rush (New York, 2004), p. 172; hereafter abbreviated “CSE.” According to Postone, state capitalism “possesses no immanent historical dynamic” and therefore describes a wholly “noncontradictory” society but one that offers no routes toward socialism as its historical negation. Postone’s reading instrumentalizes Pollock’s analysis for his reinterpretation of the relations of production. For Postone, “Pollock’s analysis reveals the limits of a critique focused on the mode of distribution” or, more broadly, the limitation of “Marxian categories of the relations of production in terms of the mode of *distribution alone*” (“CSE,” pp. 176, 181, 176, 175). In other words, Postone accepts Pollock’s thesis of the replacement of economics with questions of power.

ism possessed new forms of *antagonism* but lacked immanent contradiction. The broad consequence of the changed situation under state capitalism is that the “profit motive is superseded by the power motive.”¹⁰ It is the *replacement of profit with power* that defines the lasting import of Pollock’s analysis. This is what Postone means when he says Pollock’s approach drew attention to the “necessity of structurally locating social contradiction in a manner that goes beyond considerations of class” (“CSE,” p. 180). But as I aim to show here, the idea that the market, private property, and profit were eliminated by the Nazis (or the Soviet Union or the New Deal) was a highly contentious claim. And while the beyond-class argument certainly became “widespread in the 1960s” and after, there were strong alternatives to it all along the way if anyone cared to look (“CSE,” p. 172).

Arendt is an instance of the widespread turn from economics to politics. She had come to the same conclusion as Pollock, even if she never directly addressed him. Over-taxation, inflation, and devalued currency were the dominant modes of an expropriative state in “modern capitalistic countries,” while in Russia, “state socialism, which is the same thing as state capitalism” is defined by “total expropriation.” The process of expropriation requires “legal and political institutions that are independent of the economic forces and their automatism” to either enforce or to alter that situation.¹¹ What both Arendt and the Frankfurt school came to acknowledge—it became the cornerstone of their critiques—was that the “autonomy of the political” specifically meant a turn away from class analysis. In Arendt’s influential formulation, politics itself was identified with “race, and not class.”

At the same time Pollock was writing “State Capitalism,” the Frankfurt school were embarked on a massive (1,400 pages in total) study of “Anti-Semitism in American Labor.”¹² Pollock spearheaded the labor study and handled the day-to-day work while Adorno conducted the qualitative analysis. It should not go unnoticed that American labor was the main target of Frankfurt school inquiry in the United States at the moment the fas-

10. Pollock, “State Capitalism,” p. 78.

11. Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution: A Commentary,” in *Crisis of the Republic* (New York, 1972), p. 212.

12. Two recent studies of the “Anti-Semitism among American Labor” project have provided a crucial context for this little-discussed document; see Catherine Collomp’s “‘Anti-Semitism among American Labor’: A Study by the Refugee Scholars of the Frankfurt School of Sociology at the End of World War II,” *Labor History* 52 (Nov. 2011): 417–39, hereafter abbreviated “AS”; and Mark P. Worrell, *Dialectic of Solidarity: Labor, Antisemitism and the Frankfurt School* (Boston, 2008), hereafter abbreviated *DS*.

cists were marching through Europe. It was not the major industrialists that captured their attention. As Mark Worrell observes (without a hint of irony) “nearly alone, the Frankfurt School undertook a series of research projects into the hearts and minds of both European and American laborers.”¹³ They were alone. The Frankfurt school in the 1940s were the avant-garde of the study of power relations within ostensibly progressive institutions. What the study proved was that “Anti-Jewish prejudice pervades the overwhelming majority of the persons interviewed.” It was not the case that labor unions were outright racists, but rather something much deeper was boiling beneath the surface. “What counts is not exactly open and active hostility to Jews, these agitators can be spotted and neutralized,” the authors explained. Rather, “the threat . . . is the prejudice itself,” which was vastly more challenging to overcome (quoted in “AS,” p. 423).¹⁴ In the opening remarks to the labor study the authors observed that European labor before Hitler “obviously was more immune to anti-Semitic prejudice than American labor today.” This was particularly frightening because “totalitarianism succeeded in obviating or reducing the resistance of European workers” so quickly and so thoroughly. And if American workers were “so much more easily swayed by racial prejudice,” then how could they possibly provide a “bulwark against totalitarianism?” (quoted in “AS,” p. 423). These were the kind of questions the “primacy of politics” seemed to necessitate. It was the theory of state capitalism that showed the ways in which race could become an alternate model to economics and one that proved as fully applicable to the United States as to Europe. It bears noting that as late as the winter of 1942 Horkheimer was sharply opposed to the labor study and “inclined to drop it entirely,” telling Pollock it was “idiotic” to pursue it.¹⁵ Horkheimer’s attitude changed in 1944 with the cowriting with Adorno of the “Elements of Anti-Semitism” for *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (see *FS*, pp. 74–75, 191).¹⁶ Here Hork-

13. Worrell, *Dialectic of Solidarity*, p. 11.

14. If the threat manifested at the level of the agent’s unconscious, then it was also conveyed by demagogues at the level of the unconscious to pliable workers. As Adorno put the matter at a conference in 1944 “concrete political ideas play but a minor role compared with the psychological stimuli applied to the audience” (Theodor W. Adorno, “Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda,” in *Anti-Semitism: A Social Disease*, ed. Ernst Simmel [New York, 1946], pp. 125–26). See also Adorno, *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas’ Radio Addresses* (1943; Stanford, Calif., 2000).

15. Quoted in Jack Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 194 n. 237; hereafter abbreviated *FS*. Jacobs quotes from an October 1942 letter from Leo Lowenthal to Pollock referring to a discussion with Horkheimer and a December 1942 letter from Horkheimer to Pollock.

16. Jacobs inadvertently writes 1943 in the main body of the text for the writing of the “Elements of Anti-Semitism” section, but the information provided in the footnote indicates 1944.

heimer and Adorno explain—in the second thesis—that “rational, economic, and political explanations” can tell us something important but cannot stem the tide of anti-Semitism “since rationality itself, through its link to power, is submerged in the same malady.” Because power determines economics, so then does power affect “persecutors and victims” as part of the “same” cycle of reason and unreason.¹⁷ With the advent of this immensely influential mode of analysis—the origins of intersectionality itself—Horkheimer effectively reverses his position, the one shared by Brecht, of a few years earlier. Horkheimer, writing in 1939, infamously observed that in order to understand anti-Semitism one must “consider the tendencies within capitalism,” and whoever was “not willing to talk about capitalism” should “keep quiet about fascism.”¹⁸ As Dan Diner has remarked of this infamous line, “No statement, no passage of Horkheimer’s has been worn out more” than this.¹⁹ Like Brecht’s analysis, Diner notes that Horkheimer’s claims are “entirely in accord with the sentiments and convictions predominant on the left at the time.” It was Horkheimer along with Adorno who altered the basic terms of political argumentation on the left after 1940. They opened up the possibility from within Marxism of seeing class as a matter of power, of domination, rather than of economics (the Jews were not a category defined by economic exploitation). And once that possibility was raised, it became the dominant mode of analysis on the Left at large. In other words, it was the tool some on the Left had been seeking all along to get “beyond” Marxism itself.

