

# Revisiting German Proletarian-Revolutionary Literature

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The proletarian-revolutionary literature of Germany's Weimar Republic has had an ambivalent literary historical reception.<sup>1</sup> Rüdiger Safranski and Walter Fähnders entry for "proletarian-revolutionary literature" in the influential *Hanser's Social History of German Literature* series (1995, p. 174) recognizes the significance of the movement's theoretical debates and its opening up of the proletarian milieu to the literary public sphere, but flatly dismisses the literature itself as one that "did not justify such outlays of reflection and organization." In the new left movements of the old Federal Republic, the proletarian-revolutionary culture of the Weimar Republic played a complex role as a heritage to be taken up and critiqued. However, the most influential, if not most substantial, West German account of this literature, Michael Rohwasser's (1975, p. 10) *Saubere Mädel-Starke Genossen* [Clean Girls-Strong Comrades], sharply criticizes the corpus and describes the proletarian mass novel as hopelessly masculinist and productivist, a narrative spectacle of the "disavowal of one's own alienation." In the former GDR, on the other hand, after having been largely passed over in the 1950s, proletarian-revolutionary literature, rediscovered in the 1960s, was often described as the heroic preparatory works of a socialist national literature that would develop only later in the worker-and-peasants' state itself, still bearing the infantile disorders of ultra-leftism and proletkult (Klein, 1972).<sup>2</sup> This paper offers a revisionist reading of the proletarian-revolutionary literature of Germany's Weimar Republic.

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Although a large proportion of what we can consider proletarian literature in Germany consists of lyric, dramatic, and agit-prop forms, this essay focuses largely on the novel. First, the novel is the genre that most clearly reflects the tensions of proletarian literature in Germany between its status as a countercultural or subcultural working-class practice on the one hand and its ambitions to proletarian cultural hegemony in society at large. Second, this essay addresses the interwar Weimar Republic time period, a focus justified by this period's unique institutional formation of proletarian-revolutionary literature. Working-class literature is not particular to the Weimar Republic, but it acquired a self-conscious voice, autonomous institutional structure, and clearly defined purpose in the late 1920s and early 1930s that is unique in the German experience. Despite the literature's continued influence in the 1960s and 1970s in both postwar German Republics, this formation would not repeat. In the GDR, proletarian literature was subsumed into a socialist national literature aligned, however uncomfortably, with the project of state socialism. In the Federal Republic, groupings of working-class writers like the Dortmund-based *Gruppe 61* (Group '61) or the *Werkkreises Literatur der Arbeitswelt* (Working Group for Literature of the Working World) were subcultural or countercultural formations, and lacked the insurrectionary claim on the public sphere that characterized the proletarian-revolutionary literature of the Weimar Republic.

I will argue the novel form itself plays a role in this contestation of the German public sphere in the Weimar Republic, precisely because of the novel's status as at once a vehicle of bourgeois high culture and its identification with the capitalist "culture industry" in the form of genre fiction and pulp novels. By appropriating this form, simultaneously the medium of high and mass cultural idioms in bourgeois society, German proletarian-revolutionary literature understood itself as struggling against bourgeois ideology on two fronts. First, in contesting the bourgeois hegemony of the public sphere, and secondly in creating a popular literary form, accessible not just to workers, but also to the middle classes, farmers, women and youth, for the propagation of a kind of vernacular socialist sensibility. In this essay, I will argue proletarian revolutionary novels broadly contain three aspects. The

first aspect is what Fredric Jameson (1992) calls an oppositional realism, the intense investment in the limits of dominant forms by “minor literatures,” which undermine and adapt these dominant forms without fully moving beyond their generic logic. The second characteristic of proletarian-revolutionary literature is its depiction of proletarian modernity and of the scenes of waged and unwaged labor as aspects of capitalist society. Finally, coevality characterizes this literature, in Marike Janzen’s (2018, pp. 5–6) sense of the term, where the political impetus behind a set of global literary organizations, institutions, and authors aspired not to circulate through the world literature market, but, through a global unified revolutionary struggle, transform the world.

### **The Rise of Proletarian Literature in Germany**

Working-class culture and writing emerged in Germany in the wake of the failed 1848 bourgeois revolutions, but it was not until the first workers’ parties, the General German Workers’ Association founded by Ferdinand Lassalle and August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht’s Social Democratic Worker’s Party, formed and merged in the 1860s and 1870s, that a working-class public sphere—based on the associational culture, party structures, and press of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the trade unions of the German Empire— began to take on firm contours. The Antisocialist Laws of 1878–1890 pushed the party underground and into a proliferation of associations, from sports societies to workers’ educational associations to singing groups, and much of what could be called Social Democratic literature in the nineteenth century, consisted of popular science tracts, agitational poetry, and workers’ songs that animated this associational culture. At the same time, the late nineteenth century saw a proliferation of proletarian autobiographies and memoirs. At the same time, little theoretical attention addressed the question of what an autonomous working-class culture might look like, beyond the strategic adaptation of bourgeois forms to working-class audiences’ aims and interests. The SPD, it might be argued, mobilized culture to political ends without providing, before or after World War One, any real basis for a socialist literary or cultural practice

(Schulz, 1993, pp. 5, 46). Indeed, the major literary debates within the party—the 1905 Schiller debate, the Naturalism debates of the 1890s, and the “Tendency Literature” debate between 1910 and 1912—revolved largely around the socialist reception of bourgeois literary positions. The SPD was generally suspicious of overtly political literature and oriented itself toward the classical German canon. Franz Mehring, the SPD’s leading literary critic and member of the editorial board of the party’s theoretical organ *Neue Zeit* [The New Time], partook in the generalized atmosphere of neo-Kantianism that permeated late nineteenth century German intellectual life and attempted to combine historical materialism with Kantian aesthetic theory. Wielding Kantian rigor against the “*Gefühlsästhetik*,” (aesthetics of feeling) *fin de siècle* modernist currents like naturalism and expressionism, he also insisted on the sociological and class character of art as part of the superstructure. Nevertheless, Mehring was unable to reconcile these two tendencies in his thought (Trommler, 1976, pp. 163–172). Mehring indeed subordinated literature and art to the political struggle, a sentiment captured in his well-known aphorism, “the muses fall silent among weapons” (Witte, 1977, p. 11).

