

## Brecht's Marxist Aesthetic

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Brecht's relationship to Marxism is extremely important and highly complex. From the 1920s until his death in 1956, Brecht identified himself as a Marxist; when he returned to Germany after World War II, he chose the German Democratic Republic (GDR), where his actress wife Helene Weigel and he formed their own theater troupe, the famed Berliner Ensemble, and were eventually given a state theater to run. Yet Brecht's relationship to orthodox Marxist officials and doctrine was often conflictual, and his own work and life were highly idiosyncratic. Of a strongly anti-bourgeois disposition from his youth, the young Brecht was also initially repelled by Bolshevism. He experienced the German revolution of 1918 with some ambivalence and dedicated himself to literary and not political activity during the turbulent early years of the Weimar republic. He recorded in his *Diaries*, for example, a negative response to a talk he heard on 1920 on the Soviet Union in which he was repelled by the concept of socialist order he heard discussed. He indicated a negative impression of Bolshevism and conclude his entry by noting that he rather have a new car than socialism!

Yet from the beginning of his literary career, Brecht was an enemy of the established bourgeois society. Brecht composed a strongly anti-bourgeois play *Baal* (1918-19), which had a complex relation to expressionism (Kellner, "Literature"), and in 1919 wrote *Drums in the Night*, a play that dealt with the disillusionment after World War I and the German revolution. The returning soldier in the play, Kragler, turned his back on the German revolution after the war in favor of going to bed with his girlfriend.

While in Berlin in the mid-1920s, Brecht began to show an interest in Marxism. He associated with a wide circle of distinguished leftist friends and artists, and became acquainted with Marxism through discussion with friends and collaborators such as Leon Feuchtwanger, Fritz Sternberg, John Heartfield, Wieland Herzfelde, Alfred Doblin, Hans Eisler, and Erwin Piscator. As Brecht tells it, he needed information about economics for a play planned with Piscator for the 1926-1927 season about the Chicago grain market. The unfinished play, **Wheat**, required knowledge about the sale and distribution of wheat. Brecht said that although he spoke extensively with grain brokers, they were not adequately able to explain the workings of the wheat market and that the grain market remained incomprehensible in standard economic and business discourse.

Although the planned drama remained fragmentary -- it was later renamed *Joe Fleischhacker* -- Brecht entered Marxist study groups at this time, including one run by Marxist heretic Karl Korsch. The man who he later referred to as "My Marxist Teacher" was one of the first Marxist intellectuals to be thrown out of the Communist Party for "deviationism." Korsch also developed a strong early critique of Leninism and then Stalinism. In this article, I argue that Brecht's specific version of Marxism was highly influenced by his "teacher" Karl Korsch and that indeed Korsch's version of Marxism shaped Brecht's aesthetic theory and practice. I attempt to demonstrate that certain Marxist ideas not only were central to Brecht's worldview, but to his

very concept of political art. Accordingly, emphasis will be put on the ways that his political aesthetics, derived from Marxian ideas, helped shaped the very form of his theater and writing. But first, I indicate how Brecht appropriated his concept of Marxism and what version of Marx's ideas so deeply influenced him.

### Korsch and Brecht

In the voluminous literature on Bertolt Brecht, the impact of the version of materialist dialectic advocated by Brecht's Marxian "teacher" Karl Korsch on Brecht's work has not been adequately clarified.[0] Not only did Korsch strongly influence Brecht's conception of Marxian dialectics, but the Marxian ideas that were most fruitful for Brecht's aesthetic practice were precisely the ideas shared by Brecht and Korsch in their conception of materialist dialectics and revolutionary practice. Brecht used the Korschian version of the Marxian dialectic in both his aesthetic theory and practice, in ways that are central -- rather than incidental -- to his work, as some critics have claimed.[1]

As noted, in the 1920s Brecht began serious study of Marxism while attempting to write a play on the grain market and shortly before working on *St. Joan of the Stockyards*. During the late 1920s, Brecht became increasingly interested in both the Marxian theory of society and the dialectical method of analyzing society and history. He later wrote: "when I read Marx's *Kapital*, I understood my plays" and described Marx as "the only spectator for my plays" (Brecht, GW 20: 46 and GW 15: 129).

To help him in his study of Marxism, Brecht sought the acquaintance of people who could teach him its fundamental ideas and method. At the time, Karl Korsch was one of the leading Marx scholars in Germany and was also one of the most active militants in the communist movement.[2] After the November revolution of 1918 the Kaiser fled Germany after German defeat in World War I and the Social Democratic Party was asked to form a government. They set up "socialization commissions" to study the socialization of industry and Korsch served on a commission to socialize the coal industry, though the Social Democrats soon lost power and nothing came of this work.