According to Arendt, Marxist blinders prevented Brecht from seeing what was obvious to “everybody” with the rise of fascism—that it was about “race, and not class.” If for Diner class analysis of National Socialism was “predominant on the left,” for Arendt it was (counterfactually) a fringe position. As Nicholas Brown observes, even on the Right it was a prevalent position. Wyndam Lewis, for instance, “openly endorses the logic he discovers in Nazism.” What was that logic? The “National Socialist is, in reality, attempting to . . . put *Race* in the place of *Class*,” Lewis reflects.²⁰ On the other side of the barricade but with the same conclusion, Ernst Bloch, writing in 1963, three years before Arendt, described the current-day “chorus of sym-

17. Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford, Calif., 2002), pp. 139, 140.

18. Horkheimer, “The Jews and Europe,” p. 77.

19. Dan Diner, “Reason and the ‘Other’: Horkheimer’s Reflections on Anti-Semitism and Mass Annihilation,” in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, ed. Seyla Benhabib, Wolfgang Bonss, and John McCole (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), p. 338.

20. Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton, N.J., 2005), p. 131.

pathy for the Jews,” *philosemitism*, as an effect of antisemitism, one that shares with its opposite a refusal of class analysis. What philosemitism indicates is the depth of the relation between anti-Semitism and its seeming opposite: the celebration of Jewish identity. Bloch, that is, saw the uses to which not just racism but antiracism could be put in a class war. Bloch reflected on the difference between postwar philo-Semitism and the treatment of Jews under the Empire and the Weimar Republic. “In those periods,” Bloch writes, “the kind of philanthropy that sought . . . to vindicate the Jews was nowhere to be found.” For the proletariat, “it was not the Aryan race, but capitalism, that compelled their interest.” And in the arts, Bloch writes, “the Jewish question was hardly raised, and there was no hint of insistent philosemitism.”

The fact that Reinhardt, S. Fischer, Bruno Walter, Otto Klemperer, or Josef Kainz were Jewish, and that Piscator, Rowohlt, Furtwängler, or Bassermann were not, held no interest for anyone outside of a few disreputable groups and their sinister publications; most people neither knew nor cared anything about it. Who would find, on one hand, Weill’s music in *The Threepenny Opera* to be Jewish and Brecht’s libretto, on the other, to be . . . German?²¹

Bloch had an answer to his parting question. Looking back on the period of “cohabitation without pathos” Bloch saw how it was “first of all the Nazis . . . who made Germany wake up” to race, not class. Or rather, they were the first to make race a stand-in for class.

When Brecht attempted to make a similar point at the home of a member of the American Communist Party he was—not surprisingly—met with resistance. In his journal he describes a new Communist policy according to which “american jews are to organise themselves as a national minority.” At the event an organizer exclaimed “the jews know nothing of their culture!” Brecht attempted to deflate the program: “schönberg, einstein, freud, eisenstein, meyerhold, döblin, weigl represent not jewish but other cultures etc etc.”²² From there Brecht brought up a favored (and highly contentious) text, noting how the great Jewish artists and scientists exemplified Marx’s point in “On the Jewish Question”: “what the jews

21. Ernst Bloch, “The So-Called Jewish Question,” in *Literary Essays*, trans. Andrew Joron et al. (Stanford, Calif., 1998), p. 491. I am indebted to Manfred Voigts’s “Brecht and the Jews” for several references, including this one to Bloch. I nonetheless come to significantly different conclusions from Voigts; see Manfred Voigts, “Brecht and the Jews,” *Brecht Yearbook* 21, trans. and ed. Maarten van Dijk (Madison, Wisc., 1996), pp. 100–23.

22. Brecht, *Journals, 1934–1955*, trans. Hugh Rorrison, ed. John Willett (New York, 1996), pp. 332, 333; hereafter abbreviated *J*.

need, just as in marx's time, is to emancipate themselves from capitalism (commerce) and not to retreat into their 'old culture.'" Marx notoriously identified Judaism with capitalism itself, and the struggle against one was the struggle against the other. "The present-day Jew's capacity for emancipation," Marx wrote, "is the relation of Judaism to the emancipation of the modern world." Because "real" Judaism (excluding, that is, religious belief) is "*huckstering* and *money*," then emancipation from Judaism "would be the self-emancipation of our time."²³ Marx's crushing verdict was to show how "the emancipation of the Jews is the emancipation of mankind from Judaism" ("JQ").

Brecht apparently could not let go of the point. He brought up Marx's essay a few months later at Adorno's home. For Adorno, Marx's essay was "out of date," a product of the "*young*" Marx, and it was grounded on a false distinction between two types of capitalist, greedy versus creative (*J*, p. 338).²⁴ Brecht countered with an overly generous reading: "marx took the jew in his historically 'existing form,' shaped by persecution and resistance, with his economic specialization, his forced reliance on liquid cash (the need to buy oneself free . . .). . . and marx advised him to emancipate himself (and himself demonstrated how)." This charitable assessment seems to rely on a key, and overlooked, line in Marx's essay. Marx described the "particular situation of Judaism in the present enslaved world" ("JQ"). Because Jews are the epitome of enslavement—they have wholly identified with the aggressor—their freedom would model for others what freedom from capitalism looks like. Arendt characteristically exonerated Marx for his "anti-Jewish" writings precisely because of his "utter neglect of political questions."²⁵ For Arendt, race without politics simply wasn't racism. Conversely, politics *without* an account of racism wasn't politics at all.

For Arendt, Brecht's putative failure to understand race resulted in a precipitous decline in artistic quality. Because Brecht simply couldn't see racism his work sunk into empty propaganda. *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (1938) is full of "lies" and "wooden-prose dialogue" (*MDT*, p. 243). Here, for instance, is some ostensibly dubious dialogue from *The Jewish Wife* episode. The wife is plotting her escape from Germany and bids her physician husband farewell.

23. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," trans. pub., www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/; hereafter abbreviated "JQ."

24. Adorno makes fleeting reference to Marx's essay in Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York, 2005), p. 16.

25. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1994), p. 34.

I've often thought lately about something you told me years back, how some people were more valuable than others, so one lot were given insulin when they got diabetes and the others weren't. And this was something I understood, idiot that I was. Well, now they've drawn a new classification [*neue Einteilung*] of the same sort, and this time I'm one of the less valuable ones. Serves me right.²⁶

She was an idiot for assenting to the old classifications between the deserving and undeserving; she was an idiot for believing her husband was anything other than the author of those classifications, including the latest one about Jews and Aryans. That anti-Semitism was a politically expeditious "new classification" has led writers like Frank Dietrich Wagner to identify this as Brecht's disastrous blind spot. "Antisemitism was just another form of political strategy for Brecht," Wagner writes. For Brecht "antisemitism and racism as the core of fascist ideology were alien . . . from the start, and remained incomprehensible."²⁷ The case against Brecht is usually framed in terms of this "core" versus periphery argument. The point of my analysis, of course, is not to place economics at the core and race at the periphery, a hardly sustainable view of National Socialism and not a view Brecht held, but to see how Brecht thought through race and class (along with a range of Marxists working in the 1920s and 1930s) in ways that should be more central to current ways of engaging the problem.

