

Philosophizing with Marx, Gramsci, and Brecht

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1. Why Gramsci and Brecht?

I don't have to introduce you to Karl Marx, though one could apply Brecht's sentence to him: "Marxism has ultimately become so unknown largely through the many writings about it."¹ In about ten years, it will be two hundred years since Marx was born.

Eight years after Marx's death, in 1891, Antonio Gramsci was born on the island of Sardinia, a marginal and almost colonially subordinated part of Italy. During the strikes and occupations of factories by the north Italian workers in the early 1920s, this hunchbacked little man, "with the face of an angel" (as the German poet Uwe Timm described him), became

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1. "Schließlich ist der Marxismus so unbekannt hauptsächlich durch die vielen Schriften über ihn geworden." Letter to Karl Korsch, about February/March 1939, in Bertolt Brecht, *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* (Berlin-Weimar-Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989–2000), 29:131. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *GA*.

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the leader of the workers' movement and finally the founding president of Italy's Communist Party. There is no better concept to describe his role than that of the "organic intellectual," which he coined himself. One of his traits, which earned him the faith of the working masses, was his capacity to listen to people before he spoke. This political virtue is expressed in Brecht's poem "Listen While You Speak":

Don't say you are right too often, teacher.
 Let the students realise it.
 Don't push the truth:
 It's not good for it.
 Listen while you speak!²

Recently, the Zapatista Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, a practicing Brechtian,³ formulated a similar motto: *preguntando caminamos*, "asking we advance."

Gramsci did not have the stature one would expect of a great speaker. He was a small man with a rather weak voice. But because he listened to people, he could talk to them in a way that fascinated even his enemies. A photo shows the Italian parliament during one of Gramsci's speeches: like filings in a magnetic field, the *deputati* seem attracted to him, even the Fascists. Mussolini, a hand at his ear to hear better, is sitting on one of the benches, as if he did not want to miss a single word. Maybe it is because he had felt the "soft power" of Gramsci's mind that he shortly thereafter ordered it silenced.⁴ Hence Gramsci, in spite of his parliamentary immunity, was condemned to twenty years in prison. It was like a slow execution. A decade later, Gramsci would be discharged, but only to

2. Bertolt Brecht, "Höre beim Reden!" trans. Humphrey Milnes, in *Poems, 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim with the cooperation of Erich Fried (London: Eyre Methuen, 1976; corrected version 1979; paperback version London: Minerva, 1994), 436; compare Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 10:1017. Hereafter, *Gesammelte Werke* is cited parenthetically as *GW*.

3. See "Ponencia de Don Durito de la Lacandona para la mesa 7: Cultura y Medios de Comunicación en el Tránsito a la Democracia," 1996, in which Marcos reads from Brecht's *Kalendergeschichten*, the story "If the Sharks Were Humans" (*Wenn die Haifische Menschen wären*), Brecht, *GW*, 12:394ff.

4. In 1928, state attorney Michele Isgrò said, "We must prevent this brain from functioning for twenty years" (Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. with intro. Joseph A. Buttigieg, vol. 1 [New York: Columbia University Press, 1992], 88). On June 4, 1928, Gramsci was condemned to twenty years, four months, and five days in prison.

die a few days later, on April 27, 1937. Before being broken by prison life, however, he wrote what many consider to be the most important work of political philosophy of the twentieth century. In the meantime, these notes have become known to the world as the *Prison Notebooks*. I will refer to this work in what follows.⁵

Bertolt Brecht was born in Augsburg, Germany, in 1898, seven years after Gramsci. In 1933, he fled the Nazis, first to Denmark, later to Sweden, and, finally, when the German troops arrived there, through Finland and the Soviet Union to the United States. After he appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee, who investigated Brecht for alleged communist activity, he left the United States and went, after a short stay in Switzerland, to the German Democratic Republic, where he died in 1956, nineteen years after Gramsci.

Brecht's plays and poems, often in the form of songs, have reached the peoples of the earth to an extent that secures him a prominent place in world literature. Parts of his work, however, are largely overshadowed by the fame of the poet. Roland Barthes, for example, understood that Brecht was more than a marvelous poet and playwright: "No one can deny that Brecht's oeuvre, both theatrical and theoretical, is Marxist criticism of an almost impeccable force and intelligence."⁶ We are indebted to him for one of the most inspiring contributions to Marxist philosophy in the twentieth century. For the sake of critical thought, I draw attention to this hidden part of the iceberg.

