Stephen Parker

Brecht and *Sinn und Form*: Generating Cultural Capital in the Cold War

This investigation into Brecht’s collaboration with *Sinn und Form* offers a fresh perspective upon his position within early GDR and Cold War cultural politics. Brecht’s publications in the journal, edited by Peter Huchel under the aegis of the elite German Academy of Arts, contributed substantially to its legendary status as a unique organ representing a progressive vision of German cultural unity. Brecht engaged with the emerging cultural-political orthodoxy in a series of key publications in *Sinn und Form*, as the SED leadership sought to subordinate cultural to political capital. Brecht’s position in those stage-managed exchanges was informed by aesthetic considerations, yet the SED leadership was driven in the nationalistic discourse that coloured Socialist Realism by the geopolitical imperative of justifying the GDR’s status among the people’s democracies of the Eastern Bloc. These radically divergent perspectives, exemplifying the irreconcilable claims of cultural and political capital, spawned major antagonisms and illusions. The position occupied by Brecht and his supporters was relentlessly eroded until, quite improbably, the crisis of 17 June 1953 allowed Brecht to turn the tables. While popular opposition was suppressed, as Brecht re-affirmed his loyalty to the SED leadership, whose revolutionary achievements he continued to praise, Brecht and his supporters asserted the relative autonomy of the Academy and its journal vis-à-vis weakened SED cultural politicians. From 1954 to 1956, Brecht and *Sinn und Form* capitalized upon their enhanced reputations, achieving the legendary status that later repression did nothing to diminish.

Brecht, the GDR’s leading author, and *Sinn und Form*, the state’s most prestigious journal, stand out as quite isolated sites for the early GDR’s accumulation of cultural capital on the international stage. The collaboration between Brecht

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and the journal’s first editor, Peter Huchel, contributed much to the legendary reputation that Brecht, Huchel and *Sinn und Form* came to enjoy in the early Cold War. The journal was lauded as a unique organ that embodied a progressive vision of German cultural unity grounded in representative literary excellence, which enabled it to transcend political division. That reputation occluded the journal’s heavy dependence on state subsidy and institutional support in its promotion – albeit for a restricted, opinion-forming elite – of what was, of course, the GDR’s own policy of German unity. That policy derived ultimately from Stalin’s acute concern that Soviet security and claims for reparations would be compromised by a divided Germany.² Hence, Stalin’s placemen in Germany, the KPD/SED leaders around Walter Ulbricht, were initially required to prioritize the establishment not of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism but of a German “bourgeois” democracy. The policy of unity informed, too, the foundation of the journal’s parent organization, the German Academy of Arts, which was promoted by the East Berlin elite as a similarly progressive and representative, all-German successor to the discredited Prussian Academy of Arts.³ Brecht was the most illustrious member of the Academy. He served on its founding commission and participated keenly in its development, acting as a Vice-President from 1954 until his death.⁴ The investigation of Brecht’s collaboration with *Sinn und Form* in the context of the Academy, a field relatively under-developed in research on Brecht, permits a fresh perspective upon his position within early GDR cultural politics.

The journal’s international success in the 1950s, like that of Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble, contrasts with the failure of much that surrounded them in the GDR, not least the ruling SED, which never achieved acceptance amongst the GDR’s population nor, for that matter, abroad and was thus faced with a near-permanent crisis of legitimacy. The SED leadership was wholly unsuited to representing a Soviet position that ran counter to its own interest in consolidating power in East Germany on the basis of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Since its legitimacy depended on the accumulation of cultural as well as political capital, from the early 1950s it turned to the only way that it understood in order to make up its severe deficit, exercising a “total” claim in all spheres of activity,


⁴Brecht’s pieces concerning the Academy and its journal are collected in volume 23 of the BFA.