Anti-Semitism for Brecht was not "just another form" of politics, it held the key to understanding the new rules of exploitation. "Anyone who talks about Germany becomes a diviner of mysteries," Brecht wrote in a note for *Fear and Misery*. But it was only a mystery for the bourgeoisie. He wonders why

people find the persecution of the Jews, for instance, so exasperating, because it seems such an "unnecessary" excess. They regard it as something extraneous, irrelevant to the business at hand. In their view pogroms are not essential to the conquest of markets and raw materials, and accordingly can be dispensed with.

They fail to understand that barbarism in Germany is a consequence of class conflicts, and so they cannot grasp the Fascist principle which demands that class conflicts be converted into race conflicts.²⁸

26. Brecht, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, in *Collected Plays*, trans. Willett, ed. Tom Kuhn and Willett, 8 vols. (London, 2001), 4: 163; trans. mod.

27. Quoted in Voigts, "Brecht and the Jews," p. 109.

28. Brecht, "Texts by Brecht," in *Collected Plays*, 4: 323, 324; hereafter abbreviated "T."

The principle of conversion of class into race is not a guiding concern of *Fear and Misery*, but it is at the heart of the play he completed just prior to it. Brecht's *Round Heads and Pointed Heads* whose subtitle—*Money Calls to Money: A Tale of Horror*—indicates the basic approach. I will not review the tortuous history of the development of *Round Heads* (begun in 1931 but not completed until 1938, with a performance in Copenhagen in November of 1936) but simply mention that it is an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, which Brecht described as "his most progressive" and also "most philosophical" play ("T," p. 304). The title is meant to signal the arbitrariness, but also the effectiveness, of the "new classification" that rules this political fable.

The prologue begins with the Theatre Director introducing the writer Bert Brecht who has traveled the world and witnessed the most shocking things.

THEATRE DIRECTOR: He saw a white man wrestling with a black,
 An angry yellow giant with a yellow midget on his back.
 A Finn took up a stone and flung it at a Swede,
 And someone with a snub nose punched a hook-nosed man and
 made him bleed.
 Our playwright stopped to ask the cause, and heard
 That in these parts a spectre is abroad:
 The great distributor of skulls is on his rounds again,
 A quack with snake oil in his pack for every man.
 He keeps a stock of noses and bags of coloured skin
 With which he stirs the folk against their kith and kin.

 And where the skull-man goes
 People look more carefully at your hair and skin and nose.

 There's one thing matters more than all the rest
 For it alone determines if you're cursed or blessed.
 I'd better make myself quite clear:
 It's rich and poor that really matters here.
 And just in case you'd like some explanation
 I've penned this parable in demonstration,
 In which I prove beyond all doubt
 That this is the difference to shout about.²⁹

29. Brecht, *Round Heads and Pointed Heads, or Money Calls to Money*, in *Collected Plays*, 4: 3–4; hereafter abbreviated *RH*.

What the demonstration shows is how the poor “swallow” all the rulers’ “myths that racial health / Would solve the inequalities of wealth” (*RH*, pp. 111–12). (Or perhaps the myth that racial diversity would solve it as well?) Anonymous farmers appear along the way to condemn the new classifications. “Lord and tenant should unite, they’re saying, / And what’s the reason? ’Cause our heads are round! / But *he* collects the rent, while *I* must pay it! / You’ve got to see, the reasoning’s not sound!” (*RH*, p. 31). Before the farmers get divided into round and pointed heads they fleetingly acknowledge “there’s only one thing: rich or poor!” Two women see the writing on the wall and grasp the basic moral of the play: “We used to be united by our woes / But now our different head shapes make us bitter foes” (*RH*, p. 32). A performance still of the 1936 Copenhagen production shows how comedy and horror are conflated in the play (fig. 1). Although the round and pointed heads (and noses) are ridiculous prosthetic attachments, they are also, as the rope screen before the audience suggests, a “closely knotted net” that serves to “hopelessly enmesh” the peasants and challenge the audience not to be caught by the same myths (*RH*, p. 106).



FIGURE 1. *Die Rundköpfe und die Spitzköpfe*, Copenhagen, 1936.

Brecht provided a brief outline of the story for the Copenhagen production of the play:

In the wake of a crisis on the grain market the country of Yahoo, with its tenant farmers and landowning classes, faces the prospect of rebellion by the peasant farmers, who have joined forces in an association called "The Sickle." A certain Iberin suggests to the Viceroy, who is himself a landowner, that the farmers' opposition could be disrupted by a new division of the populace into Round Heads [or Zaks] and Pointed Heads [or Ziks], and by the persecution of the Pointed Heads, who are to be designated the enemies of Yahoo. The Viceroy delegates power to Señor Iberin. ["T," pp. 304-5]

The chief accomplishment of Iberin's "new division" of round and pointed heads is the "dispersal and defeat" of the Sickle. The tenant farmer Callas was prepared to join the Sickle but when his Zik landlord de Guzman is arrested he is content to "expropriate for himself" two of his horses and leave collective organization behind ("T," p. 305). Iberin allows for these individual acts of retribution, but as soon as the Sickle is defeated he demands the return of property and for the (newly divided) workers to go back to his land, which Callas now understands as a death sentence.

Scene 11 reintroduces the Viceroy after Iberin has accomplished his divisive work. A government minister queries Iberin about his "creed of Zaks and Ziks" and retorts that what matters in the end is that "this Sickle, / Once emblem of rebellion and unrest, / Is now for ever banished from your land / And from your capital" (*RH*, p. 113). Iberin's racial policy is revealed for its sheerly instrumental value, it is a weapon in the class war. And now with "the peasantry . . . well and truly cowed" the owners are free to "proceed to other plans." This was the point all along. Imperialist expansion requires a pliable military and work force. The kingdom requires "room to grow, or else it soon may wither," so war preparations have begun against "Our old ancestral enemy. . . . A fearful nation, peopled with Square Heads" (*RH*, p. 110). As the play ends it is revealed that Iberin's new task is to "teach" the peasants about the "foreign peril" of the newly classified Square Head (*RH*, p. 110).

As an allegory of National Socialism it does not add up. If Iberin is Hitler, then the suggestion he is colluding with Jewish landowners (Ziks) to defeat working class socialists (Zaks) is absurdly false. But Brecht made every effort to avert any interpretation of the play along these lines. He insisted to his Danish director that the play did "not [aim to] provoke a discussion of the Jewish question." He defends himself in a letter to the director:

It would do so only if it depicted the unjustified sufferings of the Jews. What it does show is that the “Jewish factor” plays no part in the way National Socialism (and other reactionary systems, e.g. Tsarism, Pilsudskyism, etc.) exploit the racial question politically. The audience will not say: The Pointed Heads are good or bad, they are treated justly or unjustly, they will say: There is no real difference. . . . Anything specifically Jewish is avoided. After ten minutes the audience will see only Round Heads and Pointed Heads and laugh, just as they would if the new governor had in all seriousness broken down the population into bicyclists and pedestrians. . . . There isn’t a single song about the racial question, we simply weren’t thinking about it. As a socialist . . . I’m not interested in the racial question as such.³⁰

It is true that nothing in the play indicates that the Ziks are ill-treated (which obviously sets them apart from any Jewish analog). Indeed the difference between Zik and Zak is one letter, suggesting the arbitrariness of the distinction. The utter flimsiness of the classifications—the bicyclist versus the pedestrian—reflects the emptiness of racial categories in general and aims to show, to *alienate* the category of race to exemplify its purposes.

