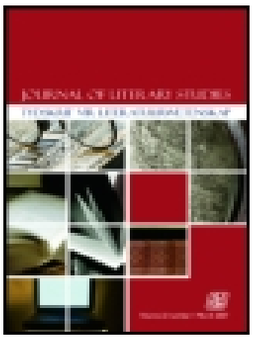

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Ulrike Kistner

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The Politics of Canon Formation in Literary Theory – for Example: Realism and the Popular Front*

Ulrike Kistner

Summary

This article shows how literary theory has been entangled in the process of canon formation, with particular reference to the Expressionism or Realism Debate in Germany in the 1930's. Certain positions expounded in this debate have found their way into the manifestoes of cultural activisms in South Africa in the 1980's. They rely on populist tactics which are seen to be necessitated by both anti-fascist and anti-imperialist struggles. This article problematises the equation of apartheid and fascism, and the assumption of a form of resistance common to both.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word, met spesifieke verwysing na die Ekspressionisme of Realisme debat in Duitsland gedurende die dertigerjare, aangetoon hoe literatuurteorie verstrengel geraak het in die proses van kanonvorming. Sekere posisies wat in hierdie debat uiteengesit is, het hulle weg gevind na die manifesto's van kulturele aktivismes in Suid-Afrika in die tagtigerjare. Hulle steun op populistiese taktiek wat genoodsaak word deur sowel anti-fascistiese as anti-imperialistiese "struggles". In hierdie artikel word die gelykstelling tussen apartheid en fascisme en die veronderstelling van 'n vorm van weerstand by albei geproblematiseer.

Echoing the perennial lament of literature teachers over "The Resistance to Theory", Paul de Man examines the reasons for this resistance which lie at the heart of the subject of literary theory. Literary theory does not assume a referential relation to a stable object; as De Man notes, "...the main theoretical interest of literary theory consists in the impossibility of its definition" (De Man 1986: 3). To the question why theory of literature is eyed skeptically as an unholy ally of literary studies as national philology, De Man adduces a partial answer:

> [Literary theory] upsets rooted ideologies by revealing the mechanics of their workings; it goes against a powerful philosophical tradition of which aesthetics is a prominent part; it upsets the established canon of literary works and blurs the borderline between literary and non-literary discourse. By implication, it may also reveal the links between ideologies and philosophy.
>
> (De Man 1986: 11)

To assume, however, that literary theory itself is exempt from the stabilised truths and establishments which it questions, would be a foregone conclusion. In this article, I would like to show how literary theories have been and can be entangled in the politics of canon formation, with effects much more far-reaching than those resulting from the stabilisation and closure of any particular object of literary studies.

A particularly striking example of canon formation in literary theory is that pertaining to the Expressionism or Realism Debate which was first tabled in

the 1930's, but extended beyond that into positions debated in controversies around cultural politics today. At first glance, the politics of canon formation in relation to the Realism Debate plays itself out in terms of a number of exclusions. In most anthologies, summaries and surveys of the variety of "Marxism and Literature", or "Marxism and Literary Criticism" (or worse still) "Marxist Literary Criticism" or "Marxist Literary Theory", it is mainly the polemics, aesthetics and doctrinairerieties that have earned themselves the label "Marxist", largely to the exclusion of the contributions of Brecht, Benjamin, Bloch, Eisler and others to the Debate. (Brecht's contribution usually appears in more specifically designated volumes under the subject of "Theory of Drama and Theatre".)

Wherever the Realism Debate is treated in greater detail, it is generally presented as a debate on particular orientations in aesthetics. It is thereby placed in a political vacuum; the political strategies that shape cultural activisms are factors that hardly receive attention. For this reason, too, scholars who have familiarised themselves with the Realism Debate on aesthetic terms, would be largely unable to detect the political and cultural conjunctures which have informed that Debate.

Having learnt to view popular frontist tactics in anti-fascist struggles as a closed chapter to be assigned to the grand narrative of History, they are unable to critically respond to the debates, policies and dictates issuing from organised political cultural activisms in South Africa today. In an attempt to arrive at a critical orientation, I would like to open this chapter again, by linking contemporary South African cultural activism and its manifestoes to what I perceive as popular front tactics; and by comparing both aspects to anti-fascist political and cultural struggles in the 1930's.