Fed up with the ineffective reformism of the Social Democrats, Korsch joined the Independent Socialist Party (USPD) in 1919 and then the Communist party (KPD) in 1920. Korsch served as justice minister in a short-lived left coalition in Thuringia in 1923, became editor of the communist journal *Internationale*, was on the Central Committee of the German Communist party (KPD), and represented the communists in the Reichstag.

In 1926 Korsch was one of the first victims of Stalinism and was expelled from the movement to which he was deeply committed and which he had loyally served. Thereafter he moved into the forefront of the left opposition and developed one of the sharpest critiques of the Stalinization of the Soviet Union, the Comintern, and the German Communist party. He worked with a variety of left oppositional groups and taught courses on Marxism at the Karl Marx School and in small study groups in Berlin. Brecht joined these courses and Korsch's study group and solidified a life-long friendship with Korsch.

From the beginning of his involvement with the communist movement in the early twenties, Korsch saw the Marxian dialectic as the theoretical core of Marxism. He characterized the Marxian dialectic by the principles of historical specification, critique, and revolutionary practice. The principle of historical specification articulates Marx's practice of comprehending all things social in terms of a definite historical epoch, of conceptualizing every society and phenomena as historically specific, rather than engaging in universalizing discourse and theory.

For Korsch, Marx's achievement was his analysis of historically distinct and specific features of capitalism and bourgeois society, as well as his development of a method that enabled one to analyze distinct social formations critically and to transform them radically. Bourgeois political economy and theory, on the other hand, dealt with the forms of bourgeois society as if they were universal, eternal, and unchanging relationships, rather than historical forms of a system that was full of contradictions and subject to radical transformation. Problems of economy, politics, and culture cannot be solved through a general abstract description of "economics as such," but requires "a detailed description of the definite relations which exist between definite economic phenomena on a definite historical level of development and definite phenomena which appear simultaneously or subsequently in every other field of political, juristic, and intellectual development" (Korsch, *Karl Marx*: 24).

For Korsch, the Marxian dialectic is a critical dialectic that aims at the critique and transformation of the existing bourgeois order (Korsch, "Why I Am a Marxist": 64-65). The Marxian dialectic sees reality as a process of continual change and is interested in those contradictions and antagonisms that make radical transformation possible. Above all, Marxian dialectic integrates critical theory with revolutionary practice which would emancipate the working class and construct socialism.

Korsch wrote his book *Karl Marx*, which summarizes his description of the basic principles of Marxism, Korsch he was a guest of the Brecht family in exile in Denmark and he and Brecht had daily discussions of the basic ideas of Marxism. They tended to agree on the basic principles, although they differed widely on their application, with Korsch highly critical of Leninism and the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union, while Brecht was more sympathetic. For Korsch and Brecht, MM provided "a new science of bourgeois society." It articulated the critical perceptions of the working class and attacked the views of the ruling bourgeois class. As a force of opposition to bourgeois society and its principles, it is "not a positive but a critical science. It is also a "practical theory" which aims at the revolutionary transformation of bourgeois society, investigating the tendencies visible in the present development of society which could lead to its overthrow. Thus, "it is not only a theory of bourgeois society but, at the same time, a theory of the proletarian revolution" (Korsch, *Karl Marx*: 36).[3]

Brecht's theoretical writings show that he agreed with Korsch on these issues and that he developed his conception of Marxian dialectics while working in Korsch's seminars and discussion groups. In the following sections, I shall accordingly delineate the parameters of Brecht's Marxist aesthetics, show the influence of Korsch, and then finally indicate the ambivalence and tensions in Brecht's relationship to Marxism.

## Epic Theater: Materialist Dialectics, the V-Effect, and the Politics of Separation

From the perspective of Korsch's version of Marxism, one could argue that Brecht's epic theater was built on the Marxian principles of historical specification and critique that he learned from Korsch. In his epic theater, Brecht sought to illuminate the historically specific features of an environment in order to show how that environment influenced, shaped, and often battered and destroyed the characters. Unlike dramatists who focused on the universal elements of the human situation and fate, Brecht was interested in the attitudes and behavior people adopted toward each other in specific historical situations.

Thus, in *Mahagonny* and *The Threepenny Opera* Brecht was interested in how people related to each other in capitalist society; in *Mother Courage*, how tradespeople related to soldiers and civilians during war in an emerging market society; in *The Measures Taken*, Brecht depicted revolutionary relationships in the struggle in China. He called this practice "historicization" and believed that one could best adopt a critical attitude toward one's society if the present social arrangements and institutions were viewed as historical, transitory, and subject to change (**Theatre** 140). Brecht intended that epic theater show emotions, ideas, and behavior as products of, or responses to, specific social situations and not as the unfolding of the human essence.