Although it has rarely been remarked, Brecht formulated the notion of *Verfremdung*—his core aesthetic technique—in light of this analysis of race. As John Willett writes, *Round Heads* marks the “first instance of Brecht applying the theory of ‘Verfremdung’ to his own work.”³¹ To alienate the audience from their empathetic attachments to specific characters and events, to alienate an empathetically-oriented—that is, historical, emotional, and non-biological—category like race was to redirect attention to what is obscured by it, class. It is in the notes to the play that we read about *Verfremdung*, a feeling whose proper response is laughter (something obvious in light of the Copenhagen performance). Laughter is induced whenever one is tempted to make empathetic judgments about the goodness or badness of the characters on display.³² As Brecht urges, the use of parable form was an effort to “enable and encourage the audience to draw abstract conclusions” from a

30. Brecht, letter to Per Knutzon, May 1934, in *Letters, 1913–1956*, trans. Manheim, ed. Willett (New York, 1990), pp. 172–73.

31. Brecht, *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. Willett (New York, 1992), p. 103 n.

32. It was obviously highly risky to make a comedy out of National Socialism, but it became the model for more well-regarded, if also controversial, comedies such as Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940). Of course in *The Great Dictator* the proletariat and the dictator are played by the same person, an identification Brecht resisted making.

situation that seemed to demand—or extort—their empathy.³³ The Viceroy's council makes this exact point in support of Iberin's "Great discovery" of race. "Iberin knows, the common people / Have little fondness for abstraction, and / Are eager to discover blame for our / Financial woes in some familiar cause" (*RH*, p. 12). To enable the audience to think abstractly, to think outside the immediacy of feeling, was to help them to see through the all-too-familiar cause to the structural conditions that produced the racial categories to begin with (see "T," p. 306).

Brecht received a good deal of criticism even among his colleagues for *Round Heads*. He responded to two "insidious" objections. First, that he affirmed the idea that "Aryans have visibly (and anatomically) different racial characteristics from Jews." Brecht was ambiguous on this question. In the prologue, for instance, he wavers between physical characteristics (snub and hooked noses), national differences (Swedish and Finnish), and trivial preferences (biking versus walking, as he puts it in his letter). Answering the objection about physical differences, Brecht thought it would not help "oppressed Negroes in the United States" if someone demanded equality for them by asserting that Negroes were in fact "white."³⁴ Far from insidious, this objection points in the right direction. Brecht was imprecise when he didn't note, or simply didn't care to notice, the difference between bicyclists and pedestrians, on the one hand, and snub and hook noses, on the other.

Brecht's disinterest in this distinction takes on a tragicomic tone in his "From the English Letters" of 1936. Writing in regard to the new Nuremberg Race Laws, he mockingly muses how "It is a screaming injustice that some people, just because of the shape of their noses, should not have the right to take part in the exploitation of their fellow human beings, just at a time when exploitation is so in vogue. Are they to be excluded from war profiteering as well, just because their hair is black?"³⁵ This is what we might call a classic Brecht joke. Like *Round Heads* it straddles the line between comedy and horror (in other words, it's funny). Brecht's parody of the Nuremberg laws was meant to drive home a point about the class nature of racial discrimination. And as this joke suggests,

33. For a discussion of Brecht's notion of abstraction, political and artistic, see Todd Cronan, "Seeing Differently and Seeing Correctly: Brecht For and Against Abstraction," in *Distance and Proximity: Brecht Yearbook* 38, ed. Theodore F. Rippey (Madison, Wis., 2013), pp. 96–121.

34. Brecht, letter to Bernard Reich, March 2, 1937, in *Letters, 1913–1956*, p. 245.

35. Quoted in John J. White and Ann White, *Bertolt Brecht's "Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches": A German Exile Drama in the Struggle against Fascism* (Rochester, N.Y., 2010), p. 66. John and Ann White rightly mention Joseph Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question of 1913* as a source for Brecht's account of anti-Semitism.

Brecht was wavering in his critique of biological categories, usually because he thought it strategically ineffective. Nonetheless, as he always made room to reflect, “There is no real difference” between people who bike and those who walk, and the same is said of the difference of “white from black.”³⁶

Second, he was accused that his play could not depict fascism because of its agrarian setting (Brecht shifted locations from Vienna, to Bohemia, to Peru, and finally to a fictional land of “Yahoo,” a reference to Jonathan Swift). Answering this charge, he asserted that his aim was to “depict racism,” not fascism or any particular political system. Racism is “used to deceive the people, not only by German fascism . . . but also other reactionary governments, and has been since time immemorial (formerly in Poland and Armenia, in America, etc.).”³⁷ The long-standing use of race as a capitalist tool is clear in the opening of the chapter “Classic Administration of a Province” from *The Business Affairs of Mr Julius Ceasar*. There a property owner reflects on two forms of nationalism: antagonistic and competitive. He explains how he tries to “keep the nationalities together. You wouldn’t have been able to do that twenty years ago. You had to mix them up, to keep the antagonism going. Troubled times. These days I’m getting quite good results with teams from one region. The teams even compete against each other, from national pride.”³⁸ Antagonistic or competitive, the point is the same whether it is nation or race, to produce the desired (economic) results through internal competition among the exploited.

Recall that Bloch used the phrase “Germany wake up”—*Deutschland erwache*—to describe the moment the National Socialists introduced distinctly racial politics into German life. The phrase was a reference to a now little-read 1932 book by Brecht’s collaborator Ernst Ottwald.³⁹ Part one of Ottwald’s study was devoted “to the biology of a ‘worker’s party,’” aiming to dismantle the biological mythology underwriting the Nazi assimilation of the proletariat. As Ottwald put it in the opening pages of the book, “antisemitism is mostly the inevitable product of economic relations.”⁴⁰ Anti-Semitism, according to Ottwald, was a class-based effort by state forces to “absorb the anti-capitalistic inclinations of the petty bourgeoisie and fittingly

36. Brecht, letter to Knutzon, p. 172.

37. Brecht, letter to Reich, pp. 245–46.

38. Brecht, *The Business Affairs of Mr Julius Ceasar*, trans. Charles Osborne, ed. Anthony Phelan and Kuhn (New York, 2016), p. 137.

39. In 1932 Brecht cowrote *Kuhle Wampe, oder: Wem gehört die Welt?* with Ottwald. That is, Brecht was collaborating with Ottwald during the writing of *Wake Up Germany!* and while he was at work on *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*.