In the framework of the anti-apartheid stance in the broad field of culture, it was largely the 1987 Culture in Another South Africa Conference which set the scene for most cultural groupings presently operating in South Africa. Flimsy as the Conference Report appears (for its lack of debate and its lack of critical theoretically and politically founded positions), it lays down stringent guidelines which have been adopted in the constitutions of a large number of video filming, journalistic, theatre, poetry, music and art groups. If one were to draw up a lexicon of terms featuring prominently in the Report, one would come up with the following repertoire:

- "mass democratic movement"/"national liberation movement"/"national democratic movement"
- "struggle for national liberation"/"national democratic struggle"/"people's struggle"
- "people's culture"/"democratic culture"/"national democratic cultural organisation"/"authentic democratic culture"/"true Culture in Another South Africa.

The characteristics ascribed, with definitive force, to "the struggle" – national, popular, democratic – are mapped prescriptively onto the field of cultural production. The Resolutions declare that "culture is an integral part of the national democratic struggle" (Resolution) (Campschreur & Divendal

1989: 216) and therefore "culture must be viewed in the context of people's struggle" (Resolution 4) (Campschreur & Divendal 1989: 217).

The cement bonding the particular descriptions of the state of the arts in South Africa and the dictates formulated for cultural production, is derived from a particular strategic consideration: apartheid and opposition to apartheid. These two elements of the foundation of a supposedly "alternative" culture are defined in close correspondence to each other. This is comprehensively formulated in the first point of the Preamble of the CASA Conference:

> ...in the course of the struggle of our people against racist domination and exploitation there has developed a vibrant culture, rooted in South African realities and steeped in democratic values, in opposition to the racist culture associated with the apartheid regime. This democratic culture is characterized by a spirit of internationalism and a humanist perspective that derives from the best of the cultural heritage of the various peoples that make up the South African population.
>
> (Campschreur & Divendal 1989: 214)

A modifying clause is subsequently added to the notion of "the spirit of internationalism":

> We hereby pledge to assert a humanist, internationalist but distinctively South African character of people's culture which draws upon the cultural heritage of all people of the country.
>
> (Campschreur & Divendal 1989: 216)

Of particular interest, moreover, is Resolution 15 on the performing arts:

> noting [that] historically the performing arts have been divided into two traditions – one representing the interests of the apartheid regime and the ruling class, and the other a true representation of people's culture and struggle ... therefore we resolve to restore the performing arts to their rightful role of both reflecting and being instruments of resistance to the apartheid regime ...
>
> (Campschreur & Divendal 1989: 223)

The paradigmatic axes of this discourse can be critically summarised as follows: Apartheid and (cultural) opposition to apartheid are defined in close correspondence to each other, with "apartheid" culture occupying centre-stage, to which then "people's culture" is counterposed as reaction formation. On the side of "the people", the following equivalence is constructed: "the people" – "democracy" – "democratic culture" as "true representation of people's culture and struggle" – "humanism" – "cultural heritage".

The category designated as "the people" is viewed as a reservoir of organicism, vitality, vibrancy, democratic by nature, and humanism. These are precisely the attributes which Lukács construed for his notion of "the people", "popularity" and "populism":

> Wherever the cultural heritage has a living relationship to the real life of the people, it is characterized by a dynamic, progressive movement in which the active creative forces of popular tradition, of the sufferings and joys of the people, of revolutionary legacies, are buoyed up, preserved, transcended and

> further developed. For a writer to possess a living relationship to the cultural heritage means being a son of the people, borne along by the current of the people's development.
>
> (Lukács 1977: 53ff)