Nineteenth century socialist literature served two major functions: workers’ education and promoting working class sociability — in other words, *Bildung* and celebration. At the same time, Sabine Hake points out that the poems, choral songs, memoirs, and workers’ autobiographies of nineteenth century Social Democracy created not only an oppositional working-class public sphere within the German Empire, but also founded what she calls a “*Gefühlssozialismus*,” or emotional socialism, bonding men and women to the political signifier of “the proletariat” through a mode of sentimentality “marked by suffering, motivated by indignation, and united in the demand for recognition” (Hake, 2017, p. 68). Nevertheless, the separation of politics and literature in SPD encouraged the rise of “*Arbeiterdichtung*,” or workers’ poetry, consisting of a largely nonpolitical character and conventional aesthetic nature, which continued through the Weimar Republic. As Alexander Stephen has noted, “Themes like strikes, unemployment, inflation, lock-outs and demonstrations [...] appear [...] only at the margins.” Rather, the poems of *Arbeiterdichter* like Karl Barthel, Karl Bröger, Heinrich Lersch, Alfons Petzold,

and many others treated love and nature, as well as their own biographies in the vein of the bourgeois *Bildungsroman*, and the hyper-masculine heroics of work and war (Stephan, 1977, p. 58). Many of the representative writers of this movement continued their careers with remarkable success under Hitler and the Nazis after 1933 (Ibid., pp. 62–63).

The period around the First World War saw the rise of a leftwing, antiwar tendency in Expressionism, best apparent in the poet Johannes R. Becher, the formation of Berlin Dada, involving a number of early members of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), including Georg Grosz and John Heartfield, as well as a general radical cultural fervor (Willett, 1978). Under the influence of the October Revolution and the Soviet avant-garde and confronted with economic chaos, revolutionary furor, and the White Terror of the Weimar Republic in the early 1920s, the cultural *milieux* that gravitated toward the nascent KPD and the various left radical groups that proliferated in these years were of a very different sort than either the “O Mensch”-prophets of Expressionism or the embourgeoisified *Arbeiterdichter* in the orbit of the SPD, with their increasingly middle-class style and attitudes. Indeed, the first years of the Weimar Republic embodied what critic Axel Eggebrecht described as a “Bolshevik fashion.”<sup>3</sup> 1919 saw the foundation of the Association for Proletarian Culture, which attempted to make connections with the Russian Proletkult movement while promoting the “Proletarian Theater,” Erwin Piscator’s agitprop troupe (Ibid. pp. 177–80). The journal *Die Aktion* published essays by Alexander Bogdonov (Ibid. p. 181). The Malik Verlag, founded by Wieland Herzfelde with his brother John Heartfield as its in-house designer, was set up in the same year and combined a Communist political orientation with a strong left-avant-garde publishing profile (Schulz, 1994, pp. 311–314). Throughout the early 1920s, a heterodox group of writers and artists like Grosz, Berta Lask, and Franz Jung attempted to work out what Hake describes as an aesthetic of proletarian modernism, marked by “...class-based perspective, collaborative ethos, interventionist method, multimedia aesthetic, internationalist orientation” (Hake 2017, p. 206). By 1923 or so, as the revolutionary tide in Germany and Europe ebbed, this Bolshevik fashion, too, receded in the face of New Objectivity’s brisk coolness, with its claims to documentary

neutrality and functionalism (Lethen, 2002). Nevertheless, a core of socialist writers remained, including Becher (who joined the KPD in 1919 and would eventually become the first Minister of Culture of the German Democratic Republic), Herzfelde, Lask and others, joined throughout the decade by figures including Bertolt Brecht, Anna Seghers, Friedrich Wolf, and Ernst Ottwalt. The “Group 25” organized many left-leaning authors, such as Alfred Döblin, Kurt Tucholsky, and Ernst Toller, with Communists like Becher and the “racing reporter” Egon Erwin Kisch. Communist authors also organized the Working Group for Communist Writers within the *Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller* (SDS), the German writers’ union. At the same time, the work of dramatists like Brecht, Friedrich Wolf, and Gustav von Wagenheim demonstrated the growing connection between writers and the revolutionary theater, as did the proliferation of agitprop groups and revolutionary workers’ choirs like Maxim Vallentine’s Red Megaphone, which was affiliated with the composers Hanns Eisler.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the 1920s saw a flood of writings by proletarian authors, including, pamphlets and agitational lyrics, as well as a crop of militant worker autobiographies from writers like Ludwig Turek, Max Hoelz, Oskar Maria Graf, Albert Daudistel, Adam Scharrer, and others, who no longer narrated their stories in the idiom of the Bildungsroman, as had been common for the workers’ autobiographies of the previous century, but instead as exemplary tales of class-based exploitation, violence, and resistance (Safranski and Fähnders 1995, p. 194). The workers’ correspondents’ movement also gained an institutional structure as part of the general reorganization of the KPD press in the 1920s. The “Bolshivization” of the party in the mid-1920s led to a focus on factory newspapers and the cultivation of worker correspondents based on the Soviet model (Lenin’s “Party Organization and Party Literature” had been published in German in 1924). Many of the authors who would shape literature of the early GDR (for example Willi Bredel, Hans Marchwitza, and Eduard Claudius) began their literary careers as workers’ correspondents for the KPD press, and were mentored by the Party’s editors such as Becher and Kurt Kläber in the *Proletarian Feuilleton-Correspondence* (*Ibid.*, p. 207). By 1930 there were somewhere in the neighborhood

of 15,000 worker correspondents in Germany (Ibid., p. 206). Momentum toward formalizing the cultural work of the KPD and the wider international Communist movement came as well from the Third International, which in 1927 hosted the First International Conference of Proletarian and Revolutionary Writers in Moscow, and from the XI Party Congress of the of KPD in the same year, where the building of a “red cultural front” was proclaimed as a goal of the party. Accordingly, the *Bund Proletarisch-Revolutionärer Schriftsteller* (Association of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers), or BPRS, was founded in October of 1928 as the German chapter of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers [IURW] (Kaufmann, 1973, p. 213).

### The BPRS

Formed amidst the general Third Period turn to more clearly-defined communist cultural politics (Eley, 2002), the BPRS was thus part of the emergence of a distinctive and self-conscious proletarian culture in Germany, exemplified by the working-class counter public sphere organized around the KPD. The BPRS was part of a larger proletarian counter-public sphere influenced by the Communist Party, including, besides the above-mentioned KPD press and agitprop groups, the Workers’ Theater Association, the Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists of Germany, The Workers’ Singers’ Association, the Peoples Union for Film Arts, and the Marxist Workers’ Schools, as well as the Communist-aligned press empire of Willi Münzenberg, which included numerous newspapers, publishing houses, and film firms (Kaufmann, 1973, p. 210; Safranski and Fähnders, 1995, p. 212). The BPRS united the movement of revolutionary proletarian writers with radicalized left-bourgeois authors like Becher, Kisch, and Seghers in a single organization, and its journal *Linkskurve* [Left Curve] gave them a platform to distinguish their positions from the broader field of progressive literature in the Weimar Republic. With the founding of the BPRS, “proletarian revolutionary literature emancipated itself from the literature of the bourgeois left, to which it had more or less been considered an appendage,” according to the account provided in the East German *History of German Literature*. “It constituted itself as an autonomous movement,

independent from the bourgeois culture business” (Kaufmann, 1973, p. 213).