Some say that Brecht had, in a given moment in the 1920s, "appropriated" Marxism. It is almost never understood that appropriation in his case meant transformation. He said he came to Marxism the "cold way," through arguments that filled him more with enthusiasm than appealed to his emotional life (*GA*, 21:256). But this is only half the truth. In reality, his commitment to Marxism unleashed his productivity. "When I read Marx's *Capital*, I understood my plays," he said (*GA*, 21:256). He found his subject and ethical-poetic stance⁷ in the class struggles of capitalism, or, in a

5. Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* will be quoted by page, notebook, and paragraph numbers. Since Joseph A. Buttigieg's splendid American edition is not yet accomplished, I quote from *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971). Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *SPN*.

6. Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews, 1962-1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 162f.

7. Brecht refused to compromise either on his belief in communism or his belief in art,

general sense, in the critique of all forms of class domination, exploitation, and injustice. In a newspaper article, he declared, "The theatre's future is philosophical."⁸ From that point on, he used lyrics and theater to teach his philosophy. During his lifetime, he was wise enough not to overstress the license of someone who was recognized as a poet. He kept his directly philosophical writings secret. The only theoretical piece Brecht published is the *Short Organon for the Theatre* (1948). The philosophical writings to which I refer and which started to come out after his death include: *Journals 1934–1955*; *The Messingkauf Dialogues*; his little handbook of dialectics and morals, *Me-ti: Book of the Turning Points*, which he clothed in Chinese motives and manners⁹ and mainly the hundreds of theoretical, political, and philosophical notes that came out for the first time during the 1990s, almost forty years after his death, in a great edition that gives us access to Brecht's philosophical workshop. Until this edition, his philosophical writings were not available.

Gramsci and Brecht did not know about each other. It is all the more astonishing that their thoughts were congenial, sometimes even to the word. And if Marx had become "unknown through the many writings" about him, it is even more astonishing how congenially Gramsci and Brecht take up his original thought against every mainstream on the left. They do not, however, simply repeat it in its "frozen" form, but in its "fluid" mode. Just as Marx says in the second edition of *Capital* (volume 1), we have to grasp "the movement itself, of which every resulting form is but a transitory configura-

which makes his comments on the subject important and unusual reading. The interaction between art and politics—specifically between theater and education about communism—became the central theme of his thought for the thirty years he lived after reading Marx. See Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht's America*, with a foreword by John Willett (Columbus: Ohio State University Press for Miami University, 1981), 163.

8. *Brecht on Theater*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 53.

9. Bertolt Brecht, *Journals, 1934–1955*, ed. John Willett, trans. Hugh Rorrison (London: Methuen, 1993); Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (1965) (London: Methuen, 1994); and Bertolt Brecht, *Me-ti: Buch der Wendungen. Fragmente, 1933–1956*, in *GA*, 18:45–194. Fredric Jameson, in his beautiful book *Brecht and Method* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), understands Brecht's *sinité* as a Lacanian "tenant-lieu," a place-keeper for the metaphysics that have become impossible" (12). But neither wisdom (see below) nor estrangement is metaphysical; on the contrary, they are dialectical as opposed to metaphysical. See my article "Dialectics" (originally written for *Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, vol. 2 [Hamburg: Argument 1995], 657–93), trans. Peter Thomas, *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* 13, no. 1 (2005): 241–65.

tion.”¹⁰ We might speak of the “source code” of the Marxian thought in order to be understood by the “computer generation.”

For Gramsci, as for Brecht (and his philosophical teacher Karl Korsch), Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* were the starting point, as they were a generation earlier for Antonio Labriola in Italy. The parallel way in which Gramsci and Brecht took up the Marxian impulse may be partially explained by the fact that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s linguistic philosophical investigations indirectly influenced both of them: Brecht, through his contacts with the left wing of the “Wiener Kreis”; Gramsci, through his friend Piero Sraffa,¹¹ who functioned as the liaison between him and the Italian Communist Party. He is the only person to whom Wittgenstein acknowledges an intellectual debt in the foreword to his *Philosophical Investigations*, and it seems that Wittgenstein’s category “life form” is an echo of Gramsci’s category “modo di vita,” “mode of life.”

2. Marx’s Critique of All Philosophy

The first part of the title of my essay, “Philosophizing with Marx,” hides a contradiction that leads directly into the center of the subject: Marx und Engels were persuaded to overcome the form of discourse, or “thought form” (*Denkform*), named “philosophy.” Not from the beginning, of course. In Marx’s doctoral theses, he compares two antique “atomists,” namely Democritus and Epicurus, the latter of whom had introduced an element of indeterminism into the rigorously deterministic view of Democritus. Since Cicero, this modification had been presented as a kind of theoretical botched job. Marx rehabilitates Epicurus with the argument that this element of indeterminism has reconciled materialism and philosophy of praxis.

