

Editorial Note

Frustrated with traditional epistemologies of theatre, playwright Bertold Brecht would spend his career developing the method he called “epic theatre.” Brecht believed that audience and performer must interact for theatre to have potential as a revolutionary art form, but that social surveillance and convention maintained relationships in which the audience was subordinated to the performer. A regular contributor to radical journals like *Left Review*, Brecht’s political convictions became more immediate as he and other writers, including Antonio Gramsci and George Orwell, invested in a shared resistance to the growth of fascism in Europe. His own prescription was offered at the end of World War II, in “A Short Organum for Theatre”:

We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.¹

His terminology is telling; “theatre,” for Brecht, extended outside the playhouse. If the relationship between performer and audience was a simulacrum for the relationship between a dominant order and those whom that order would oppress, then Brecht believed performance was an essential component to all human relations. “Epic theatre” could be used as a form of therapeutic education allowing performers and their audience to experiment with “thoughts and feelings” that contradicted the restrictive limits of those relations.

Brecht’s notion of relational and circumstantial performance could be transposed into a theoretical framework meant to aid historians in comprehending the actions and motives of historical actors. To do so is to unravel a complex web of willful and competitive strategies of identity; it requires the historian to explain not how events change groups of people, or how groups of people change events, but how individuals constantly and relatively mediate their public responses to both.

Referenced in passing, Brecht acts as an off-stage presence for two of the articles in this issue of *Left History*; however, all could be read to function within his framework. While they are temporally and geographically separated — Black refugees in the early 1800s, British intellectuals involved with the Spanish Civil War, Trotskyist arms of the United Auto-Workers Union in the 1940s, and Joni Mitchell’s ascent to stardom — and deal with different social issues — race, class, and gender — at root Brecht would have understood the dynamics of the relation of subordination that defined their subjects as functioning in the same fashion. If Gramsci’s similar blueprint of social hierarchy is more widely acknowledged as a model for social history, Brecht’s nuance concerning performance seems more resonant here: in each of the following arti-

cles, a marginalized group or individual attempts to articulate a new identity through making choices to adapt, explore, and perform within a dominant ideology.

Brecht's own reaction to the Spanish Civil War was quite similar to that of his Leftist British colleagues at the *Left Review*, the subject of Michele Haapamaki's article, "Writers in Arms and the Just War." Brecht's *Señora Carrar's Rifles* (1938) depicted a working class mother's attempt to deal with the death of her husband and prevent her sons from going to war, despite her convictions that the workers fought for a just cause. Haapamaki traces a similar identity crisis for her subjects; she focuses on the personal and public ways individuals previously aligned with pacifism came to embrace certain martial strains of British Nationalism to facilitate their participation in the Spanish socialist cause. Haapamaki argues that this merger of interests with a British Nationality that these writers and poets were politically aligned against was successful in transforming the sense of identity held by the leftist constituency. However, she also notes that the re-imagination of a leftist warrior relied heavily on conservative notions about masculinity and war.

Similarly, Harvey Amani Whitfield, in "The Development of Black Refugee Identity in Nova Scotia, 1830-1850," notes that despite existing first and foremost in British and North American society as a marginalized and enslaved group, Black Refugees were quick to take advantage of the polarizing politics of war. Identity for these refugees was founded upon a carefully considered relationship between support for the British effort in the War of 1812 and a desire for freedom. Whitfield examines the ways these groups continued to articulate loyalty to the British after their resettlement in Canada, even though British nationalist ideology was overwhelmingly racially conservative. In other words, despite continued alienation, these Black Refugees were persistent in playing a role within the rubric of nation; their efforts reinforced relationships with Britain while articulating a new identity tied to their experience as settlers within Nova Scotia. British Black Refugees drew upon a multiplicity of languages in order to articulate a unique identity.

Victor Devinatz's article on "The Role of the Trotskyists in the United Auto Worker's Union, 1939-1940" examines the relationship between a radical formation contained within a larger (and more conservative) political group. Members of the Socialist Workers Party and the Workers Party, the two major wings of Trotskyism in the UAW, were leading activists and individuals within that larger body. As Devinatz traces conflicts that emerged among activists over the best strategies to exert influence over the broader body, he offers insight into the ways Trotskyists often chose to temper their own responses in an effort to seem more palatable. At the same time, however, Devinatz notes that fractions within the Trotskyists deplored this tactic, and instead made bold statements about the role they should play as the vanguard of the working class.

In effect, Devinatz shows a political entity from which fractions attempted to play very different roles in mobilizing Union members to their cause.

Stuart Henderson's "All Pink and Clean and Full of Wonder?" explores the career of Joni Mitchell with similar observations. Henderson argues that Mitchell's presence in a male-dominated music industry in the 1960s and 1970s offers a critical site of gender relations. Henderson suggests that despite Mitchell's gender, which placed her outside of music industry norms, she never made an overt claim to feminism. Henderson locates Mitchell's performance in the precarious space between an industry that wanted to portray her as just another female singer with an acoustic guitar and her own penchant for working on the fringes of composition and production. Indeed, by refusing to succumb to the essentialist views of the patriarchal music industry, Mitchell engaged in a variety of performances that transcended normative gender categories, creating a niche in the industry for both her music and her self.

Each article in this issue concerns a marginalized voice struggling to articulate an identity despite the restrictive force of a dominant ideology from which that voice is alienated. We can interpret these articles as communicating with one another through the language of identity. Throughout the vast geographic and temporal spaces that provide the background and context for these articles, we can see that identity is always in question precisely because it always exists in a relationship with other options. For Brecht this would clearly mean that identity is already a form of theatre; a performance meant to ease passage and experience. Though not "resistance" in the traditional sense employed by social historians, the agency of their subjects is a powerful force that reinterprets, rearticulates, and transforms the dominant ideologies with which they grapple — one that, in effect, attempts to "transform the field itself."

As a postscript, as we go through our own transformation, *Left History* would like to thank the contributions of departed editor Liza Piper to the journal. We would also like to thank Independent Curators International (iCI) for their kind permission to publish the work of Mark Lombardi (see Ryan Bigge's review of Lombardi's exhibition which was organized by iCI).

The Editors
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Notes

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), 190.