Published in the first issue of *Linkskurve*, Becher’s essay “Our Front” lays out the tasks confronting proletarian-revolutionary literature, stressing the need for a systematic application of Marxist thought to literature, criticism, and aesthetics and declaring, “we must take up the struggle against all forms of bourgeois literature, and even against a certain type of so-called working class writing [*Arbeiterdichtung*—HB] (Becher, 1994, p. 236).” Becher also emphasizes proletarian-revolutionary literature’s representative and collaborative character, stressing that “the central character of the proletarian-revolutionary writer is precisely his modesty, the knowledge that he is nothing more than an organizer of the experiences of others,” and that “thousands, uncounted hundreds of thousands, are collaborators in his work (Ibid., p. 235).” The “Draft of an Action Program” for the BPRS, published in 1928 in the KPD newspaper *Die rote Fahne* [The Red Flag] accentuates literature’s class-bound role in the ideological superstructure of a society and sets the following guidelines for proletarian-revolutionary literature: 1) the “winning over, developing, and organizing” of the “hearts and minds of the working class” for the “preparation of the proletarian revolution”; 2) the winning-over, or “at least neutralizing,” of the middle class and intellectuals; 3) combating bourgeois literature and its pretensions of being above politics, such that it tends to “consciously or unconsciously blur class oppositions, often flee from reality and cloak its contents in artistic forms mastered in a craft work fashion by schooled literati”; 4) to privilege content over form, understanding that “literature does not receive its revolutionary value from a revolutionizing of form, but instead the new revolutionary form can and must be an organic product of the revolutionary content;” and 5) to understand their work as “a weapon of agitation and propaganda in the class struggle.”

From these guidelines, the document extrapolates five organizational tasks for the BPRS: 1) facilitating the work of proletarian-revolutionary writers by organizing them; 2) to widen the field of action of this literature and to elaborate its theoretical underpinnings on a dialectical materialist basis; 3) to pursue the struggle

against bourgeois literature practically and theoretically; 4) to promote, train, and encourage working-class youth and worker-correspondents in their literary development; and 5) to learn from and defend the USSR (Klein, 1979, pp. 138–149).

Beyond the commitment to culture as a tool of political struggle and the pledge to active counter-production as a strategy for contesting the bourgeois public sphere, both of the BPRS's constituent groups shared, according to West German critic Helga Gallas, an interest in the "breaking-up of traditional genre forms in the direction of anti-psychologizing, documentary modes of representation and the suppression of traditional principles of literary construction, like the individual protagonist, the artificial plot, individual conflicts, dramatic tension, etc" (Gallas, 1971, p. 96). Echoing the Soviet avant-garde, BPRS initially opposed the proletarian subject's collective nature to bourgeois literature's individual protagonist. Lask formulates this opposition in her essay "On the Tasks of Revolutionary Writing," denouncing the "imperialism of the individual" in bourgeois literature with its ornately crafted subjective interiority as a symptom of reification and fantasies of mastery. "A future collective society will understand," Lask writes, "how to reshape and use that of new value which an individualism driven to extremes has brought forth (Lask, 1979, p. 153)." In the meantime, Lask advocates what she describes as "mass writing and performances," arguing that "... it is necessary to strengthen mass and class feeling, it is necessary to evoke this collective experience: that of the exploited and struggling proletariat, an experience in the individual does not see herself reflected as individual, but where instead the individual experiences herself as integrated part of the class and mass." Lask does not, however, posit such "mass writing" as a generalizable technique but argues that the construction of socialism in the USSR provides a basis for the worker's individual development as social subject that the German proletariat lacks under capitalist social relations (Ibid., p. 154). In a similar vein, critic Andor Gábor framed the so-called *Geburtshilfetheorie*, in which the role of the intellectuals within the BPRS was to act as "midwives" to the rising proletarian literature. For Gábor, literature was inherently class based, serving a particular group of people whose "thoughts and

feelings it depicts, organizes, and develops Gábor, 1979, p. 171).” Gábor argued that a proletarian literature could emerge only from workers themselves, since such a literature must be “experienced from the standpoint of the proletarian-revolutionary class struggle (Ibid., p. 177).” Instead of creating such a literature themselves, intellectuals should facilitate proletarian literature through securing publication venues for, supplying theory to, and tutoring writing workers on matters of literary technique (Gallas, 1971, p. 50). Whereas Gábor called for recruiting and training workers’ correspondents as a step toward building a proletarian-revolutionary literature, others took this position further, seeing proletarian-revolutionary literature as being already present in the KPD’s factory newspapers and in worker correspondents’ texts without the need for intellectual tutelage. It was this type of literary production that Erich Steffen declared in *Linkskurve* to be the essence of proletarian literature. Arguing that bourgeois society “has no further creative power” but only an apparatus of power and exploitation at its disposal, Steffen asserts “only the proletariat itself can create the literature that it needs,” precisely because, as a class, it is oriented to modes of literary practice that contribute to overcoming the social division of labor between work and expertise (Steffen, 1972, p. 650).” Steffen declared, “we have no need to construct a proletarian literature, we have it; we only need to understand that it’s necessary to look for it there where the forces of production are to be found and we must learn to see it and not to look for it or wish to shape it through bourgeois glasses (Ibid., p. 651).” Steffen’s view was representative of many of the worker correspondents in the BPRS who thought, as Gallas puts it: “proletarian literature could only be created from the experience of the workplace, in constant contact with the material production process (Gallas, 1971, p. 50).” What was at stake in these discussions was the elaboration of a specifically working-class literature, emplotting the working class not as a psychologically differentiated grouping of individuals but as a collective protagonist. The aim was to consolidate the class-consciousness of this group through the organization of their experience using small, operative forms like the reportage, agitprop skit, or militant poem (Ibid., p. 82).