Marx first aimed at teaching philosophy at the University of Bonn, but

10. The English editions—Engels’s as well as Fowkes’s—mistranslate this sentence, which in German reads, “jede gewordne Form im Flusse der Bewegung, also auch nach ihrer vergänglichchen Seite” (compare Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke* [Berlin/DDR: Dietz, 1958ff.], 23, 28). Marx himself translates this for the French edition as follows: “le mouvement même, dont toute forme faite n’est qu’une configuration transitoire” (compare Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Gesamtausgabe* [Berlin/DDR: Dietz, 1975–], II.7:696). My translation is from this version. Hereafter, I cite the German works parenthetically as *MEW* and *MEGA*, respectively.

11. See Piero Sraffa, *Lettere a Tania per Gramsci*, ed. and introd. Valentino Gerratana (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1991).

this was blocked by the conservative turn of Prussian politics. So he worked as a journalist and quickly became chief editor of a radical liberal newspaper in Cologne. There he acted as the public voice of “the philosophy,” which was Hegelian philosophy, but criticized and dialectically “sublated” (*aufgehoben*) in a Feuerbachian manner. The decisive settling of accounts “with our erstwhile philosophical consciousness”¹² took place in *The German Ideology*. The question that leads to the emergence of the fundamental concepts of historical materialism aims to establish “the connection of German philosophy with German reality” (*MEW*, 3:20),¹³ a question that did not occur to its exponents. Therefore, “Not only in its answers, already in its questions there was a mystification” (*CW*, 5:28, translation modified). Marx and Engels conceived philosophy from that point on as an “ideological form” or “ideological power.”¹⁴ And one has to keep in mind, against the old tradition, that their concept of ideology was a critical one and that they claimed to have overcome it. The thought-form “philosophy,” for Marx, was defined by a twofold divide: inside the ruling classes, it was separated from the immediate practices of domination; in the social structure as a whole, it was separated from the praxis of all subordinated. For Marx, it was fundamentally the alliance with the proletariat and, more generally, with those whom Gramsci later called the “subaltern” that determined his perspective. The resulting new relation between theory and praxis meant, for him, the exodus from the thought-form “philosophy.” Once again after Marx’s death, Engels proclaimed the end of “all philosophy.”

3. Gramsci’s and Brecht’s Rearticulation of the Philosophical

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, after Engels died, a split occurred between Marxist scholars. In Italy, Labriola declared the “*Philosophy of Praxis*” to be “the core of historical Materialism” and to be the philosophy immanently present in the things about which it philosophizes.¹⁵

12. Karl Marx, preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton and Company, 1978), 3–6.

13. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), 5:30. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *CW*.

14. Compare Marx, preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 5; see also Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie*, in *MEW*, 21:302.

15. Antonio Labriola, *Über den historischen Materialismus*, trans. Franz Mehring and Anneheide Aschieri-Osterlow (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 318; and *Saggi sul*

Benedetto Croce, who once had been Labriola's pupil, concluded from Marx and Engels's rupture with all philosophy that their theories had no philosophical relevance. To this, Gramsci replied a generation later that this very rupture had to be understood as a philosophical act par excellence.

This may seem contradictory if one does not take into account that this meant the refoundation of philosophy on a radically different social basis and therefore in a not less radically different understanding of its "status."¹⁶ Here Gramsci meets Brecht. Both refound philosophy as a philosophy of praxis from below. Brecht's great fragment *Der Messingkauf*, which can be translated as "The Purchase of Brass" or "The Brass Bargain," carries the subtitle "The Philosopher on the Theater." The title hints at an allegory through which Brecht explains that he will use the theater for philosophical purposes. The philosopher compares his relation to the theater with that of a dealer of scrap metal to a brass band, where the dealer is interested only in the exchange value of the brass, not in its musical use value. This allegory means that Brecht's interest in the theater is predominantly philosophical. Both Brecht and Gramsci start from the Wittgensteinian question of what ascribes a "philosophical attitude" to someone. Normally, says Brecht, we understand it as the passive virtue of enduring a blow. He urges us to include the active virtue of striking a blow. "Philosophy teaches the right behavior," he can now say. Not in the normative meaning of moral philosophy, however, but in the sense of the art of living, "the greatest of all arts."

