

ters with rock. Of course, it turned out that these forms were, in the end, easily adaptable to the music business' standard operating procedure as well. The rise and fall of Nirvana and the shenanigans at Woodstock '99 should make it clear that the familiar romantic pattern of star-spangled excess, decadent fame and violent dissolution can be learned by rote and continually played back over and over again.

Still, these more recent phenomena left important legacies that point beyond the familiar pattern. For instance, while Miller was half-heartedly covering Michael Jackson's every twitch for *Newsweek* in the mid-'80s (a story he uses to detail his disillusionment), groups like the Minutemen, Mission of Burma, Hüsker Dü and a host of others were making seminal records on

unknown labels, touring the country in vans and playing for small crowds. The broad cultural influence of these kinds of music scenes—across genres—can still be felt in the wealth of independent record labels, community performance spaces, musical collectives and bands scattered around the country today. Some of these are merely unofficial "farm teams" hustling to get noticed by the larger music industry, but many continue to provide a way for people to make music more or less under the radar or just outside the provenance of the big record companies.

This is a history you can't get from Miller's book. It requires readjusting one's understanding of what rock 'n' roll has become. To some extent the sense of personal transformation that Miller so adeptly evokes is predicated

upon a sense of youthful idealism nurtured by the buzz and rush of radio patter, fast money, inchoate politics, racial transgression and drugs that made rock so new in the years that Miller surveys. While all this may still be in effect to one degree or another, rock music has mutated indeed. In fact, Miller's frustration with the history proves it has been transformed; it has "grown up," for lack of a better phrase, and can no longer be measured or understood through the language of youthful exuberance and utopian transformation. It will take instruments other than those Miller employs to chart its as yet unknown effects. ■

**Sandy Zipp**, a graduate student at Yale in American studies, has also written for *The Baffler* and *Might*.

## Make It Strange

By J.W. Mason

In one of the remarkable poems he wrote while in exile in Denmark, Bertolt Brecht wondered, "Why should my name be mentioned?" He offered answers—"because I praised the useful"—but concluded: "But today / I accept that it will be forgotten. / Why should the baker be asked for if there is enough bread? ... Why should there be a past if there is a future?"

**Brecht and Method**  
By Fredric Jameson  
Verso  
184 pages, \$25

So when Fredric Jameson speculates at the beginning of his study *Brecht and Method* that "Brecht would have been delighted ... at an argument, not for his greatness, or his canonicity, nor even for some new and unexpected value of posterity ... [but] rather for his usefulness," one wonders if he really would have been as delighted as all that. But the future with no further need of Brecht was to be the day "when man is a helper to man," and if its realization has been indefinitely delayed, by the same token so has Brecht's obscurity. For the moment, there are many good reasons for his name to be mentioned.

I have no idea what complex theoretical gap Jameson intends a study of Brecht to fill; charting the branches of his work and their recombinations keeps platoons of graduate students occupied. Let's ask instead why Jameson personally might choose to write about Brecht. As the man who owns the franchise on "postmodernism" (its "capture" by Jameson is nicely documented in Perry Anderson's excellent *Origins of Postmodernity*), he has been at the center of all the pullulating debates over the uses and abuses of that term and of the relation between cultural politics and the real item.

Thank god the "culture wars" seem to have petered out. But Jameson, who unlike many of his lit-crit colleagues is a lucid writer and thinker, cannot have

**Jameson wants to rescue Brecht, and, by extension, Marxism, from the taint of the gulag.**

been untroubled by the questions begged by, for instance, the habit of referring to academic articles as "interventions." Jameson is distinguished from many on the cultural left by the clarity and confidence of his political stance, which is overtly anti-capitalist and positions itself in the tradition of political economy. But he is uncertain what the duties and capabilities of a political writer are in a time of political paralysis. So he looks to Brecht as a model for what a writer can do.

The answer Jameson comes up with is not that different from what his less committed colleagues might offer: His Brecht is a universal subversive, undermining every convention, orthodoxy and received idea. Jameson no doubt wants to rescue Brecht—and, by extension, Marxism—from the taint of the gulag. But more than an opportunistic rereading, this represents a fundamentally different approach to politics than Brecht represented in his own day. And it fails to fully capture the project of Brecht and his comrades, who were as concerned with building up as with tearing down.

For someone who has encountered Brecht as a spectator at his plays (or his imitators'), the book's focus will come as a surprise. Jameson is not much interested in "Brechtianism"—a mix of sly self-contradiction, paradox, heroic cowardice and honest hypocrisy on the one hand, and of self-conscious

"estrangement effects" in which the artificiality of the situation of the play (or, these days, the movie) is highlighted. His concern isn't with Brecht's style or technique (though he has some interesting things to say about what makes Brecht work on the page and in the theater) nor, significantly, with his specific political commitments, but, as the title suggests, with his method.