## Debating the Proletarian-Revolutionary Novel

This turn to operative genres was at once a sometimes veiled and sometimes open critique of the novel as the privileged bourgeois literary form and an assertion of the need for prose forms more open to the discourses of science, politics, economics, and mass media (Kaufmann, 1973, p. 298). Indeed, Communist worker-correspondents were far from alone in their critique of the novel form around 1930. Bourgeois writers from Alfred Döblin to Thomas Mann spoke about the crisis of the novel (Ibid. p. 297). As critic Silvia Schlenstedt points out, the crisis of the novel is, in fact, an integral aspect of the genre itself. What distinguished the discussion in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s was its explicitly political basis, “now when the crisis of the novel is spoken of, reflection on the social and ideological crisis of the bourgeoisie, the crisis of bourgeois self-consciousness in the course of the 1920s, flows into the discussion (Schlenstedt, 1983, p. 68).” Becher himself wrote in 1929: “the novel strikes me today as a ponderous affair, weirdly clumsy in its response, I have only once in my life (*Levisite*) occupied myself, by way of experiment, with this ‘infinite line.’ With the intervention of Joyce, the novel, the way that we know it today, is not just put into question—it is finished ... The apparatus that our novels have at their service—sociological, natural scientific, psychological—is completely archaic and useless.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, rather than the Joycean stream of consciousness techniques, it was in reportage literature and the “*Tatsachenroman*,” or novel of facts that socialist authors found prose forms that were more clearly anchored in concrete social and historical reality than the novel (Kaufmann, 1973, p. 297). In contrast to much of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which was content simply to reflect reality as a given, members of the BPRS like Kisch, Becher, Weiskopf and the theater director Erwin Piscator stressed a “documentary literature that would provide a Marxist analysis of the segments of reality depicted (Gallas, 1971, 93).” This emphasis on social analysis and political partisanship also differentiated these authors from the discourse of the Soviet Union avant-garde group LEF, which advocated “a literature without a subject, the writing down of details, the montage and assemblage of true facts (Ibid.)” If, under the conditions of Soviet socialist construction, literature could become a “factory of facts,” as was advocated by figures like Sergei

Tretyakov and Boris Arvatov in the 1920s and 1930s, German proletarian-revolutionary writers were still faced with the task of ideological struggle from within bourgeois society.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, all factions within the BPRS understood art as a weapon (to quote the Communist dramatist and reproductive rights activist Friedrich Wolf) in the class struggle, “depicting, organizing, and advancing... the thoughts and feelings” of a particular social class for the purpose of revolutionary struggle.<sup>7</sup>

From mid-1930 through the fall of 1931, the *Linkskurve* debate shifted, as contributions began to mount a critique of the operative, proletarian-specific positions the journal had previously promoted. Steps toward a Hegelian-influenced theory of Marxist aesthetics and a re-orientation from class-specific rhetoric and modes of address to a mass audience appeal paralleled this shift. The BPRS’s leftwing and the worker correspondents contested this turn, and many of the key texts in the ensuing debate responded to the arguments of Georg Lukács, the leading polemicist of the journal’s new direction. Arriving in Berlin from Moscow in the summer of 1931, Lukács mounted a critique of leftist tendencies in the BPRS through his well-known series of articles in *Linkskurve*, which included attacks on the modernist tendencies of reportage and montage in the works of noted BPRS authors Willi Bredel and Ernst Ottwalt. It was also during this period that discussion in the BPRS shifted from a class-specific literature to a mass literature written from a revolutionary standpoint. In his 1930 *Linkskurve* article “Against Economism in Literature,” N. Kraus already advocated widening proletarian literature’s standpoint to address other social classes and for the production of a Marxist-inflected popular literature for the broad working masses, including the petit bourgeoisie, women, youth, peasants, and other groups that might not feel themselves sufficiently addressed in the often combative and masculinist style of BPRS writing. In calling for a mass literature, Kraus defined the proper standpoint for such literature as Marxism itself, a theory of the social totality. “The proletarian literature we need,” Kraus wrote, “must reflect the entire life of human society, the life of all classes from the revolutionary proletarian standpoint” (Kraus, 1979, p. 203). Thus, criteria of the previous period, such as the author’s

class origin, the address to a specifically class-conscious proletarian audience, and the treatment of proletarian themes, were no longer binding (Gallas, 1971, p. 83).

During the course of 1930, *Linkskurve* published a series of articles by Karl August Wittfogel (who would later go on to become an influential anticommunist), which, as Gallas points out, marked the first attempt in Germany to frame a specifically Marxist aesthetic (IBID., P. 111). Wittfogel took the publication of Mehring's 1929 literary historical works as occasion to articulate BPRS's theoretical views. Rather than the notion of art as "the free play of the powers of imagination," which Mehring inherited from Kant, and which Wittfogel denounced as a philosophy of art as its own purpose, Wittfogel proposed a content-based notion of art based on a reading of Hegel. For Wittfogel, it was not Spirit to which art gave objective form as it had for Hegel, but rather political and historical struggle (Ibid.). In Wittfogel's account, it is not art that ends (as it does in Hegel), but bourgeois art, as the truth content of the social moves increasingly toward the proletariat. At the same time, Wittfogel introduced a Hegelian notion of the "essence" of art, which was to disclose the "essence of appearances" through its aesthetic rather than conceptual concreteness, implying an emphasis on major forms like the classical bourgeois novel and drama as opposed to reportage.

Wittfogel's and Kraus's articles appeared as part of a general reorientation of the BPRS in the early 1930s, after the fashion of its Soviet sister organization, RAPP, toward the conventions of the traditional realist novel and its focus on individual psychological representation, breaking with previous *Linkskurve* positions on the mass hero and operative forms (Ibid., p. 64). The novel form gained importance in BPRS theoretical discourse after 1929. This was due, among other factors, to the International Conference of Revolutionary Writers, held in 1930 in the Soviet city of Kharkov and attended by several BPRS members. By this time, the discussions in RAPP were focused on the novel and the depiction of "the living person." The individual was to be portrayed in his or her development and change in the context of social contradictions (Murphy, 1991, pp. 30–31). The category of the living person, with its emphasis on psychological character development,

was combined with what the 1931 BPRS draft program referred to as “dialectical realism,” a mode of representation linked to “the dialectic of objective development itself” (Klein, 1979, p. 435). This is to say the proletarian experience was theoretically subordinated to, or more positively sublated within, Marxism-Leninism as a theory of the *whole* social totality in its development, and manifested in individual, psychologically rounded characters. The draft program also emphasizes the novel form over smaller operative forms, like mass performances and reportage. Advocating “the great proletarian work of art,” the program calls for texts that “capture the proletarian everyday life in its mutual interaction with the life of the other classes in such a deep, all-around fashion that in this everyday life the great driving forces of social development become visible and manifest.” The program continues by asserting that proletarian-revolutionary literature poses the question of “handling all the problems of the entirety of society from the standpoint of the proletariat (Ibid., 432).” Becher programmatically summed up this re-orientation in the theoretical and practical work of the *Bund* in a *Linkskurve* article published in late 1931. The article “Our Turn,” begins by citing the August 1931 Plenum of the RAPP and proceeds to summarize the Kharkov Conference, and the criticisms voiced there of the “backwardness” of proletarian-revolutionary literature to this point. Becher goes on to evoke the need for a socialist mass literature to combat the bourgeois culture industry and to call on proletarian-revolutionary authors to master Marxist theory (Becher, 1979, pp. 409–423).