Gramsci, too, rearticulates the popular conception of what is regarded as being philosophical. He aims at transforming the stoical withdrawal from the world into a merely tactical withdrawal within an overarching perspective of changing the world. He bewilders the common sense with the affirmation, inspired by Croce, "that all humans are 'philosophers'" (*SPN*, 323, n. 11, §12). He gives several reasons for this, the first being the linguistic understanding that language always already conveys elements of "spontaneous philosophy," a Gramscian concept that Althusser will elaborate later.¹⁷ The problem is, the philosophical elements that are sedimented in our language are not only incoherently organized—Gramsci calls their

materialismo storico (1964), ed. Valentino Gerratana and Augusto Guerra (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1977).

16. See Georges Labica, *Le statut Marxiste de la philosophie* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1976).

17. See Louis Althusser, *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants, 1967* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1974).

spontaneous mixture “bizarre”—but it is ourselves whom they organize from behind. Such opinions are not mine, but I am theirs. Since they are disparate, we remain in a kind of disparate bondage to be a “member” of something that has been “mechanically imposed by the external environment.” Such a membership “occurs” to us from “one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his [or her] entry into the conscious world” (*SPN*, 323, n. 11, §12).

4. Dialectics without Hegelian Guarantee

It seems almost impossible to speak *about* dialectics without speaking in an *undialectical way*, or, as Brecht warns, without changing “the flow of things itself into a frozen thing.”¹⁸ On the other hand, it is impossible to speak “right” about anything, dialectics included, without speaking dialectically, that is, without retranslating the frozen things into the flow of their becoming. So, if we speak about a human individual dialectically, we cannot take unity as the point of departure. Brecht understands the individual as decentered, as “dividual.” He conceives the “divisibility,” which he observes in the individual, on the one hand like Gramsci, “as membership in several collectives” (*GA*, 21:359), on the other hand as inherently conflicting: “The individual appeared to us more and more as a contradictory complex in constant development. Seen from outside, it may behave as a unity, and still it is a multitude full of fights, in which the most different tendencies gain the upper hand, so that the eventual action only represents the compromise” (*GA*, 22.2:691). Or, as he puts it in a fragment for the didactic poem “Lehrgedicht”:

So even the brave is not all over brave: sometimes he fails.
In him live courage and cowardice and the courage triumphs, but not
always. (*GA*, 15:172)

The personnel of traditional European philosophy—Subject, Ego, Person, even Spirit—turn from a collection of metaphysically pre-given entities into a number of oscillating effects. “‘I’ am no person. I come into being every moment, remain none. I come into being in the form of an answer. In me is permanent that which answers something which remains permanent” (*GA*, 21:404). Here we see one of Brecht’s many assimilations of Marx’s sixth thesis on Feuerbach—and let me note that the Anglophone world,

18. Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 6.1.1948.

through the *Collected Works*, knows only Engels's vulgarized version of this little text, not the Marxian original. The sixth thesis reads, "Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the *human* essence. But the human essence is no abstractum inherent in the single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations" (*MEW*, 3:6).¹⁹

5. The Effort of Coherence and the Roots of Hegemony

Gramsci understands our spontaneous mode of existence with its disparate "memberships" as *incoherence*. The question arises: "is it better to 'think' . . . in a disjointed and episodic way?" (*SPN*, 323, n. 11, §12). Whenever individuals start to "consciously and critically elaborate their own conception of the world," they start producing their *coherence*. This Gramscian concept is based on the assumption that every human being aims at "choos[ing] one's sphere of activity, tak[ing] an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be[ing] one's own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality" (*SPN*, 323, n. 11, §12). Gramsci's coherence has to be understood dynamically as an effort to win agency (capacity to act). He does not deny contradiction or inner conflicts, which, from an Aristotelian point of view, would be inconsistent. Like Brecht, he presupposes these non-Aristotelian characteristics. Jürgen Habermas describes the problem—whose Gramscian analysis he obviously ignores—in terms of a "hopeless fragmentation" of the common sense: "False consciousness," he states, "is today supplanted by *fragmented* consciousness," a condition of the capitalist "colonization of the life world."²⁰ In Habermas, unlike in Gramsci, the problem seems unsolvable. Coherence for him seems to be the product of specialized intellectuals, called "philosophers," within the framework of the social division of labor, not, however, a production of the people themselves. In Gramsci, everyone has access to "philosophizing," because nobody does *not* work on his or her own "coherence." Gramsci's "moulding of one's personality" should not be confounded with individualist privatism. Against the bourgeois illusion of nonconformism, he insists that we are always "conformists of some conformism or other, always man-in-the-mass or collective man. The question

19. In the *Collected Works*, the beginning of the sixth thesis reads: "Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual" (*CW*, 5:7).

20. Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 2:522.

is this: of what historical type is the conformism, the mass humanity to which one belongs?" (*SPN*, 324, n. 11, §12).

Of course, no individual can be fully autonomous, and a priori there is no guarantee against all kinds of irrational forms of "mass humanity." As the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch liked to say, what we aim at is no given, given is only the task of making an effort. For Gramsci, "Creating a new culture does not only mean one's own individual 'original' discoveries. It also, and most particularly, means the diffusion in a critical form of truths already discovered, their 'socialisation' as it were, and even making them the basis of vital action, an element of co-ordination and intellectual and moral order." And he continues, "For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world, is a 'philosophical' event far more important and 'original' than the discovery by some philosophical 'genius' of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals" (*SPN*, 325, n. 11, §12).

This "'philosophical' event," or, better, "'philosophical' fact," *fatto filosofico* in Gramsci's words, is nothing but the deep structure of *hegemony*. For Gramsci, those who elaborate coherence for a social class or group and thus open the path to hegemony for it are the intellectuals of this class or group. Just as he and Brecht rearticulate the meaning of philosophizing, he also rearticulates in a nonacademic sense the meaning of "intellectuals." Intellectual functions for him are functions of coherence. All individuals practice such functions one way or another. But only those who practice them *in* and *for* a social group become organic intellectuals of this group. If a group wants to win social influence, it has to network its interests with those of other groups or to translate them from particularity to a certain generality. The more universal—in the sense of uniting different groups—the solutions and orientations are that a group can represent, the further radiates its "charisma," which finally can win "hegemony" or politico-ethical leading influence for this group formation. Hegemony, for Gramsci, is a philosophical fact, because it combines a certain conception of the world with a political ethics. So what Gramsci calls a "historical bloc" can emerge, a sociocultural and political formation that gains sustainable historical agency.

After departing from the individual striving for coherence to arrive at a new understanding of politics, Gramsci transfers his concept of the historical bloc back to the individual. In its relation toward itself, he highlights a dimension that corresponds to what we call politics. "Man is to be

conceived as an historical bloc of purely individual and subjective elements and of mass and objective or material elements with which the individual is in an active relationship. To transform . . . the general system of relations, is . . . to develop oneself" (*SPN*, 360, n. 10.II, §48.1). From here, Gramsci reformulates Marx's sixth thesis on Feuerbach:

That ethical "improvement" is purely individual is an illusion and an error: the synthesis of the elements constituting individuality is "individual," but it cannot be realised and developed without an activity directed outward, modifying external relations both with nature and, in varying degrees, with other men, in the various social circles in which one lives, up to the widest relationship, which embraces the whole human species. For this reason one can say that man is essentially "political" since it is through the activity of transforming and consciously directing other men that man realises his "humanity," his "human essence." (*SPN*, 360, n. 10.II, §48.1; translation modified)

6. Philosophy of Praxis, Subjectivity, and Objectivity

Gramsci and Brecht understand that in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* a new kind of philosophizing had emerged. In prison, Gramsci translates this text anew, and its motifs from here on reappear in his notes. He integrates "praxis," this key concept of the *Theses*, in the name of Marxist philosophizing as he rearticulates it. Is Brecht's reformulation of Marxist thought in accordance with this?

Brecht takes up the Marxian dialectics with its dynamic and relational ontology. He seems to refute Wittgenstein's opening sentence of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—"The world is everything which is the case"—when he observes, "Reality is not only everything which is, but everything which is becoming. It's a process. It proceeds in contradictions. If it is not perceived in its contradictory character it is not perceived at all" (compare *GA*, 22.1:458). The basic insight for Brecht, as for Gramsci, follows in accordance with Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach: Reality is not our vis-à-vis, and we are not sitting across from it, in what Nietzsche ridiculed as a "Hinterwelt"—a world behind the world, with a connotation of backwardness of who believes in it. We are not looking into the world like through a keyhole into another room. We are thrown, without any reserve, into the historical world of the social—just as our thinking is thrown into language. To say, with Jean-Paul Sartre, that we are thrown into this world makes sense, of

course, only in contrast to traditional European metaphysics. In reality, we are not thrown into, but develop within and with, this world.