40. Ernst Ottwald, *Deutschland erwache!: Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus* (Vienna and Leipzig, 1932), p. 23; hereafter abbreviated *DE*.

steer them toward a harmless end" (DE, p. 55). In other words, anticapitalism was the problem that was conveniently solved by anti-Semitism.

Although it has not been discussed in the literature, Ottwald's *Wake Up Germany!* was a major source for Brecht's *Round Heads*. Ottwald's key case study for the economic sources of anti-Semitism was the Stöcker affair of 1879–80. Adolf Stöcker's anti-Semitic attack on Bismarck's Jewish banker, Gerson Bleichröder, was evidence for his thesis that "antisemitic trends are in their being and in their aim of an economic nature." Ottwald reproduced at length Bismarck's extraordinary response to the attack on Bleichröder. What is so striking about it is that Bismarck's only concern was the anticapitalist sentiment promoted by Stöcker; Bismarck's condemnation of anti-Semitism was strictly confined to its connections with socialism. Bismarck's condemnation of Stöcker was a matter of "incitement of class hatred" and "incitement of the unpropertied class population against the prosperous Jews." Stöcker was responsible for "encouraging lawless desire" in his rehearsal of the "excessive treasures of the Jews" (DE, p. 55). Stöcker's speeches, Bismarck contended, "address themselves to the envy and greed of the have-nots against those who possess."⁴¹ Ottwald further suggested that Bleichröder's case against Stöcker, like Bismarck's, only emerged when the question of class was raised and was never conceived as a threat before that. Under the Empire anti-Semitism was permitted, even encouraged, to the degree to which it focused the energies of the proletariat onto the Jews, but was ruthlessly curbed when it was conflated with class conflict.

The longstanding relationship between Bismarck and Bleichröder is the subject of Fritz Stern's monumental *Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder, and the Building of the German Empire*. As Stern shows, the Jews under Bismarck were starkly divided along class lines. What vexed Bismarck about Stöcker was his socialist pleas for higher taxes for the rich.⁴² Stöcker calls for "economic security for workers in case of unemployment as the goal to be achieved, he demands the standard working day and the progressive income tax," Bismarck wrote in evident horror (quoted in RD, p. 38). Moreover, Bismarck thought Stöcker was attacking the *wrong Jews*. It was the "political reformers among the Jews" (quoted in RD, p. 39), the "prop-

41. Quoted in Paul W. Massing, *Rehearsal for Destruction: A Study of Political Anti-Semitism in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1949), p. 39; hereafter abbreviated RD. Remarkably Massing's book (brilliant in its own right), published as part of Horkheimer's and Samuel H. Flowerman's "Studies in Prejudice" series, does not cite Ottwald's book, although he covers the same ground.

42. See Fritz Stern, *Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder, and the Building of the German Empire* (New York, 1979), p. 515; hereafter abbreviated GI.

ertyless” and “not moneyed Jewry” who were the true enemies of the state (quoted in *GI*, pp. 516, 515). Stöcker’s attack even threatened to “drive rich Jews into the radical camp,” and for that reason only “socialist anti-Semitism deserved a rebuff” (*GI*, p. 516). According to Stern, Bismarck saw there was “payoff in protecting Jews” against Stöcker as it would “keep rich Jews on his side and perhaps diminish the attractiveness of liberalism for other Jews. On the other hand, he probably thought that ‘a little anti-Semitism’ might make the rich Jews still more pliable.” Bismarck continually inveighed against what he called the “Jewish proletariat” and above all feared that “Stöcker’s agitation was driving right-thinking, rich Jews into the arms of the Progressives.” Bismarck’s own verdict couldn’t be clearer: “For me . . . *the Socialist element is far more decisive than the anti-Semitic*” (quoted in *GI*, p. 516).⁴³ It was the Stöcker affair that provided the crucial historical background for Brecht’s *Round Heads*. To a degree, Bismarck was the model for the Viceroy, Stöcker for Iberin, and Bleichröder for de Guzman. Brecht went further than Ottwald in attempting to show the *collusion* among all of the parties against the peasants and proletariats (neither Ottwald nor Stern suggest Stöcker could share sides with Bleichröder), and it is this interpretation that outraged both his critics and admirers. Even here, Brecht was likely following historical sources, specifically the conclusions of Bismarck’s son who reflected that Bleichröder likely would “have let Stöcker carry on” if he only attacked “the excesses and hypertrophy of Jews in press and parliament.” Bleichröder made his appeal to the Chancellor when Stöcker seemingly affirmed the “communistic-socialist tendency” (quoted in *RD*, p. 39).

Round Heads remains Brecht’s most unloved play. Even Arendt’s adversary, Brecht scholar Willett, agreed with her assessment of Brecht on race. “Fascism can only be fought by treating it as capitalism,” Willett writes, implying they are separate phenomena. It is this blinkered view that “accounts for the profound misconception” of Brecht’s antifascist plays. The idea that “anti-Semitism was only a political weapon, and that in due course the Nazi leaders and the rich Jews would combine again against the working class, irrespective of race” was both unsustainable and dubious. “The doctrine of the class war,” Willett concludes, “becomes a straightjacket into which the facts have to be crammed. Whatever does not fit has simply to be discarded or suppressed.”⁴⁴

43. Bismarck’s son Herbert observed that his father objected to “the socialistic [rather] than to the anti-Semitic” content of the attack. More remarkable is the fact that Herbert assumes “Stöcker agitates against Bleichröder not because he is a Jew, but because he is rich” (quoted in *RD*, p. 39).

44. Willett, *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht: A Study from Eight Aspects* (New York, 1959), p. 197.

Round Heads receives virtually no mention in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* and is not cited at all in Fredric Jameson's *Brecht and Method*. The play is not mentioned in David Barnett's 2015 *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance*. *Round Heads* does not appear in the *Jubiläumsausgabe um 100. Geburtstag* of Brecht's works. Bruce Cook called it a "monstrosity," a "terrible and muddled" play that aimed to "'prove' that Hitler's anti-Semitism was a phony issue."⁴⁵ Ronald Gray condemns all of the "anti-Nazi plays" together but singles out *Round Heads* as "the least satisfying." Gray summarizes the play's meaning as follows:

The allegory is clear enough: Hitler is being allowed . . . by the capitalists and their allies in government to distract the attention of the German people from economic injustices by fomenting anti-Semitism. Once the Communists have been defeated, this decoying move can be abandoned, and the capitalists can return to their normal methods of exploiting the poor for the benefit of the rich.

Not surprisingly—given the historical transparency of the interpretation—we read how the "political thinking is crude" and the allegory a failure. Why? Because for Brecht "only economic motives count."⁴⁶ Gray cites Martin Esslin's putatively established verdict that "the Marxist explanation of Hitler's racial policies fails so lamentably that the whole play is invalidated."⁴⁷ Against the anti-Nazi period works of the 1930s Gray remarkably prefers the earliest plays: "The narrowness of Brecht's outlook in his work, his complete lack of interest in any but economic motivations, are surprising after the profusion of interests that [his early plays] seemed to promise."⁴⁸ There is little doubt that "profusion of interests" is no longer of value to Brecht after *The Threepenny Opera*. Profusion matters insofar as truth matters, and truth, or access to it, seemed to require something like a reduction of variety in the communication of basic, but unacknowledged, realities.