The primary theatrical device of epic theater, the *Verfremdungseffekt*, was intended to "estrangle" or "distance" the spectator and thus prevent empathy and identification with the situation and characters and allow the adoption of a critical attitude toward the actions in the play (*Theatre*: 91-99, 136-147, 191-196). By preventing empathetic illusion or a mimesis of reality, epic theater would expose the workings of societal processes and human behavior, and would thus show the audience how and why people behaved a certain way in their society. For example, the greed in *Mahagonny* and *The Threepenny Opera*, *Mother Courage's* sufferings, or Galileo's persecution, were to be understood as historically specific constituents of a social environment and the theater was to induce the spectator to reflect on **why** these events happened, thus providing the audience with better historical understanding and knowledge.

As Walter Benjamin stressed, the response to epic theater should be: "Things can happen this way, but they can also happen a quite different way" (8). The strategy was to produce an experience of curiosity, astonishment, and shock, raising such questions as: "Is that the way things are? What produced this? It's terrible! How can we change things?" Such a critical and questioning attitude was also fostered by a "montage of images" and series of typical social tableaux that Brecht called "gests" (*Brecht on Theater*: 42, 86-87, 104, 134, 139, 198-205). He wanted his spectators to work through these examples, to participate in an active process of critical thought that would provide insights into the workings of society, and to see the need for and to implement radical social change.

Brecht's epic theater broke with the "culinary theater" that provided the spectator with a pleasant experience or moral for easy digestion. He rejected theater that tried to produce an illusion of reality, claiming that illusionist theater tended to reproduce the dominant ideology and induce the spectators to identify bourgeois ideologies with reality. Brecht appropriated Korsch's theory that ideology was a material force that served as an important tool of domination; they both saw ideology as a deluding force from which people should be emancipated and both attempted to

produce works that would break people's identification with bourgeois ideologies (Korsch, **Marxism** 70-73 and Brecht GW 18: 156-158 and GW 20: 156-158).

Hence Brecht's practice of ideology demolition and "intervening thought" is an application of Korsch's principle of ideology-critique and intellectual action. Brecht saw his plays as providing an alternative to the dominant bourgeois theater that would force his spectators to think and to look at the world more critically. He saw this as a form of critical intervention with bourgeois culture that would undermine it from within. Thus both Korsch and Brecht viewed intellectual action, as well as aesthetic and political theory, as important moments in revolutionary practice -- along with economic and political action.

In order to produce a revolutionary theater, Brecht argued for a "separation of the elements" (Weber), or what MacCabe calls a "politics of separation." In the important *Mahagonny* notes, Brecht distinguished his separation of words, music, and scene from the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk, which fused the elements into one seductive and overpowering whole in which word, music, and scene work together to engulf the spectator in the aesthetic totality (**Theatre** 33-42). Conversely, in his "separation of the elements," each aesthetic component retains its autonomy and "comments" on the others, often in contradiction, to provoke thought and insight.

For instance, in *The Threepenny Opera*, first Mac and Polly, and then Mac and Jenny, sing of love and romance. But the scene is first a warehouse full of stolen goods and then a brothel, and the plot is one of deception and betrayal. These scenes might shock one into reflecting on the bourgeois ideology of love and the context of exploitation and betrayal that, in Brecht's view, marked bourgeois relationships. In Brecht's film *Kuhle Wampe*, romantic organ music is played as a young unemployed youth returns home after another futile search for work, evoking a poignant contrast between music and image. Contradiction between the elements, Brecht believed, would prevent identification and passive immersion and would provoke critical reflection. Each aesthetic medium retains its separate identity, and the product is an aggregate of independent arts in provocative tension.

Brecht's theory of aesthetic production is congruent with Korsch's model of the workers' councils as the authentic organs of socialist practice.[4] For just as Korsch urged a democratic, participatory activity of coproduction in the spheres of labor and politics, Brecht urges the same sort of coparticipation in his aesthetic production.[5] Brecht worked whenever possible in collectives in which a team of co-workers collaborated on production. He was especially attracted to radio and film as both exemplary of the highest development of the forces of production and as involving a new kind of collective work.[6] He saw his co-workers as important participants in the creative process, all of whom were encouraged to contribute to the production of the work of art. Such a revolution in the concept of creation, rejecting the notion of the creator as the solitary genius, was intended to alter aesthetic production radically, much as the workers' councils were intended to revolutionize industrial and political organization, thus providing an anticipatory model for socialist cultural organization.

Both Brecht and Korsch stress the primary importance of production in social life and see socialism as a constant revolutionizing of the forces and relations of production. Thus, in

opposition to such critics as Georg Lukács, Brecht defended the need to innovate, experiment, and produce new aesthetic forms.[7] He argued that since the apparatus of aesthetic production was not yet controlled by artists and did not work for the general good, revolutionary artists should strive to change the apparatus. One had to develop "the means of pleasure into an object of instruction, and to convert certain institutions from places of entertainment into organs of mass communication" (*Theatre*, 33-36, 42). Brecht's art thus aimed at a *radical pedagogy* that would provide political education, cultivate political instincts, and provoke revolutionary political practice.