Like Gramsci, Brecht distinguishes clearly between objectivism and objectivity, and learns from the American pragmatists, whose impulse he liberates from its social limitations.²¹ He condemns the objectivism of many Marxists. He balances on the narrow ridge between a critique of objectivism and the loss of reality. To say it paradoxically: Following Brecht, we have to understand the objectivity of the subjective and the quasi subjectivity of the objective. Only that which affects us (is “effective against” us) can be our object; and only in as much as it resists against our practical insistence we grasp its objectivity. There is no knowledge without physical innerworldly interaction.

Brecht highlights both sides. On the one hand, there is the changeability of the object of cognition through cognition: “Conditions and things which cannot be changed through thinking (which do not depend on us) cannot be thought” (GA, 21:521). On the other hand, there is the activity of cognition and its interference with its object. After having observed that objectivistic affirmations are “rectified” by every possible action, he continues, “Fight sentences which are rectified [*rektifiziert*] through a determinate acting—as the sentence ‘Great men make history’—not as objectivist, that is, putting forward sentences which cannot be rectified through any determinate acting, like the sentence ‘There are unsurmountable (social) tendencies, and so on!’” (GA, 21:575).²²

Brecht transfers the insight of modern physics about the changing of the research object by the very research itself (GA, 22.2:730) into the field of historical materialism: If “practicable definitions” are those that “allow the handling of the defined field,” then the “behaviour of the defining [subject]” must appear “always among the determining factors” (GA, 21:421). Brecht criticizes, therefore, the notion of “necessity” in the sense of a mechanical inevitability of an event: “In reality there were contradictory tendencies

21. “In den Praxishorizont rückt die Frage nach der Vergesellschaftung. So hebt sich Pragmatismus auf in marxistischer Philosophie der Praxis” (W. F. Haug, *Philosophieren mit Brecht und Gramsci* [Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 1996; 2nd augmented ed. 2005], 156).

22. “Bekämpfe Sätze, welche durch bestimmtes Handeln rektifiziert werden, wie den Satz ‘Große Männer machen die Geschichte,’ nicht als Objektivist, das heißt, indem du Sätze setzt, die durch kein bestimmtes Handeln rektifiziert werden können, wie den Satz ‘Es gibt unüberwindliche (gesellschaftliche) Tendenzen und so weiter!’” (GA, 21:575; GW, 20:69).

which were conflictingly decided, this is much less [than inevitable necessity]" (*GA*, 21:523).

And Gramsci? To conceive of the so-called external world in terms of a given—or, to say it in Marx's words, "from the standpoint of the ready [already constituted] phenomena" (compare *MEW*, 24:218)—is, for him, sedimented creationism, or the sedimented belief that a god has created the world, "even if the man who shares it is indifferent to religion" (*SPN*, 441, n. 11, §17). He shows this in regard to the spontaneous idea that man would have found "the world all ready made, catalogued and defined once and for all" (*SPN*, 441, n. 11, §17). Gramsci suggests the experiment of imagining "an extra-historical and extra-human objectivity" (*SPN*, 445, n. 11, §17) and asks, "But who is the judge of such objectivity? Who is able to put himself in this kind of 'standpoint of the cosmos in itself' and what could such a standpoint mean? It can indeed be maintained that here we are dealing with a residue of the concept of God" (*SPN*, 445, n. 11, §17; translation modified). The extra-, pre-, and post-human reality is only a "metaphor." Gramsci concludes, "Objective always means 'humanly objective' which can be held to correspond exactly to 'historically subjective': in other words, objective would mean 'universally subjective'" (*SPN*, 445, n. 11, §17).

The universalization of this practical subjective is not primarily a mental process but a material historical process: politics and struggle. At stake is the process of historical unification of humanity. The "epistemological barrier" here is not primarily epistemological, since it relies on the set of divisions and antagonisms that traverse every nation as well as the international community. Objectivity is a function of socialization; at the same time, it is the realm of what Marx, in the *Grundrisse*, called "general intellect," the "commons" of historical (socialized) subjectivity:

Man knows objectively in so far as knowledge is real for the whole human species *historically* unified in a single unitary cultural system. But this process of historical unification takes place through the disappearance of the internal contradictions which tear apart human society, while these contradictions themselves are the condition for the formation of groups and for the birth of ideologies which are not concretely universal but are immediately rendered transient by the practical origin of their substance. There exists therefore a struggle for objectivity . . . , and this struggle is the very struggle for the cultural unification of the human species. What the idealists call "spirit" is not a point of departure but a point of arrival . . . towards concrete

and objectively universal unification and is not a unitary presupposition. (*SPN*, 445–46, n. 11, §17; translation modified)

Until now, science and technology “provided the terrain on which a cultural unity of this kind has reached its furthest extension. . . . It is the most objectivised and concretely universalised subjectivity” (*SPN*, 446, n. 11, §17)—not, however, social sciences or philosophy, to say nothing about religion.