The play receives a standard hearing in Stephen Parker's important study of the life of Brecht:

Treating anti-Semitism as just another political question in the practice of reactionary systems, Brecht failed to grasp how deeply rooted the Nazis' racial obsession with Jews and other "inferior" races was

45. Bruce Cook, *Brecht in Exile* (New York, 1983), pp. 12, 64.

46. Ronald Gray, *Brecht: The Dramatist* (New York, 1976), p. 94.

47. Martin Esslin, *Brecht, a Choice of Evils: A Critical Study of the Man, His Work, and His Opinions* (London, 1984), p. 182.

48. Gray, *Brecht*, p. 94.

and therefore how extremely dangerous this defining characteristic of German Fascism was too.⁴⁹

While the editors of the *Collected Plays* are wary to reduce the play to “a botched satire on Nazism” even if its “analysis of racial politics” is “inadequate to Nazism,” they affirm what I take to be the main point, “The use of racist politics . . . as a calculated distraction from social and economic problems.”⁵⁰ So too does Ronald Haymen show that the aim was to indicate how “racism will work as a diversionary strategy,” redirecting “vital energy from the essential conflict between rich and poor.” Hayman’s conclusion follows more traditional lines, “Brecht had faith in the Communist dogma that international capitalism was fomenting anti-Semitism in order to deflect energy from the class struggle.” Here “Hitler is presented as no more than a puppet manipulated by industrial tycoons.”⁵¹ But is Hitler presented in the play at all? What else is the parable form for but to alienate these kinds of direct confluences?⁵² Evidence suggests that beginning in 1934 Brecht worked hard to dislocate *Round Heads* from any direct reading of events with the addition of more and more alienation effects (more songs, more fictive setting, more prosthetics, more interpolation by the actors, more comic turns).

A shared assumption of all the critiques is that Brecht was toeing the party line on race, a claim that is awkwardly coupled with Arendt’s claim that there is “not a line in Marx, Engels, or Lenin” that addresses the question of race. There is much to disagree with in Brecht’s account of race—that it doesn’t begin to address the depth of Hitler’s racist commitments—but it is important to see it as emerging from a vast, and still valuable, discourse within Marxism. It is part of the debate on the so-called national question that began with Karl Kautsky’s *Modern Nationality* of 1887, through Lenin’s “Corrupting the Workers with Refined National-

49. Stephen Parker, *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life* (New York, 2014), p. 330.

50. Kuhn and Willett, “Introduction,” in Brecht, *Collected Plays*, 4: xi.

51. Ronald Hayman, *Brecht: A Biography* (New York, 1983), pp. 163, 163–64, 164.

52. Neither did Brecht exactly accept the “puppet” theory of Hitler. To see Hitler as either a “dummy” or a puppet was to assume a “bourgeois” theory of fascism: “to present hitler as particularly incompetent, as an aberration, a perversion, humbug, a peculiar pathological case, while setting up other bourgeois politicians as models . . . of something he has failed to attain, seems to me no way to combat hitler.” Hitler was an authentic expression of the bourgeoisie, not simply their tool. He was “a truly national phenomenon, a ‘people’s leader,’ a cunning, vital, unconventional and original politician,” and only under those terms could his corruptness be properly combated. Hitler’s admirers were the petit bourgeoisie and anti-Semitism, from their perspective “makes . . . sense, even if it is abominable.” Anti-Semitic scapegoating “created a feeling of nationhood (‘against the jews’ meant ‘for our brothers in the sudetenland’)” (*J*, pp. 204, 205).

ism” of 1914, and which was ongoing throughout the 1940s.⁵³ Every new “refinement” in nationalism, Lenin wrote summing up a tradition, “advocates the division and splitting up of the proletariat on the most . . . specious of pretexts.” Against this division, he called “for the *amalgamation* of the workers of the different nationalities in *united* proletarian organizations of every kind.”⁵⁴ Far from being “patent to everybody” that National Socialism was exclusively about race, Brecht’s account of race in the service of class warfare was an established mode of analysis at the time and after, established above all on the grounds of the debate on the national question within Marxist discourse. Furthermore, as Martin Jay has observed, the “young Horkheimer’s facile dismissal of specifically Jewish problems was shared, at least in their written work, by all of his colleagues” at the institute. Their shared tendency to “subsume anti-Semitism under the larger rubric of class conflict persisted throughout the 1930s even after the Nazi seizure of power.”⁵⁵ It was of course equally true that after 1940 nothing of the sort could be said, and something like the opposite case could be made; anti-Semitism replaced class as the operative category within the institute and beyond. Above all, what is crucial to see is how the dismantling of the Marxist project at large was directly connected with the insufficiency of the analysis of anti-Semitism (a failure to recognize Hitler’s commitment to racism in addition to class war). It was not simply a matter of mistaken emphasis (to put the matter in obviously understated terms); the whole mode of analysis was thought to be corrupt. It was this mistake of

53. The most comprehensive, if ideologically oriented (toward nationalism), collection of these text is *Les Marxistes et la question nationale, 1848–1914: études et textes*, ed. Georges Haupt, Michael Löwy, and Claudie Weill (Paris, 1974).

54. V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, trans. Bernard Isaacs and Joe Fineberg, ed. Julius Katzer, 45 vols. (Moscow, 1972), 20: 289, 291. In *Marxism and the National Question* (1913) Joseph Stalin asks what is common to the Jews of today. Is it their “religion, their common origin, and certain relics of national character. All this is beyond question.” But he adds that what most powerfully affects current-day Jews is the “living social, economic, and cultural environment that surrounds them.” Stalin’s point is the same as many others within this tradition: the national question “diverts the attention of large strata of the population from social questions, questions of the class struggle, to national questions. . . . This creates a serious obstacle to the work of uniting the workers of all nationalities” (Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question: Selected Writings and Speeches*, trans. pub. [New York, 1942], pp. 14–15, 15, 20–21). There is little doubt that Brecht was familiar with this text. As late as 1945 C. L. R. James (writing as J. R. Johnson) writes in “The Lesson of Germany” that “Behind all the Swastikas, the worship of Odin and of Thor, the outstretched hands and the Heil Hitlers, the persecution of the Jews, and all with which the world is familiar, there must be kept in mind the one central principle of Fascism—the destruction of the organized working-class movement” (J. R. Johnson, “The Lesson of Germany,” www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1945/05/lesson-germany.htm). None of this is meant to suggest the unassailability of the position but to indicate the depth of commitment and near-ubiquity of the claims on the Left.