Which is what? The conventional designation is epic theater, which suggests Homer, *Beowulf* and the Elder Edda. But as Jameson points out, the epic that Brecht opposed to familiar dramatic theater had none of these connotations: It simply meant narrative or storytelling. If dramatic theater is the playing

out of a premise whose unavoidable resolution leaves us with a sense of catharsis, or at least satisfaction, epic is the theater of the contingent, the arbitrary and the evitable. The tension it produces isn't resolved within the world of the play. Or as Brecht himself put it: "This way of subordinating everything to a single idea, this passion for propelling the spectator along a single track where he can look neither left nor right, neither up nor down, is something the new school of playwriting [the epic] must reject."

At every moment, he always reminded his actors, they must convey the fact that their characters could have done otherwise, and his plays were to have the air of (often, in fact were) rehearsals, which might well be performed differently the next time around. In the same way, the estrangement effects offer a reminder that the world is also arbitrary, artificial, unnatural—in short, strange; what seems natural is really a product of human action and therefore subject to modification.

As Jameson rightly points out, Brecht's plays, while thoroughly political—in the sense that they were intended to provoke the audience to action—didn't function at all in the

way we often expect of political art. Brecht, he insists, had no patience with "culinary" theater that moved the audience through their emotions. In the *Three-Penny Opera*, he offered Peachum, the instructor of professional



Brecht with life mask, 1931.

beggars, as a ruthless satire on anyone who hopes to arouse the sympathy of the well-off for the poor. The play's opening title reads: "To combat the increasing callousness of mankind, J. Peachum, a man of business, has opened up a shop where the poorest of poor can acquire an exterior that will touch the hardest of hearts."

Brecht carefully reworked plays like *Galileo* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* to make their protagonists less sympathetic and identification with them trickier. He didn't want audiences to suspend disbelief and enter into the imaginative world of the play as an escape from their daily routine; he wanted workers to come, smoke cigars during the performance and debate its application to their lives afterward. He was especially attracted to court cases, both because of their implicit invitation for the audience to pass its own judgment, and because of the chance they presented to show that what appeared as a seamless moral order was in fact hopelessly contradictory.

Jameson approves of Brecht's ability to ferret out contradictions; to invite analysis; to systematically play against, rather than to, an audience's

emotional responses. This is the heart of his method, and for Jameson, it's a method inherently opposed to doctrine. What Brecht was about, Jameson insists, was challenging every conventional view; what he offered was a kind of universal acid with which ideas could be broken down into their smallest component parts, the better to be "reconstructed replaced, improved."

Even Brecht's Marxism, which his critics and admirers both see at the center of his work, lacks for Jameson any positive content. If Brecht acknowledged Marxism as the "science of society," what he meant was, "Yes, Marxism really is a science ... but only in that figurative sense of what accompanies and theorizes the new." He made

no argument, supported no cause, except in a relative and contingent way, and his greatest fear was that ideas which were useful for the moment would be regarded as absolutely true. Thus the paradoxes, the playing of values against each other; the constant reminders to the audience that what they are watching is just a play, and might be put on differently under different circumstances. In the end, says Jameson, this warning against the freezing or fossilizing of ideas is the only thing the plays have to teach us: "The doctrine is simply the method itself."

Jameson is quite right that techniques of "Brechtianism" exist for a reason: to shock and surprise, to make people rethink what they've taken for granted. Brecht often noted that if his particular alienation effects became too familiar, they themselves would have to be alienated; writing today, Brecht would not be a Brechtian. And he acknowledged a certain primacy of technique over content: "Show that you are showing! Among all the varied attitudes / Which you show when showing how men play their parts / The attitude of showing must never be forgotten." Jameson draws especially on the *Me-Ti: The Book of Twists and Turns*, which retells Marx in

the idiom of the Chinese classics to produce aphorisms like, "Certain thoughts, of the ordering kind ... can be compared to bureaucrats in their conduct and function." So his postmodern Brecht is, at least, not created out of whole cloth.

Still, is this all there is to Brecht? Brecht's critics, notes Jameson, denied that estrangement effects were what made the plays run; they "maintained that Brechtian distanciation was impossible, that we always identified with Mother Courage and her tragedy in spite of ourselves." For that matter, many of Brecht's admirers have said the same. Would the plays still be performed if they lacked what Brecht (and Jameson) dismiss as "culinary" virtues, or if nothing could be taken from them but a warning against "thoughts of the ordering kind"?

The limits of Jameson's approach become clearest in his section on the *lehrstucken*, Brecht's didactic "teaching plays" of the '30s, which offer the richest pickings for anyone convinced that the man was simply an apologist for Stalinism. These short plays are as cheerfully paradoxical as anything Brecht wrote, but the contradictions and ironic reversals always serve to uphold, rather than undermine, a particular perspective: that of the revolutionary and the Communist. In *The Measures Taken*, for example, a young agitator in China is executed for sympathizing excessively with the coolies; his killers are exonerated before a Party tribunal.

