CfP: The “fiery theological nucleus” of Marxism: Brecht, Müller, Benjamin

„Sie kennen sicher den Text von Benjamin über den theologischen Glutkern des Marxismus...“

(Heiner Müller)

You probably know the text by Benjamin about the fiery theological nucleus of Marxism. But even if you don’t – which is likely, since it does not exist – then you may sense that Heiner Müller is referring to the political theology of Marxism. The invented Benjaminian quote about this fiery theological nucleus was actually coined by Adorno in a critical response to Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* and as such complicates this theoretical rift within left-wing thought. Beyond the well-known (and petty) controversies over Benjamin’s influence and his legacy, Müller’s insistence on the metaphor of the *Glutkern* transposes these theoretical concerns into questions of artistic practice.   
  
The relation between terror and play is at the heart of tragedy both in its ancient and modern forms. According to Müller, this fiery nucleus also constitutes terrorism when it kills with humility ("Töten mit Demut, das ist der theologische Glutkern des Terrorismus."). However, in his later interviews (e.g., “Da trinke ich lieber Benzin zum Frühstück”) and in many of his plays/texts (e.g., *Der Auftrag*, *Bildbeschreibung*), Müller highlights the ambivalent features of the “fiery theological nucleus” of Marxism and describes its fundamental essence as the feverish striving for “redemption through annihilation”. In this sense, the *Glutkern* becomes an ambiguous concept that at least partly undermines its own justification, because the just struggle of the oppressed for liberation inherently bears the seed of inhumanity, devastation, and self-destructive absurdity.   
  
How do authors shape their creative engagement with and their reflections on the “fiery theological nucleus” of Marxism, and how do they assess its implications? This political-theological complex of terror and redemption through revolution has received attention in Brecht's Lehrstücke (e.g., *Die Maßnahme*), Müller's reception of it (e.g., *Mauser*), as well as a theoretical discourse (Schmitt to Agamben to Mbembe). Instead of a theoretical reappraisal, this panel attempts to shed light on the relationship between terror and play (Blumenberg) as it is connected in ancient tragedy and appears through its modern variant (Menke, Lehmann) as play within play, especially in the Lehrstück. More broadly, the (supposedly) necessary murder for the (supposedly) just cause is an issue of immediate topicality and oppressive seriousness, which raises questions about the forms of aesthetic play through which such violent dialectics can be thought and worked through.  
  
For this panel, which is organized in cooperation with the International Brecht Society (IBS), we seek contributions that engage with the political-theological complex in the context of Marxism and theatrical/literary practice in Brecht, Müller, and beyond. Possible works to consider:  
- Bertolt Brecht: *Fatzer* & *die Lehrstücke*  
- Heiner Müller: *Mauser*, *Der Auftrag*, *Bildbeschreibung*, Interviews  
- Walter Benjamin: *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*  
- Augusto Boal: *Theater of the Oppressed*  
- Elfriede Jelinek: *Ulrike Maria Stuart*  
- Peter Weiss: *Marat/Sade*  
- Alexander Kluge: *Massensterben in Venedig*  
- Wole Soyinka: *A Dance in the Forest*, *Death and the King’s Horseman*  
- Curzio Malaparte: *Das Kapital*  
- Sarah Kane: *Blasted*  
- Jean Genet: *The Screens*, *The Blacks*  
- Gillo Pontecorvo: *The Battle of Algiers*  
- Werner Herzog: *Even Dwarfs Started Small*  
- Jordan Peele: *Us*  
  
Please submit 250-word proposals and brief biographical details by 1 March 2024. For more information, contact: andrefischer [at] wustl.edu and jpohlmann@uni-bremen.de.  
  
Papers may be presented in either German or English.  
To be a panel participant, presenters must become members of the German Studies Association before 18 March 2024.