55. Martin Jay, “The Jews and the Frankfurt School: Critical Theory’s Analysis of Anti-Semitism,” *New German Critique* 19 (Winter 1980): 137.

the Marxists (not taking racism as the “core” of their analysis) that *another Left*—antiracist but also anticlass conflict, identity based, but skeptical of economic based arguments—had been lying in wait for. This was the crucial, defining opening for a new post-Marxist Left. The putative failure of Marxist analysis of racism was just enough, or more than enough, for a new mode of Left analysis to define itself. This is also a lesson about the current fascination with intersectionality. The fantasy of progressive politics as defined by the intersection of class, race, and gender has little relation to the history of antiracist analysis or polemics. It was always, as Arendt said, “race, not class,” that was at stake; it was a gift to Arendt and to the Frankfurt school theorists after 1940 that Marxist orthodoxy missed how central anti-Semitism was to National Socialism.

Jack Jacobs has recently identified a turning point in the Frankfurt school’s attitude toward the role of race played in politics. In the summer of 1940, just over a year before Brecht’s arrival into Los Angeles, Horkheimer and Adorno had a change of heart about the anti-Semitism study.⁵⁶ Just a few months prior, at the end of 1939, Horkheimer could write that “blather about race is only superficial” within National Socialism and notoriously analyze anti-Semitism in terms very similar to Brecht in his “The Jews and Europe” published in the institute’s *Zeitschrift* in December of 1939 (an essay Horkheimer pointedly left out of his collected writings). By 1940, the year Pollock’s “State Capitalism” was written, things had changed and Horkheimer and Adorno began to see things in a different light. “I cannot stop thinking about the fate of the Jews,” Adorno writes to Horkheimer in August of 1940 (quoted in *FS*, p. 59). It is here that Adorno offers a crucial redefinition of Marxist terms: “It often seems to me that everything that we used to see from the point of view of the proletariat has been concentrated today with frightful force upon the Jews.” The Jew, that is, came to *replace the proletariat* as the ones who “are now at the opposite pole to the concentration of power” (quoted in “AS,” p. 422). Rolf Tiedemann grasped the centrality of this idea for Adorno’s thinking: “These lines . . . provide us with a key to Adorno’s thinking from 1940 on” (quoted in *FS*, p. 60). This turn marks the internal shift within the Frankfurt school analyses from the *exploitive* model to one oriented around *domination*, what I am also describing here more specifically as the turn from class to race.⁵⁷

56. One of the revelations of Jacobs’s rich study of the Jewish commitments of the Frankfurt school is Adorno’s dramatic and decisive turn over the summer of 1940 toward questions of anti-Semitism; see *FS*, pp. 58–59.

57. The shift from exploitation to domination within the writings of Adorno and Horkheimer is the subject of my contributions to a debate at *Nonsite.org*; see Cronan et al., “Do We Need Adorno?” 17 Sept. 2012, nonsite.org/feature/do-we-need-adorno

Brecht's encounter with the Frankfurt school occurred at this moment of shifting allegiances from exploitation to domination, proletariat to Jew, class to race, in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer. By September of 1942 Adorno tells his parents that Brecht is one of a "select circle of people" who he sees regularly (Brecht arrived into Los Angeles in July of 1941, Adorno in November).⁵⁸ When Brecht came to know Adorno, Horkheimer, Pollock and Marcuse, the institute was in the midst of a pitched battle with members of the institute in New York. At the center of those discussions were competing analyses of National Socialism: Franz Neumann's account of "totalitarian monopoly capitalism" versus Pollock's "state capitalism."⁵⁹

It is beyond the confines of this discussion to enter into the texture of Neumann's argument in his monumental *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1942*. The first edition appeared within months of Pollock's "State Capitalism" and was in large part a counter to Pollock's claims, which he had been following throughout their development. Neumann took direct aim at Pollock in the first chapter of the second part of *Behemoth*, "Economy without Economics?" (see *B*, pp. 231–34). Like Pollock, Neumann saw that full employment was a great "gift to the masses" but insisted that it was the "sole" one on offer and that the "business cycle has not been brought to an end" nor has the "economic system been freed from periods of contraction" (*B*, p. 431). In other words, far from stability, crisis was imminent within the National Socialist state. In a letter to Horkheimer, Neumann was unflinching in his assessment of Pollock's claims: "For a whole year I have been doing nothing but studying economic processes in Germany, and I have up till now not found a shred of evidence to show that Germany is in a situation remotely resembling state capitalism" (quoted in *DI*, p. 285). Although Horkheimer assented to Neumann's criticism, he nonetheless urged, in a feat of fuzzy logic, that he could not free himself "from Engels' view that society is moving towards precisely that. I must therefore assume that the approach of such a period very probably still threatens us. And this seems to me to a

58. Adorno, letter to Oscar and Maria Wiesengrund, 1 Sept. 1942, in *Letters to His Parents, 1939–1951*, trans. Wieland Hoban, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (New York, 2006), p. 108. For a discussion of the shared ideological commitments of Brecht and Adorno during their time in Los Angeles, see Ulrich Plass, "Refunctioning Alienation: Brecht and Adorno in Los Angeles," in *Distance and Proximity*, pp. 60–95.

59. For a brief summary of the debates around Neumann's book see Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950* (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 161–67; hereafter abbreviated *DI*. Also see, Rolf Wiggershaus, "Disputes on the Theory of National Socialism," *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), pp. 280–91.

great extent to prove the value of Pollock's construct in providing a basis for discussion of a topical problem, in spite of all its deficiencies" (quoted in *DI*, p. 285).⁶⁰ By October of 1941 Horkheimer lobbied for Neumann's removal from the institute, and a year later Pollock informed him of his dismissal. According to Wiggershaus, "Pollock demanded that Neumann should sign a declaration that he would have no more claims with respect to the Institute after 30 September 1942" (*DI*, p. 293). Neumann left the institute and soon joined the Office of Strategic Services. By 1943 Marcuse, who remained close with Neumann, was persuaded to accept Pollock's state capital "construct" and to publicly reject Neumann's theses. The defeat (or suppression) of Neumann's account was a defining moment in the history of the Frankfurt school, and, more significantly, in the history of progressive thinking about the relations between class and race.

On the question of race, Neumann, like Brecht and Ottwald, took an orthodox Marxist position. His account came to be known as the "spearhead" theory of racism:

The Jews are used as guinea pigs in testing a method of repression. It is only the Jews who can possibly play this role. National Socialism, which has allegedly abolished the class struggle, needs an enemy who, by his very existence, can integrate the antagonistic groups within this society.⁶¹

Like Ottwald, Neumann described anti-Semitism as an integrative process of bringing enemies into line. Neumann considered the gradualism of anti-Semitic legislation under the National Socialists as a tool by which to "stimulate the masses or divert their attention from other socio-economic and international policies" (*B*, p. 121).⁶² Every principle held by the Nazis—including blood, community, folk—are "devices for hiding the real constellation of

60. Horkheimer is referring to Engels' *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (1880). It bears noting that Adorno began as one of Pollock's deepest critics. Writing to Horkheimer about "State Capitalism" he lamented how it was "all formulated so axiomatically and condescendingly . . . that it lacks all urgency." Moreover, Pollock was guilty of making "the undialectical assumption that a non-antagonistic economy might be possible in an antagonistic society" (quoted in *DI*, p. 282). Adorno nonetheless came around to Pollock's position and (along with Horkheimer) dedicated *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to him. Adorno was also Pollock's key ally during discussions around the anti-Semitism and labor study.