7. Experimental Thinking and Utility

Both Gramsci and Brecht focus on “experiment” and “dialectics.” Like in an ellipse, these are the two focal points of their thought. The only “theoretical” work Brecht publishes—and in which he restricts himself to theater questions—is the *Short Organon*. The title renders homage to Bacon’s *Novum Organon*. This is not accidental. Bacon’s rejection of Aristotelian metaphysics and his pleading for experimental science interests Brecht, who introduces some of it in his *Galileo*.

For Gramsci, too, the experiment is of paradigmatic importance as the “first cell of the new method of production, of the new form of active union of man and nature.” Workers and scientists are in a certain way homologues: “The scientist-experimenter is also a worker, not a pure thinker, and his thought is continually controlled by practice and vice versa” (*SPN*, 446, n. 11, §34).

In accordance with this, Brecht practices dialectics as “a coherent sequence of intelligible methods which allows the dissolution of certain rigid ideas and the assertion of praxis against prevailing ideologies” (*GA*, 21:519). He argues “against constructing too complete worldviews” (*GW*, 12:463) and urges, paraphrasing the first biblical commandment, “You shall not make an image of the world for the image’s sake” (*GA*, 21:349). He demands concrete utility²³ of thought. Arguments should be handled like snowballs, not in the spirit of system-building for “eternity” (compare *GW*, 12:451f). Against the reflection theory or image theory of cognition he demands “practicable images” that openly show their “subjective” point of view.

Most important for Gramsci and Brecht is the way in which they follow Wittgenstein’s “linguistic turn,” while changing its course. Gnoseology

23. See Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, chap. 1, “Nützliches,” 1–5.

has to be “above all criticism of language,” urges Brecht (*GA*, 21:413). Wittgenstein demands that language analysis be completed by the analysis of practices and “life forms.” Probably this is an echo of the impulses from Gramsci’s ever-insisting friend Sraffa. But in spite of his sharp analyses of linguistic usages, Wittgenstein never really arrives at such life concreteness, let alone at social relationships under which such practices and forms develop. This is what Brecht and Gramsci do. Gramsci, as a trained linguist, can explain the metaphorical shifting of meaning following the changes in the network of social practices and relations. Everything has to pass through the needle’s eye, that is, through practice. It may be that on this ground, the proper terrain of historical materialism, Wittgenstein’s analyses make much more sense than in the usual “linguisticism” of his school.

Gramsci and Brecht, in different ways, experienced deep defeats, political and personal. In jail, Gramsci had to think about the fascist answer to left radicalism after World War I. Brecht, in his emigration years, was cut off from his language, not knowing, like Gramsci, whether what he wrote would ever reach the public. “When I open the *Messingkauf* for a bit of a change it’s like having a cloud of dust blow into one’s face. Can you imagine that sort of thing ever coming to mean anything again? That’s not a rhetorical question.”²⁴ No, this certainly was no rhetorical question. The standpoint from which Brecht experienced, when looking at his work, “having a cloud of dust blow into one’s face” was that of a world constellation where Nazism and Stalinism dominated the scene. Yet—under the impact of great deviations and defeats of the European labor movement—in Gramsci’s and Brecht’s notes, which long after their death reached their public, Marxist thought emerged anew. The fragmentary and unfinished character of these notes proves to be more durable than most of the systematic works of their time. They can teach us what Brecht calls *Haltung*: stance,²⁵ orientation and approach. In a changing world, the old maps are less useful than the art of “creating new ways,” as Marcos has said, who in his way combines Gramsci and Brecht.²⁶ All particular solutions or orientations had always

24. Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, 19.8.1940.

25. This is how Jameson, in *Brecht and Method*, 36, translates Brecht’s central category of *Haltung*. See also Brecht’s introductory *Keuner*-story: “Weise am Weisen ist die Haltung” (*GA*, 18:13).