There is, however, one important difference emerging from the comparison of South African populist cultural manifestoes and Lukács's category of "the people". Lukács links his organicist notion of "the people" to the cultural heritage transmitted by the liberal bourgeoisie in its supposedly progressive stage. In Lukács's writings, bourgeois realists are turned into harbingers of "democratic revolution". This marks a policy of rapprochement with the bourgeoisie as an ally in the struggle against fascism. Lukács relates a supposedly liberal bourgeois tradition to the popular front as a broad class alliance. This stance thereby accommodates and elevates particular textual constructions of reality which have been forged by the bourgeoisie as a class. In virtue of the dominance of this class inside and outside of the proposed alliance, the popular front derives its cohesion from the adoption of the traditional bourgeois claims to humanism, rationality and universality. This becomes clear in the following statement by Lukács:

> A living humanism prepares [the readers] to endorse the political slogans of the Popular Front and to comprehend its political humanism. Through the mediation of realist literature, the soul of the masses is made receptive for an understanding of the great, progressive and democratic epochs of human history. This will prepare it for the new type of revolutionary democracy that is represented by the Popular Front. The more deeply anti-Fascist literature is embedded in the soil, the better able will it be to create contrasting types of good and evil, models of what should be admitted and what hated – and the greater will be its resonance among the people.
>
> (Lukács 1977: 56ff)

South African would-be postapartheid cultural policy makers, in contrast, cannot rely for the "moral education" of "the people" on a substratum of humanist tradition transmitted by a liberal bourgeoisie. The nature of capitalist development in South Africa has precluded a bourgeois revolution accompanied by a liberal-humanist tradition. In South Africa, current notions of "people's culture", "cultural heritage", organicism, vibrancy, vitality, progressiveness, and collectivity, locate themselves outside of the time and space of capitalist accumulation. This is conceivably one of the reasons why "alternative" cultural policy makers insist on the "indigenous" nature of oppositional culture, in contrast to Lukács who investigates the traditions forged by a European international revolutionary bourgeoisie.[1]

Notwithstanding this (limited) internationalism in Lukács's studies, he, like his South African counterparts, emphasises the importance of national characteristics in the constitution of "Literature":

> ... the great realist works of art are a main factor in creating the intellectual and spiritual climate which gives human personality its specifically national character. The stronger a writer's ties with the cultural heritage of his nation, the more original his works will be ...
>
> (Lukács [1963], 1972a: 103)

In South Africa, the emphasis on "national democratic cultural organization" has been confirmed and reiterated in different cultural groupings since the CASA Conference of 1987. The anthology *Ten Years of Staffrider* with its special focus on *Worker Culture* brings working class issues in line with the "national liberation struggle" motto of the MDM (Mass Democratic Movement). The COSATU Congress 1989 "Report on Culture and Media" pledges COSATU's participation in the cultural activities of the MDM as challenge to apartheid culture (Meintjies, Hlatshwayo et al. 1989: 58). The editors comment:

> Worker culture focuses more keenly on the brutalities of capitalist exploitation and the struggles to overcome them. However, this is not at the expense of broader political and social themes such as the national liberation struggle [and others].
>
> (Meintjies, Hlatshwayo et al. 1989: 4)

The same article acknowledges the pioneering role of the CASA Conference "which aimed to shape policy and priorities for people's culture" in terms of pointing to the need for "national culture organization". The authors conclude with a call to "cultural workers to give priority to strengthen and consolidate unity against apartheid" (Meintjies, Hlatshwayo et al. 1989: 6).[2]

The interrelation and frequent conflation of class and nation stated in these formulations form one of the constitutive elements of the implicitly or explicitly assumed or postulated broad anti-apartheid class alliance. The broad front recipe, in analogy to Lukács's Blum Theses,[3] promises "democracy" through the broad anti-fascist/anti-apartheid struggle, which is thought of as a transitional stage leading to socialism. Lukács proceeded to elevate the Popular Front from the level of tactics to the principle of philosophy, literary history, and literary criticism. This brought Lukács into the ambit of the Stalinist camp, especially since the 1935 Seventh Comintern Congress, which officially endorsed popular front tactics. Consequently, socialists were encouraged to largely abandon class analysis, and to rally behind their respective national governments during the war. This new turn tallied closely with Stalin's doctrines of social patriotism, socialism in one country, and the stagist conception of the transition to socialism, all of which had been formulated during the first years of Stalin's rise to power. In the aftermath of the announcement of the popular front tactic, Stalin dissolved the Comintern in 1943, with the following justification:

> The dissolution will enable the patriots of freedom-loving nations to unite all progressive forces in their countries, irrespective of their various political attitudes and religious persuasions, with the aim of forging a common front of national liberation in order to broaden the anti-fascist struggle.
>
> (Kriegel 1977: 129)

Lukács adopted and adapted these doctrines by removing descriptions of class antagonisms from his writings in the history of literature, and by equating "socialist art" with "national art" (Lukács 1972a: 103). Backed, in addition, by the official announcement of the programme of Socialist Realism at the

First Soviet Writers' Congress (1934) and its attack on modernism, and the 1935 KPD slogan of the classical heritage as a means of anti-fascist struggle, Lukács was in a strong position to advance his realist aesthetics and stagist literary historiography.

Under the motto of popular frontist tactics, discussion forums were launched (1937–1939) in exile journals (*Internationale Literatur*, *Neue Deutsche Blaetter*, *Die Neue Weltbuehne*, *Das Wort*), to include nonsocialist writers and literary theoreticians into the ranks of the alliance. The debates were centered around the question of whether expressionism – as the first movement of modernism – represented a basis and a literary tradition favourable to the development of an anti-fascist cultural programme. Measured by the developments within the Soviet and German communist parties, though, these debates stood at the *end* of popular frontist mobilisation. The debates started on the political terrain during the First World War, and found their literary pendants in Lukács's realism essays of 1934–1939. As early as 1933, the argument was decided in favour of Lukács in virtue of his official position in various writers' groups.

Lukács arrived from Moscow in Berlin in 1931. He formed a caucus within the Association of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers (BPRS). The Lukács faction entertained close links with the German Communist Party. These two organisations acted in concert against the left opposition within the writers' association, which consisted mainly of working class writers. It was the worker writers within the writers' association who were involved in attempts to develop a workers' culture in opposition to bourgeois aesthetics. Aspects of the wrangles in the writers' association between the two different factions can be gleaned from Ottwalt's reply to Lukács's scathing review of his novel. Ottwalt distances himself from the doctrine of socialist realism which relies on notions of an organic classicist "cultural heritage":

> the question of cultural heritage does not play the same role here as it does in the Soviet Union, for the simple reason that . . . we have to confront the bourgeois ideologues of classicism and humanism in daily struggles, not in the form of a dead heritage, but as a living element of bourgeois reaction.
>
> (Lukács 1969: 171)

This and several other items of the discussion by workers within the writers' association on the possibilities of wresting new cultural forms from bourgeois aesthetics, were taken up by Brecht in his experiments with epic theatre. Discussions of this nature, however, could not be pursued in the writers' association. From 1930 onwards, the leftwing group within the writers' association was referred to the aesthetics of Aristotle and Hegel, and to texts by Balzac, Tolstoy, Goethe, Schiller, all of whom were upheld as idols against the leftwing. From then onwards, opposition to the "enduring" bourgeois cultural heritage could no longer find expression in the journal of the writers' association (*Linkskurve*).[4]

In a half-measured attempt at self-criticism, Lukács re-assesses his writings of the 1930's twenty years later, under the impact of the first post-Stalin glasnost. In the "Preface to the English Edition" of *The Meaning of*

Contemporary Realism, Lukács calls for abandoning the legacy of Stalinism (Lukács [1963] 1972a: 7). In the "Preface to the German Edition" (1957) of the same book, Lukács criticises the dogmatism of the Stalin era and presents an apology for one of the essays collected in that volume ("Critical and Socialist Realism"), arguing that it was written immediately after the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, when opposition to Stalin was not possible (Lukács 1972a: 9). Lukács's incomplete critique of Stalinism rests on his incomplete definition of Stalinism which was confined to the charges of advocating the notion of literature-as-illustration, dogmatism, and a distortion of socialist realism (Lukács 1972a: 120, 124, 133). With this disclaimer, Lukács then proceeds to reaffirm the validity of the anti-fascist popular front of the 1930's, which is precisely what motivated his writings during the Stalin-era in the first place:

> Before the Second World War ..., it was not this conflict [between capitalism and socialism] that determined the social and political pattern, but the conflict between Fascism and anti-Fascism.
>
> (Lukács 1972a: 13)

> ... both the anti-Fascist cause and the Peace Movement attracted large sections of the bourgeoisie, and particularly the bourgeois intelligentsia. The struggle between capitalism and socialism was ... not directly relevant to either. Indeed, both movements were characterized by a militant alliance between socialist and bourgeois forces.
>
> (Lukács 1972a: 15)

> ...differences of ideology have not proved an obstacle to the closest co-operation.
>
> (Lukács 1972a: 15)

Within the anti-fascist alliance, Lukács continues, there was a "common social attitude, even in works of art" (Lukács 1972a: 15). The "common ideological basis" consisted in the "humanist revolt" whose continuation is to be found in works of what was then Lukács's "contemporary bourgeois realism" (Lukács 1972a: 16). In the essay "Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?" (Lukács 1972a: 47–92), the target of Lukács's polemics is modernism, rather than capitalism. The pursuit of socialism is abandoned in favour of "peaceful coexistence among the nations", guaranteed by "critical and realist bourgeois literature" (Lukács 1972a: 92):

> The fight against the common enemy, which has led to close political alliances in our age, enables the critical realist to allow for the socialist perspective of history without relinquishing his own position.
>
> Lukács 1972a: 109)

So much for the role of Lukács in my schema of drawing an analogy between anti-fascist popular frontism and South African "national democratic struggles" for "national democratic cultural organisation". In the following, I would like to show that this analogy is not a spurious one, but that there are direct historical and political links which have been established between

anti-fascist and anti-apartheid popular front tactics. On the level of political theory, the link is seen in the particular form of populism which has been generated in both anti-fascist and anti-imperialist struggles. One example of this approach can be found in the controversial book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. by Laclau and Mouffe. The analysis presented in this book combines anti-fascist and anti-imperialist tactics under the aspect of popular identities forged by class alliances which produced a splitting of class identities (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 62). From this assumption the authors conclude that class has lost its determining character; that articulations between different struggles and subject positions are indeterminate (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 13). The examples adduced to demonstrate this, however, are derived from contexts whose disastrous developments are not further scrutinised. The rapprochement of various elements of oppressed groups with the national bourgeoisies, for instance, is not questioned. Such policies are taken as normative and decisive for the process of forging a "popular and democratic mass subjectivity" which certainly did not materialise under successive more or less Stalinist Soviet regimes.

On a less theoretically elaborated level, the conflation of anti-apartheid and anti-fascist resistance forms part of the mythology of South African national resistance movements, from which the formulations of "national culture for national unity" emanate. "National liberation" is seen as an "inherently cultural act" (Fitzgerald 1989: 166) – in a way strikingly similar to Lukács's idea that the popularisation of the classical heritage will bring about a new democracy. Within this particular analytical framework, apartheid is considered a form of Internal Colonialism (or Colonialism of a Special Type). Joe Slovo explains this concept in the following terms:

> The reality [which the concept of Internal Colonialism] describes is that the colonial conditions and status of the black majority has persisted despite the juridical, constitutional and economic changes which followed the Act of Union in 1910.
>
> From the point of view of the dominated majority, the form has changed, but the substance of their colonial status has not altered.
>
> (SACP 1987: 16)

By implying that the apartheid state is equivalent to the fascist state, anti-apartheid and anti-fascist resistance are equated to the point where the two terms are used interchangeably. This emerges from a paper which was presented at the CASA Conference:

> The whole idea of internal colonialism is of immense benefit to any conceptualisation of South Africa's cultural history, as well as to strategies for the development of a democratic and dynamic South African culture in the present context of anti-fascist struggle.
>
> (Fitzgerald 1989: 164)

Slovo, likewise, links the anti-fascist and anti-apartheid broad fronts. Stating the need for "a struggle which attempts to mobilise all oppressed classes and strata as part of a national liberation alliance" (SACP 1987: 11), he draws attention to the historical precedent of anti-fascist resistance:

> When Hitler unleashed World War, the main content of workers' class struggle correctly became the defeat of fascism. This task necessitated the most "popular" of fronts, which brought together both pro- and anti-socialist forces.
>
> (SACP 1987: 12)

The equation of apartheid and Fascism has been proposed earlier on by Bunting in his book entitled *The Rise of the South African Reich* (1964), in which he compares the political-legal structures in South Africa with those operating in Hitler Germany. In other analyses, this equation is taken to refer to the abandonment of legality and an increase in unchecked state power (African Communist no 46).

The equation of apartheid and Fascism is unsatisfactory because it provides no detailed analysis of the state; it does not differentiate Fascism from other forms of authoritarian or racist regimes. Moreover, the fusion of state and civil society characteristic of Fascism was never attained in South Africa.

The particular interpretation of apartheid by the SACP clearly drew on the Comintern's 1930 definition of Fascism. The ANC, in its turn, has utilised the notion of South African Fascism as the basis for broad front tactics, particularly in its call to whites to join in the organised resistance (Wolpe 1988: 40). In this way, the aims and tactics of the Communist Party have been coded in terms of a historical continuum which develops contemporary models from tactics construed as historical precedents. Moreover, the assumption held by populists that democracy is the promise to be fulfilled by the promotion of liberal humanist ideals or by organising a broad anti-apartheid alliance (in which the bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie find a secure place), cannot be taken as a guarantee. The very possibility of a progressive bourgeois culture is problematic. This doubt strikes at the foundation of both Lukács's aesthetic and the current South African populist cultural manifestoes. There is no necessary connection between liberalism and bourgeois revolutions. There is more historical evidence to the contrary: The bourgeois revolution of 1848 in Germany, for instance, was not followed by parliamentary democracy. Instead, the bourgeoisie pursued its interests through an alliance with the aristocracy. What did take place in the aftermath of the bourgeois revolution was a preparation of the conditions under which capitalist production could develop. This process was to a large extent accompanied by more or less extreme labour repressive measures, as was and is the case in South Africa. All these considerations militate against slogans such as "national culture for national democracy".

A recent collective soul-searching effort of the SACP was recently published under the title "Has Socialism Failed?" (Slovo 1989: 11–28). In an attempt to wrest the concept of socialism from its Stalinist distortions in which, by its own admission, the SACP had its full share, Joe Slovo retracts his earlier position on Stalinist popular front anti-fascist mobilisation. Whether or not this critique is by implication levelled at South African "national culture" conceptualisations, is not spelt out. We might be tempted to view the simultaneous publication of Slovo's paper and Albie Sachs's paper

(entitled "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom") as an indication in that direction.

However, Slovo's critique of Stalinism is limited in a similar way as Lukács's renegation on Stalinism was incomplete, focusing as it does on Stalin's "bureaucratic-authoritarian style of leadership" (Slovo 1989: 12). Slovo largely neglects to spell out the economic, cultural, and political implications of the Stalinist legacy. Failure to extend the critique to the theoretical and political pillars of Stalinism, will mean that the "national democratic" direction of cultural politics in South Africa today is likely to serve as basis for a new hegemonic culture.

To preserve a space of critique (not merely criticism) for literature and art, I would therefore like to invoke a historical materialist aesthetic which upholds the independence of art parallel to the independence of working class organisation.

*This paper was presented at the 1990 SAVAL Conference.

Notes

1. See also the stated commitment of Ampie Coetzee et al. to developing a "national literature" for "national unity" (Coetzee et al. 1989: 36, 38).
2. The Blum Theses were formulated in 1928 as "Theses Concerning the Political and Economic Situation in Hungary and the Tasks of the Hungarian Communist Party" – (Lukács 1972b).
3. All these developments are comprehensively outlined in Gallas 1967/68: 148–151.
4. I agree in this critique with the points Jonathan Hyslop raises in his paper "A Prussian Path to Apartheid? Germany as Comparative Perspective in Critical Analysis of South African Society".

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