This turn toward the social totality, as opposed to a literature of proletarian militancy and class struggle, returned to the debates about literary tendency in nineteenth-century Marxism, but with a crucial difference. Earlier Social Democratic critics, with Mehring being foremost among them in Germany, were skeptical of tendentious art and tended to advocate the appropriation of German classicism as a part and parcel of proletarian *Bildung*. Returning to this question of the relationship between politics and literature in the *Linkskurve*, Lukács criticized this Social Democratic position as itself undialectical. For Lukács, the very notion of tendency implies a reified opposition between tendency art on the one hand and pure *l'art pour l'art* on the other, ideologically reflecting the

capitalist division of labor in its opposition of art to morality and thus also of the individual to society. Against this alternative's false choice, which lay in either renouncing tendency and producing a pure art rendered all the more tendentious by bracketing out the social or in straightforward moralizing, Lukács proposes the term "partisanship," or *Parteilichkeit*, as an objective grasp of the social contradictions that shape both the subjective and objective sides of life and form. For a writer proceeding from the viewpoint of dialectical materialism, in other words, the question of tendency does not arise, "for in his depiction, a depiction of objective reality with its real driving forces and the real developmental tendencies, there is no space for an 'ideal,' whether moral or aesthetic" (Lukács, 1980b, p. 41). This turn from a specifically proletarian viewpoint to one of a Marxist depiction of the social totality did not necessarily imply a formal corollary, but it did, in its evocation of the social totality as the horizon of representation, imply a shift in emphasis from operative literary forms to more traditional and closed ones. Thus, Lukács's criticism of proletarian author Will Bredel's novels centers on the contradiction between what Lukács sees as their properly broad narrative framework and the residual reportage-like quality that he finds in Bredel's characters' language (Lukács, 1980, p. 24). "This abstract treatment of language," Lukács states, "necessarily leads many of Bredel's attempts to come to grips with concrete reality into absurdity and kitsch (Ibid., p. 26)." For Lukács, this is not a question of Bredel's talent or technique, but a symptom of an approach that is dialectically and creatively unable to dissolve "the rigid appearance of things" and reveal everyday life in its their process character (Ibid., pp. 26–27).

What Lukács means by this process of dialectical dissolution of rigid appearance into social processes and its relationship to narrative is more clearly articulated in his piece "Reportage or Portrayal," a criticism of the *Tatsachenroman, Denn sie wissen, was sie tun* (For They Know What They Do, 1932) by BPRS member and Brecht collaborator Ernst Ottwalt. Lukács makes it clear that he is taking Ottwalt's novel, an expose of the Prussian legal system, as exemplary of the reportage novel as a literary genre, represented as well by writers like Upton Sinclair, Sergei Tretyakov, and Ilya Ehrenburg (Lukács, 1980a, p. 45). The reportage

novel, Lukács writes, conceives a social product as ready-made and final,” falling victim to everyday life’s “fetishistic appearance of autonomy.” As a result, the proletariat becomes an impotent object of capitalist modernity’s differentiated systems, from the factory to the courthouse, rather than the historical agent of a class struggle through which these very forms arise (Ibid. p. 54). “Portrayal of the overall process,” on the other hand, “is the precondition for a correct construction” in terms of the novel, “because only portrayal of the overall process can dissolve the fetishism of economic and social forms of capitalist society, so that these appear as what they actually are, i.e. (class) relations between people (Ibid., p. 53).” Lukács uses Tolstoy’s work to give an example of portrayal, precisely because Tolstoy is able to integrate a seemingly contingent detail into the causality of the overall narrative while avoiding the arbitrariness of reportage, which focuses in on a single constellation of documentary details, mistaking empirical reality for the social and historical processes that the surface appearances of social life conceal. Such a portrayal of “the social process in its dynamic totality (Ibid., p. 58)” clearly presupposed large epic forms that can accommodate the portrayal of processes and interactions in between various social groups in their duration. For Lukács, this was the classic bourgeois novel. Ottwalt, Brecht, Lask, and others proposed different ways of solving the problem of forms that would be modern, partisan, connected to proletarian experience and capable of grasping larger social and historical processes. Brecht’s notion of the epic theater addresses precisely these issues. Nevertheless, by 1932, such alternative positions were largely pushed to the margins of the debate in *Linkskurve*. By the time that the Nazis drove the BPRS underground, *Linkskurve* had already arrived at many of the positions that would later be codified as Socialist Realism: a socialist perspective, stylistic realism, and an emphasis on classical bourgeois form (Gallas, 1971, p. 64).

## Revisiting the Proletarian-Revolutionary Novel

There are, though, two observations to make here. First, it is misleading to read the debates in *Linkskurve* as a guide to BPRS

authors' literary production, as the relationship between theory and practice in the BPRS was complex and contradictory. BPRS writers were not producing realist novels in the Lukácsian mold, but, in their radical decentering of bourgeois subjectivity and narrative, articulating a distinctly post-bourgeois epic form. Secondly, German proletarian-revolutionary literature remained linked to what Peter Bürger describes as the historical avant-garde, with its challenge to the institutions of bourgeois art and its claims to autonomy from politics, labor, and everyday life. Likewise, BPRS literature partakes of the historical avant-garde's predilection for techniques of fragmentation, montage, and reportage (Bürger, 1984). As John Roberts has argued, the revolutionary workers' movement provides a kind of alternative genealogy for these techniques. With its genres of workers' correspondence and agitprop, they were concerned to "close down the distance between subject and object, near and far, part and whole" central to bourgeois aesthetics and all of which aspired overcoming the boundary between art, labor, and life (Roberts, 2003, p. 53). One might argue, then, that it is precisely this avant-garde remainder to which Lukács objected in the works of Brecht, Ottwalt, and others. These writers, who had little interest in modernist aesthetics per se, nevertheless maintained a fidelity to the avant-garde aspiration to operativity, in the sense that Walter Benjamin famously evoked in his essay "The Author as Producer": not as a question of the political tendency of the author, "but on the basis of his place in production (Benjamin, 2005, p. 773)." The author's place in production for Benjamin does not describe a sociological fact—one doesn't have to be a lathe turner to write about striking metal workers, but a relationship to the division of labor between author and audience. For Benjamin, the revolutionary artist is one who works on "socializing the intellectual means of production," breaking down the boundaries between the literary specialist and the working class (Ibid., p. 780). This is, I would argue, the role assumed, again with varying degrees of virtuosity, by proletarian-revolutionary novelists in organizing and articulating the German working class's collective experience.