61. Franz Neumann, "Anti-Semitism: Spearhead of Universal Terror," in Neumann, Herbert Marcuse, and Otto Kirchheimer, *Secret Reports on Nazi Germany: The Frankfurt School Contribution to the War Effort*, ed. Raffaele Laudani (Princeton N.J., 2013), p. 28.

62. Neumann also came to the notoriously mistaken conclusion that the "German people are the least Anti-Semitic of all" (*B*, p. 121). This is what Gershom Scholem dismissively described as "an astounding lack of critical insight [among Jews] into their own situation" (Gershom Scholem, "Jews and Germans," in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, trans. and ed. Werner J. Dannhauser [New York, 2012], p. 89).

power and for manipulating the masses” (B, p. 464). The whole arsenal of ideology—the “charisma of the Leader, the superiority of the master race, the struggle of a proletarian race against plutocracies, the protest of the folk against the state”—Neumann wrote, are “consciously applied stratagems”; every pronouncement, every action carefully calculated devices to create specific effects on the masses and the world. Neumann came to the overstated conclusion that the German leadership is the “only group . . . that does not take its ideological pronouncements seriously and is well aware of their purely propagandistic nature” (B, p. 467). There is little evidence to suggest this level of distinction between the German leaders and their ideology. Neumann’s point, if true, would be something like a literal reading of Brecht’s in *Round Heads*, something, I have argued, Brecht refused to do. Nonetheless, the basic question was whether one could rightly distinguish between classes in Germany. For Neumann, Brecht and Ottwald, seeing through the diversionary “devices”—the scapegoating, propaganda and folk ideology—was imperative. For the Frankfurt school, and for Arendt, no such distinction, between device and belief, bourgeois and proletariat, could or should be made.

Arendt explicitly attacked Brecht and Neumann together in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* for their assertion of a difference between ruler and ruled. “Isolation of atomized individuals provides not only the mass basis for totalitarian rule, but is carried through to the very top of the whole structure.”⁶³ Horkheimer and Adorno similarly argued—again with reference to Brecht and Neumann—that the “fascist leaders were basically the same as the masses they led” (DI, p. 157n). Horkheimer and Adorno offered a counter-Freudian reading of the identity of ruler and ruled: “the leader no longer represents the father so much as the monstrously enlarged projection of the impotent ego of each individual.” The new leader embodies power by virtue of there being “blank spaces” where “decayed individuals” find themselves and are “rewarded for their decay.” Horkheimer and Adorno saw how Charlie Chaplin “hit on something essential” in *The Great Dictator*, in which the barber and the dictator were played by the same actor.⁶⁴ In other words, the *etwas Wesentliches* that Chaplin hit on was state capitalism, the theory that domination strikes the rich and poor in equal measure. Under state capitalism there was no longer any difference between bottom and top, proletariat and bourgeoisie, ruled and ruler. Brecht, like Neumann, preferred a notion of “state monopoly,” one that was rife with internal contradictions and imminent collapse (J, p. 73).

63. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 407.

64. Horkheimer and Adorno, “Mass Society,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 196, 197.

The question Brecht put to the Frankfurt school again and again was how state capitalism—given its capacity to “realize the dream of humanity”—could fail (*B*, p. 225)? Writing in his *Arbeitsjournal* in July of 1943, Brecht commented on the arrest of Benito Mussolini that followed the American invasion of Italy. He questioned Adorno and “another tui” (his term for left intellectuals whose ideas authorize capitalist ideology) what would become of “their economist pollock, who was expecting a century of fascism, believed in the german bourgeoisie’s planned economy, etc.” Brecht saw that for the institute the fall of Mussolini “proves nothing”; the state was able to absorb any contradiction into itself. For Brecht it signaled the beginning of the end for fascism (*J*, 287). After all, fascism was a behemoth, a “non-state, a chaos, situation of lawlessness, disorder and anarchy,” and could fall at any moment.⁶⁵ Brecht saw the toppling of Mussolini as a sign of what’s to come and he thought he saw a glimmer of recognition in the eyes of his friends at the institute.

They are all astonished at the casual ease with which the Italian bourgeoisie dismissed its “dictator” and dissolved all the “all-pervading” fascist institutions, etc. when a year ago [Brecht is referring to the “seminars on need” he attended in the summer of 1942], i expounded my idea that what they had in germany was nothing more than a superficial war economy with very little real coordination, and very tenuous state intervention in the economy, there were raised eyebrows everywhere. [*J*, p. 287]

Brecht was mistaken to read their astonishment and raised eyebrows as signs of recognition. He was mistaken to think they had come around to his way of seeing historical change. For Adorno, nothing about the fall of fascism indicated anything but its triumph at the level of *psychic administration* of its victims.

In a letter to his parents Adorno reported the evening with Brecht another way. Mussolini’s arrest was organized by “thugs [who have] rigged the whole business with the clever intention of neutralizing Italy *without the Allies occupying it*.” For Adorno the problem was not exactly the rigging of the event—that the change of heart among fascists was disingenuous—but rather that the American people fell for the dissimulation so easily.⁶⁶ The reactions to political events *are the politics* for Adorno. And

65. Neumann, *Behemoth*, [xii] and see p. 459.

66. The “reaction here [in the United States] is already so strong that people let themselves in for it” (Adorno, letter to Oscar and Maria Wiesengrund, 26 July 1943, in *Letters to His Parents*, p. 144).

the reaction he was most concerned with was the one toward the Jews. It is this shift that signals the transformation of politics from Marxism to antiracism. Of course Marxist terms continue to play a basic role in their writings, but class analysis loses its foundations. Politics becomes a matter of perceptions, and above all this meant perception of the Jews, especially in America. As he explained to his parents a few weeks before the fall of Mussolini, "I am totally Jewified i.e. have nothing but anti-Semitism on my mind."⁶⁷ The results of his Jewish immersion appeared in the 1 December "Write-up of Final Report" on the problem of "anti-Semitism among labourers."⁶⁸ As the report explains, the worst of all were the "communist run" unions. According to the report, "The members of these unions are less communist than fascist-minded, and indeed violent outbreaks of anti-Semitism could have been caused by raising the question." The report was clear: "the air is saturated with anti-Semitism" (quoted in *AS*, p. 430). When Adorno was writing his report the US was among the most economically equal in its history. In 1944, for instance, the bottom 90 percent earned 67.5 percent of the income share, while the top 1 percent earned 11.3 percent. Today, the top 0.1 percent owns as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent. And while the air has been saturated with race analyses (not least in the wake of the efforts of the Frankfurt school), the unions have declined, the labor laws have been gutted, and the exploited—of all varieties—are poorer than ever.

67. Adorno, letter to Oscar and Maria Wiesengrund, 15 Apr. 1943, in *Letters to His Parents*, p. 132.

68. Adorno, letter to Oscar and Maria Wiesengrund, 22 Nov. 1944, in *Letters to His Parents*, p. 204.