In their own way, the *lehrstucken* are entirely admirable attempts to face up to the contradictions of Communism in the '20s and '30s. But they can hardly be taken at face value by modern readers, least of all Jameson's; what then is he to make of them? To his credit, he doesn't take the obvious tack: that these pieces are slyly undermining the world-view they seem to espouse. They're simply too well put together as propaganda for that reading to get any purchase.

It's a sign of the magnitude of the difficulty the *lehrstucken* create for Jameson that he resorts to a strategy used nowhere else in the book: an examination of how these plays were actually performed. The object of the propaganda, he notes, was the actors, not the audiences; and in rehearsals and performances, the whole cast would rotate through all of the parts. Interesting: Was

what seems to be an apology for Party ruthlessness really simply an exercise in looking at a problem from every side?

I don't think so. Brecht was a Red, not (or not just) a proto-postmodernist. At the end of the day, he sometimes meant what he said. His doctrine was more than his method.

Unlike many of today's radicals, who see fragmentation, decentering and the breaking down of identities as ends in themselves, Brecht knew that any effective political project required a fixed place to stand. Like many of his comrades, Brecht was alert to the failures and absurdities of Communism and the Soviet Union, but he made his compromises with them—and worked to support them in his writing—because he believed that it was not enough to tear down the institutions of capitalism; alternatives had to be built in their place.

Of these complex and troubling questions only hints can be found in *Brecht and Method*. Jameson observes, intriguingly, that "much of left dialectics, from 1917 onwards, was generated by the conceptual dilemmas offered by [the conflict] between the particular and the universal, between a specific historical fact or datum—the Soviet Union, with its own national and local requirements—and the universalism of a left class politics." And in a footnote he admits that consistency would require him to commit his Brecht more fully to the "decentered" and the "heterogeneous," though he would "prefer not to." But these admissions that some tension exists between his universally subversive Brecht and the concrete political project to which the real Brecht was dedicated are, at best, eddies running against the main current of the book.

Yet Jameson's depiction of Brecht is still a compelling one, not so much wrong as incomplete. And the central thesis is hardly all there is in *Brecht and Method*. It is a rich book, one that strikes out in many different directions at once, many of which aren't touched on here. In the end, perhaps the secret of Jameson's greatness, like Brecht's, is that he doesn't adhere to his method too strictly. ■

J.W. Mason works for the AFL-CIO and has also written for *The Baffler*, *The Nation* and *The American Prospect*.

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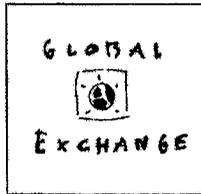
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But that's not the end of this remarkable story. Wily traders caught with the crumbling Kosovo-based Kosovar discovered that a Dead Kosovar was worth its weight in gold in Western propaganda markets. It closed today at 15 to the American, and analysts see a bright future for the Dead Kosovar—if it retains political utility. Elsewhere in the Balkans, more bad news for the battered Serb. It plummeted for a seventieth consecutive day and now sits at 400,000 to the American. Bitter investors left holding the worthless ethnicity blame London and Washington.

In the Peoples of Color Market, the Angolan fell to 44,000 to the American while the Cuban closed up 500 points at 13,000, reflecting a strong rookie pitching crop that has scouts salivating. The Haitian climbed 800 to 22,000 following Disney's announcement of a summer blockbuster with textile tie-ins. The modern version of *Snow White* finds the seven dwarfs living the good life in a Port-au-Prince assembly shop.

Today saw another big sell-off of Timorese as investors remain frightened by Western support for intensified Indonesian repression. While Jakarta and Washington pay lip service to Timorese aspirations for independence, savvy analysts are not impressed. They say the Timorese, which closed at 52,000, could go the way of the Iraqi.

Speaking of which ... indifference is so great that in a recent poll of people managers, 95 percent were unaware that eight years of economic sanctions had taken a million or more Iraqis off the market.

Some analysts credit President Clinton for devaluing the Iraqi to 500,000, while others feel a hands-off approach might trigger a recovery. In any event, the Iraqi has been demoted from the Peoples Market to the Commodities Market, where it is pegged at 200 to the cow and 25 to the soybean.

**A**nd now, tonight's commentary: Once again, government intervention in the Peoples Market has reared its ugly head. While the Exiled Kosovar is a great story, the NATO-organized relief effort has artificially inflated its value. In a free system of freely traded humans, the Exiled Kosovar would be worth no more than the Rwandan or the Guatemalan. Let's allow the market to work its magic. In the long run, we'll all be better off.

Thank you for watching the *Nightly Peoples Report*. Happy investing, and may you never sell people short. ■