The proletarian revolutionary novels that appeared around 1930 fell into two broad groupings. The first narrated the World War I and the workers' uprisings of the postwar period

across Germany. Examples include Adam Scharrer's war novel *Vaterlandslose Gesellen* [Fellows Without a Fatherland, 1930], Ludwig Turek's *Ein Prolet erzählt* [A Proletarian tells his Story, 1930] Hans Marchwitza's *Sturm über Essen* [Storm over the Ruhr, 1930] and Karl Grünberg's *Brennende Ruhr* [Burning Ruhr, 1928], which narrate the Ruhr Uprising of 1920, and Otto Gotsche's *Märzstürme* [March Storms, 1933], a novel about the disastrous 1921 March Action of the KPD in Central Germany. The second major theme of the proletarian-revolutionary novel was the everyday struggles of the Weimar Republic—rationalization and unemployment, strikes and demonstrations, police and fascist violence, poverty, squalor, and boredom. Willi Bredel's novels about factory strikes and neighborhood self-defense fall under this group, as do a number of novels about unemployed and proletarian youth, including Rudolf Braune's *Das Mädchen auf der Orga-Privat* [The Girl on the Orga-Privat, 1930], *Junge Leute in der Stadt* [Young People in the City, 1932] and Walter Schönstedt's *Kämpfende Jugend* [Youth in Struggle, 1932]. Yet another subset of this socialist *Gegenwartsliteratur*, or literature of contemporary life, was the burgeoning proletarian-revolutionary children's literature; for example, Lisa Tetzner's *Hans Urian* and Alex Wedding's *Ede und Unku*, both published in 1931. Many of the novels of the proletarian struggles of the early 1920s can be read as attempts to "make sense of the workers' experience of sudden empowerment and unlimited possibility, flowed by crushing, devastating defeat" through a set of revisionist narrative strategies that restage postwar uprisings as "temporary political defeat and inevitable historical victory" and do so through an overdetermined salvaging of the codes of proletarian masculinity (Hake, 2017, p. 179). In other words, these novels develop and cultivate the character-type of the "hard as steel Bolshevik" as compensation for historical defeat, in a manner not dissimilar to the work of Mike Gold in the US proletarian literature of the same period. As Rohrwasser has pointed out, this character type also responded to the humiliations of industrial labor and projects out in Communist self-representation in the public sphere (Rohrwasser, 1975, 106). These characteristics carry over into proletarian *Gegenwartsliteratur* as well, though in both sets of

novels the experience of women as both wage laborers and as unwaged toilers play a key role; for example, Hans Marchwitza's *Walzwerk* [1932], Willi Bredel's *Rosenhofstrasse* [1931], and Franz Krey's *Maria und der Paragraph* [1931]. At the same time, BPRS novels presented a specifically plebeian and proletarian depiction of capitalist modernity, employing what might be termed a "subaltern modernism," or "social modernism," to borrow the phrasing of Michael Denning who wrote, "as writers abandoned established family plots and the individual *Bildungsroman* to create an experimental collective novel based on documentary and reportage (Denning, 2004, p. 67)."<sup>8</sup> Modernism and realism alike stretch to their limits in the face of working-class experience.

In this sense, I would argue proletarian-revolutionary literature can be understood as a variant of what Fredric Jameson, in a development of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of minor literatures, calls oppositional realism. Put briefly, oppositional realisms mark the intense investment in the limits of dominant forms by "minor literatures," which undermine and adapt these dominant forms without fully moving beyond their generic logic, which simultaneously isolates such literatures through their own specialized idioms and forms of address (Jameson, 1992, pp. 174–175). Historically, oppositional realisms mark the historical emergence of new identities and class ideologies. "The moment of realism," Jameson writes, "can be grasped...as the conquest of a kind of cultural, ideological, and narrative literacy by a new class or group (Ibid., 156)." Realism is a moment in the larger history of cultural revolution that the emergent class carries out against the ideologies of the previously dominant class, mapping out a newly forming set of social relationships. "The function of any cultural revolution will be to invent the life habits of the new social world, to de-program subjects trained in the older one (Ibid., p. 164)." Realism was the central notion underpinning both the proletarian-revolutionary novel and its surrounding critical discourse. In his "A 'Radical' Replies," a programmatic reply to a 1928 article by Willy Hass in *Die Literarische Welt*, Becher already describes proletarian-revolutionary literature as a guide through the "environment of schematic, abstract, impenetrable relationships" that constitute bourgeois society

(Becher, 1979, p. 144). At stake in proletarian-revolutionary literary development was not only a challenge to traditional bourgeois aesthetic and ideological norms, but also an attempt to remap social reality from the proletariat's point of view. The complex task that such a literature faced, then, is the one Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge sketched out in reference to the KPD more generally vis-à-vis the public sphere of the Weimar Republic: to evolve a working-class politics that can at once: 1) take control of the public sphere to prevent its occupation by the enemy; 2) construct a counterpublic sphere of the working class. These two projects—one of hegemony and one of cultural revolution—that must be enacted at one and the same time, appeal, however, to two different sets of motives and rhetoric, the first to discipline and the second to spontaneity (Negt and Kluge, 1993, p. 211). The turn from smaller operative genres directed precisely at the revolutionary segment of the working class to the proletarian-revolutionary mass novel, which incorporated many of the forms of address of operative literature while seeking to situate these forms in broader epic narrative structures, was a conscious attempt (even in the face of Lukács and other *Linkskurve* theorists) by BPRS authors to find literary answers to this double imperative.