26. See *Shadows of Tender Fury: The Letters and Communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation*, trans. Frank Bardacke, Leslie López, and the Watsonville, California, Human Rights Committee, intro. John Ross (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995). Strangely enough, Bardacke opposes Marcos and

been developed in confrontation with certain situations of their time. Whenever the situation changed, the solutions no longer were valid. Valid, however, may be the attitude that produced such a solution in confrontation with a problematic which was then actual. So this attitude is still relevant for us. It is expressed in the “philosophical” reflections. They show the formative hinterland of the particular solutions, or, as I said before, their “source code.”

Brecht and Gramsci are essential as alternative approaches within the Marxism of their epoch. Therefore they are of vital importance to anyone who is interested in a new Marxist takeoff and, generally speaking, in a renaissance of critical theory and practice of the social.

8. Hegemony, Violence, and Wisdom

Brecht introduces wisdom of a new kind into Marxism. In a way, it is identical to dialectics as a personal attitude. Since “falsehood is worse in kings than in beggars,”²⁷ Brecht often addresses the leading figures, or, as he likes to call them, the “teachers.” So, for example, in his “In Praise of Doubt,” from 1939–40:

There are the thoughtless who never doubt.
Their digestion is splendid, their judgement infallible.
They don't believe in the facts, they believe only in themselves. When
it comes to the point
The facts must go by the board. Their patience with themselves
Is boundless. To arguments
They listen with the ear of a snitch.

The thoughtless who never doubt
Meet the thoughtful who never act.
They doubt, not in order to come to a decision but
To avoid a decision. Their heads
They use only for shaking

.

Gramsci: “There is no talk of ‘pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will.’ There is rather a commitment of the whole person to the proposition that in any situation, no matter how bad, together with other people you can figure out a few things to do” (259). This, however, is exactly what Gramsci’s famous maxim is about.

27. Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, 3.6, lines 13–14.

However, if you praise doubt
 Do not praise
 The doubt which is a form of despair.

What use is the ability to doubt to a man
 Who can't make up his mind?
 He who is content with too few reasons
 May act wrongly
 But he who needs too many
 Remains inactive under danger.

You who are a leader of men, do not forget
 That you are that because you doubted other leaders.
 So allow the led
 Their right to doubt. (GA, 14:461)²⁸

In one of his many writings in “Chinese” manner,²⁹ which Antony Tatlow³⁰ has so brilliantly commented on for the Western public, Brecht has Lao-tse saying:

That the yielding water in its movement
 Will, with time, defeat the mighty stone.
 You understand: What's hard will be defeated.³¹

[Dass das weiche Wasser in Bewegung
 Mit der Zeit den mächtigen Stein besiegt.
 Du verstehst, das Harte unterliegt.] (GA, 12:33)

And a few days before his death, in 1956, he wrote “Iron” (“Eisen”), a poem that, in a parabolic form, deals with historical sustainability of political structures:

In a dream last night
 I saw a great storm.

28. Brecht was not the only leftist in Germany who used an imaginary China to put forward his ideas: Otto Neurath published, in the early 1920s, didactical parables located in China (see Ulrich Sautter, “Brechts logischer Empirismus,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 4 (1995): 687–709, in particular, 690n18).

29. Brecht, *Poems, 1913–1956*, 333ff.

30. See Antony Tatlow, *The Mask of Evil* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1977).

31. In *Poems*, the translation is as follows: “that over time the movement of the yielding water / Will overcome the stronger stone. / What's hard—can you understand?—must always give way” (315).

It seized the scaffolding
It tore the cross-clasps
The iron ones, down.
But what was made of wood
Swayed and remained. (GA, 12:315)³²

This is Brecht's way of coming to the same conclusion as Gramsci—that hegemony is the fundament of *sustainable* political power. On the other hand, in his poem "On Violence" ("Über die Gewalt") he extends the concept of violence to point to its indirect, and therefore spontaneously invisible, form in relations of social domination:

The headlong stream is termed violent
But the river bed hemming it is
Termed violent by no one.

The storm that bends the birch trees
Is held to be violent
But how about the storm
That bends the back of the roadworkers? (GA, 14:343)³³

The opposites meet in what Gramsci calls the "integral State." "In politics," he underlines, "the error occurs as a result of an inaccurate understanding of what the State (in its integral meaning: dictatorship + hegemony) really is" (SPN, 239, n. 6, §155). The wisdom of the powerful, therefore, leads them to minimize the first, without neglecting it, and to maximize the second.

32. Brecht, *Poems, 1913–1956*, 442.

33. Brecht, *Poems, 1913–1956*, 276; translation slightly modified.

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