1930 saw the launch of the Red-One-Mark-Novel series, published by the International Workers' Press. These novels were intended as a counterweight to bourgeois trivial literature, describing the everyday life of the masses through the viewpoint of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Introducing this series, Otto Biha evokes the threat of bourgeois "reactionary literary trash" that stalks the working class. Through the factory yards, waiting rooms, subways, tenements, and homeless shelters of the republic, "these mass novels of classless idylls and economic peace parade their slogans" of "personal diligence, love, fatherland, and property," making them "more dangerous than the so-called great literature of the bourgeoisie (Biha, 1994, pp. 239–40)." In order to repel this literature, the "red mass novel" will provide, Biha asserts, Marxist genre literature for the masses, "no less gripping and entertaining;" a literature that "instead of depicting personal conflicts and private passions, gives shape to the conflicts of our time and the struggle of the masses by depicting the fate of individuals

in their actual interactions inside the class struggle in society (Ibid.).” In other words, the turn to the novel was motivated less by a commitment to the Tolstoyan realism advocated after 1931 by the Becher-Lukács group at *Linkskurve* than it was through the attempt to appropriate popular forms of capitalist mass culture to a project of proletarian hegemony and socialist cognitive mapping. The proletarian novel differed from its bourgeois counterpart, FC Weiskopf pointed out, in its documentary style and through the “capturing of collective actions and collective feelings” instead of individual psychological portrayals (Weiskopf and Hirschfeld, 1979, p. 215). Likewise, proletarian novels’ plots were driven more by social than individual processes (Ibid., p. 216). The third important innovation that Weiskopf saw in the proletarian novel was the “widening of the realm of language” to include Communist movement language, trade union and factory culture, and working class speech in general (Ibid.). This is not a content issue so much as it is one of form. For Weiskopf, these novels were no longer novels in a strict sense, but hybrid post-novelistic epic forms: half novel-half biography, half protocol-half novel, half reportage-half novel (Ibid, p. 215). In this sense, as Hanno Möbius argues, the Red-One-Mark-Novel grew more or less directly out of the Workers’ Correspondence Movement and preserved the forms of working class communication developed in the KPD’s factory and street newspapers (Möbius, 1974, p. 172). This is a form of communication largely arraigned chronologically, avoiding psychological depth, but instead interjects theoretical concepts into everyday situations, mediating between interpretation and experience and allowing workers to generalize out from their own experiences (Ibid., pp. 174–176).

At the same time, the proletarian novel is intensely saturated with descriptions and evocations of states of feeling; it is, as Sabine Hake writes, a “laboratory of political emotions” (Hake 2017, 263). In their affectively saturated descriptions of working-class daily life, these novels offer an archive of feeling for the proletarian experience of modernity, characterized by confinement, violence, precarity, and superfluity—what historian Alf Lüdtke describes as “daily combat at close quarters” (Lüdtke, 1995, p. 213). This is a working class modernity lived out, as Karl

Grünberg puts it in *Brennende Ruhr*, “between the dark coal pits, ugly living holes, hazy bars, and musty bed chambers” (Grünberg, 1959, p. 106). Rather than condemning proletarian-revolutionary literature for bracketing out “domestic spaces” and private spaces to focus on factories and mines, as Rohrwasser does for example, I think it is more productive to describe it as a literature that struggles, not always successfully, to grasp narratively the ways that proletarian experience exceeded the stereotype of the revolutionary, male, industrial worker and to portray the whole of proletarian experience, which is one of exploitation not only in production, but in reproduction in neighborhoods and homes. As the great economic rationalizations of the mid-1920s rendered the KPD largely a party of the militant unemployed (Weitz, 1997, p. 131), depictions of production itself in proletarian-revolutionary literature are often framed in terms of a civil war in the form of a direct bodily experience of the relative extraction of surplus value. “The ten thousand that stream in and out of dozens of factory gates in the mornings and evenings,” writes proletarian-revolutionary author Adam Scharrer in his *Vaterlandslose Gesellen*, “are the face of war in civilian guise” (Scharrer, 1960, p. 94). Capitalist production itself figures in the context of the War as the unmediated production of “*Selbstvernichtung*,” or self-annihilation (Ibid., p. 95). At the same time, these novels connect the violence of production and exploitation to that of working-class *reproduction*: the abjection and claustrophobia of the proletarian milieu, powerfully evoked in Klaus Neukrantz’s *Barricades in Wedding*:

Between the black walls and narrow yards flowed the turbid waters of the Panke. A sewer for factory waste in which the children bathed in summer... the cramped rooms contained several people apiece. A fetid air enveloped the faces of the sleepers. Stairs, passages, bedrooms, yards—all intolerably crowded together, the smell of humanity permeating walls, cracks, partitions; a compost of tenants, sub-tenants, lodgers—and children, the curse of the street! (Neukrantz, 1979, p. 16)

Such descriptions of remaindered proletarian space reinforce portrayals of working-class domesticity as constant exposure to

crisis and precarity, a labor of wearing down and survival. This experience of modernity as precarity and the exhausting labors of survival links German proletarian literature to global proletarian literature more broadly, echoing similar descriptions in the work of Tillie Olson or Takiji Kobayashi. Proletarian modernity is thus characterized not only as material crisis and deprivation, but also a crisis of meaning; it is a world in which, to quote Seghers, at any moment, “things had just gotten worse and less intelligible” (Seghers, 1935, 159, 159). In *Schlacht vor Kohle*, Marchwitza, a master of narrative abjection, describes proletarian domesticity as a “giant grave” in which his character Frau Ragnitzki “slowly suffocated” (Marchwitza, 1980, p. 77). Books like Bredel’s *Das Eigentumsparagraf* or Walter Schönstedt’s *Kämpfende Jugend* describe the “meaningless and empty life” of permanent unemployment, as those remaindered from capitalist production perceive themselves as “completely superfluous” (Bredel, 1961, p. 117). Proletarian-revolutionary literature thus gains its contemporary relevance both in its concern of what Nancy Fraser describes as the background conditions for exploitation, that is to say reproductive labor,<sup>9</sup> as well as the recognition that, as Denning puts it, “bare life, wasted life, disposable life, precarious life, superfluous life” (Denning, 2010, p. 79), are better descriptors for the longue durée of proletarian experience than is the Fordist imaginary of “normal life.”<sup>10</sup> Even in those novels depicting heroic proletarian struggle in the factories and the streets, the experience of surplus working-class populations in the context of the economic rationalization and mass unemployment of the time—those who “drop out... of the contemporary production process... as by-products... the waste that’s left over,” to quote Siegfried Kracauer (1930)—is never far from the narrative’s surface.

Finally, a sense of coequality characterizes this literature, in the sense developed by Marike Janzen: the political impetus behind a set of global literary organizations, institutions, and authors that aspired not to circulate through the world literature market, but to transform the world itself based on empathic notions of the world as the shared space and time of a unified revolutionary struggle (Janzen, 2018, p. 13). These novels map Germany as a proletarian social space, depicting specific sites of struggle—Berlin, the Ruhr, Central Germany, Hamburg—within the

context of a world revolutionary process (Kaufmann, 1973, 319). Indeed, the BPRS was itself part of what Denning describes as a working class and plebeian global culture that shadowed the global cultural idioms of high modernism and commodity aesthetics, a “worldwide movement of plebeian artists and writers to create a proletarian culture, a socialist realism” (Denning, 2004, 32). As Hake points out, this literature was a self-consciously articulated attempt at “developing the proletarian novel in critical dialogue with new literary experiments in the Soviet Union and as part of international networks of exchange” (Hake, 2017, p. 263). Janzen has coined the term *solidarian authorship* for this kind of literary endeavor, describing the leftist author “as collaborating participant within an international project, one supported at various times by international institutions, to build solidarity and thus to transform the world into a place where people are conscious of their interconnection and act in the collective interest” (Janzen, 2018, p. 3). Sonali Perera points out the necessarily fragmented and discontinuous character of this mode of authorship in working-class literature and of any attempt to frame an alternative genealogy of working-class literature as world literature. “Working-class internationalism,” she writes, is “a necessarily incomplete totality,” characterized as it is by “broken lines, interrupted narratives, and the inability to formalize meaning” (2014, p. 7). It is, however, precisely this necessarily unfinished form of the proletarian-revolutionary international project that renders it irreducibly collaborative, rooted in a precarious collective subject practicing a narrative mode of “willful deauthorization, self-criticism, altruism, effacement, anonymity, generosity, humility” that “self consciously figures an ethics of historical materialism (Ibid., p. 11).” Coevality and solidarian authorship are also a matter of conceiving the world as shared time. Janzen cites a short piece by Seghers from 1932, “Kleines Bericht aus meinem Werkstatt” [A Short Report from My Workshop], in which Seghers notes, that “... the first of May is celebrated around the world *at the same time*, but it is celebrated *differently* in each country” (Janzen, 2018, p. 1). Registering shared time and difference, I would argue, is central to understanding proletarian-revolutionary authorship, and, indeed, in his work on German proletarian-revolutionary

literature of the period, Christoph Schaub described this approach as the foundation of an international world literary practice as much as the institutional structures of German and international working class writing in this period (2019).

If the high road of this internationalism led from Berlin to Moscow for German proletarian-revolutionary literature, it would be a mistake to provincialize this corpus. These novels are intensely concerned with locality—a particular street, factory, prison, or mine but always concerned to relate these enclosed spaces to the global context of class struggle (Jameson, 2005, pp. xxx–xxxii). One thinks here of the program of international lists of publishers like Malik Verlag or Münzenberg’s *Universum-Bücherei für Alle* [Universum—Library for Everyone]. The most explicit attempt to frame this kind of proletarian internationalism novelistically was Anna Seghers’s first full-length novel, *Die Gefährten* [The Wayfarers, 1932], set in the aftermath of the revolutionary wave that followed the First World War. The novel begins with the Hungarian Soviet Republic’s defeat, and follows a group of Hungarian, Italian, Bulgarian, Chinese, and Polish revolutionaries, political prisoners, and refugees dispersed across Europe over the next decade. Woven through the tales of this revolutionary diaspora are narratives of global working-class struggles, from Berlin to Moscow to China, with Warsaw, the Carpathian Mountains, and factories of northern Italy in between. *Die Gefährten* is a singular contribution to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century attempt to create a popular and political imaginary for working-class internationalism, yet even a work of local scope, Berta Lask’s 1927 “optimistic tragedy,” *Leuna 1921*, about the Central German workers’ uprising of that year closes with the chorus of nationally unmarked workers evoking a global-class struggle: “Strike in Germany.—Strike in England.—Strike in America.—Revolution in Java.—Revolution in China. Victory of the Peoples Army. Red Asia” (Lask, 1961, pp. 143–144). Reportage writer Egon Erwin Kisch’s international reports from the US, the USSR, Australia, and across Asia contributed to the creation of a global, plebeian, and revolutionary counterpublic sphere (Kaufmann, 1973, p. 300).

The tension between this revolutionary horizon and the counterpublic sphere in which the BPRS, and the KPD itself, operated

is what gives proletarian-revolutionary novels their frisson. As the critic Helga Gallas has noted, “even the function of literature to deliver formulas and orientation symbols for a certain social camp consciousness and strengthen group consciousness could not be understood for proletarian-revolutionary literature in the sense of an expression and consolidation of one’s own living situation, but rather as the abolition of the same” (Gallas, 1971, 74). Despite its revolutionary ethos and attempts at mass forms of address, German proletarian-revolutionary literature remains stuck in this contradiction between the cultivation of proletarian class-consciousness and its self-abolition. By the early 1930s, the BPRS had already come up against the limits of a revolutionary cultural practice based on proletarian identification; first, the problem of the increasing organic composition of capital, expelling workers in increasing numbers from the direct points of production, and secondly, the wide diffusion of a capitalist mass culture, both of these points compounded, of course, by over a decade of fascist terror that destroyed all autonomous working-class organizations in Germany, save scattered pockets and networks of underground resistance. Nevertheless, the collapse of this proletarian counter-public sphere was not historically inevitable, and rather than condemning proletarian revolutionary literature for not rising to the level of socialist realist or new left insights, it is perhaps more productive to examine the kinds of connections this literature was attempting to make, even if it often does it badly. For this reason, it is not enough to read this literature purely in terms of what it asserts. To echo Perera, the breaks and discontinuities reveal as much as the didacticism with which these novels are replete. It must also be read against the grain. And yet, this too is not enough; we must also read the trend of that grain historically. Both in their intentions and in their lapses, these novels are doing work.

## Endnotes

1. This essay draws on the first chapter of my *Epic and Exile: Novels of the German Popular Front 1933–1945* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

2. Proletkult became a keyword in the GDR for leftist avant-garde tendencies in art and culture that had been ostensibly sublated by Socialist Realism and did not necessarily refer specifically to the Russian Proletkult movement.
3. Cited in Safranski and Fähnders, 1995. 174.
4. This account draws from Kaufmann, 1973, pp. 206–213.
5. Cited in *Geschichte der deutsche Literatur* 1973, 307. Becher had published the experimental novel ( $\text{CHCl}=\text{CH}$ )<sub>3</sub> *As (Levisite) oder Der einzig gerechte Krieg* [( $\text{CHCl}=\text{CH}$ )<sub>3</sub> *As (Lewisite) or The Only Just War*], a vision of war and revolution at once utopian and visionary, in 1926.
6. See *October* 118: *Soviet Factography, a Special Issue* (Fall 2006) and *Russian Futurism through its Manifestoes 1912–1928*. 1988. Translated by Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, 189–280. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
7. Gábor 1979, 171.
8. The term “social modernism” is evoked in Denning, 1997, 122.
9. On reproductive and feminized labor, see Fraser, Nancy. 2014, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Extended Conception of Capitalism,” 55–72. *New Left Review* 86.
10. See Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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