### The Learning Plays as the Model of Brechtian Revolutionary Theater

Parallel to his work on epic theater, which he feared might be as "culinary as ever" (*Theatre*, 41). Brecht developed a new type of theater which he called *Lehrstück* "learning play." Here, too, Korsch's influence is pronounced, for, as Hans Eisler has noted, these plays resemble political seminars (132). Brecht described them as "a collective political meeting" in which the audience is to participate actively (GW 18: 132). One sees in this model a rejection of the concept of the bureaucratic elite party where the theorists and functionaries are to issue directives and control the activities of the masses. In these plays, correct doctrine and practice would be discovered and carried out through a participatory, collective practice rather than through hierarchical manipulation and domination; that is, the learning plays were to function as Korsch had envisioned the operation of the workers' councils.

The "learning plays" were conceived by Brecht as the model for the "theater of the future." They exemplified the principles of his political aesthetics, which would create a new type of participatory culture that would promote revolution. He now saw his epic dramas by contrast as "compromise forms." *The Life of Galileo* he considered "technically a great step backwards" (*Journals* 23) that was necessitated by conditions of production in exile and then by the conditions prevailing in the early years of the GDR.[8] The learning plays were thus Brecht's most explicitly political plays and his most radical attempt to politicize art.

In his "theory of pedagogy" for a socialist future, Brecht argued that mere pleasure was harmful for cultivating appropriate social views and behavior. Rather, a socialist theater should attempt to be useful to the state and socialize individuals into appropriate socialist values (GW 17: 1023). The learning plays were superior to epic theater, in Brecht's view, because they were more effective pedagogically, both for the artistic producers and for the audience who were to participate in more direct and creative ways in the aesthetic experience. The actors and audience were to distinguish social from asocial behavior by imitating ways of behaving, thinking, talking, and relating. Within a single play the actors frequently exchanged roles so that they could experience situations from different points of view.

For example, the learning play *The Measures Taken* confronts the audience with basic questions of revolution: violence, discipline, the structure of the party, the relation to the masses, revolutionary justice, and so on. In the plot, revolutionaries are forced to sacrifice a comrade to advance the aims of the revolution and he submits to the discipline. There is no "correct doctrine" set forth; the actors are to present a scene and then discuss it with the audience. Indeed, I saw a performance of this play in the 1970s and it elicited strenuous debate among the

members of the audience -- Stalinists, Trotskyists, members of the New Left, liberals, and hardcore anti-communists--about politics and morality.

Brecht wanted such an occasion to both elicit both audience participation and to produce political education. Like Korsch's model of the workers' councils, there is to be no established hierarchy in the production of the learning plays; rather there is to be democratic participation in coproduction. Moreover, the audience is encouraged to suggest actions that should have been taken and to also participate as members of the chorus. As with Korsch's model of democratic socialism, the people are to establish the principles of revolutionary practice, strategy, and tactics, and not the party elite theoreticians or bureaucrats. Moreover, the task of the revolutionary artist here is not to make palatable party doctrine for easy assimilation, but to encourage revolutionary thought and critique. This stance was clearly a threat to bureaucratic party functionaries, and they have consistently opposed Brecht's work (Kurella; V-lker 146-47).

The learning plays confronted the audience with situations such as sacrificing oneself for the good of the public as in *The Flight Over the Ocean* and *The Baden-Baden Cantata*, or putting oneself egotistically above all the others, as in the fragments "Fatzer" and "Der b-se Ball der asozilae" (Evil, Asocial Baal). There would often be contradictory models of service or exploitation as in *The Exception and the Rule*, social consent or refusal as in *He Who Said Yes* and *He Who Said No*, and effective or ineffective revolutionary practice as in *The Measures Taken*. Brecht called this practice of involving the producers and audience the "grand pedagogy" that would turn actors/audience into statesmen and philosophers. Whereas the "lesser pedagogy" of the epic theater merely "democratized the theater in the pre-revolutionary period," the "grand pedagogy" completely transforms the role of the producers and "abolishes the system of performer and spectator" (*Werke* 21: 396; *GW* 17: 1022-1024).

Brecht intended his learning plays for schools, factories, or political groups; actors and audiences could read, improvise, and alter the plays at will as Brecht himself had done in working on the plays with many different groups. Thus, in Brecht's concept of emancipatory pedagogy and revolutionary theater, the learning plays are not concerned with advocating specific doctrines, handing down a teaching for easy consumption, or functioning as propaganda. Rather, the plays are to engage a small audience in a process of learning.

Brecht saw his learning plays as a series of "sociological experiments," as "limbering-up exercises" or "mental gymnastics" for dialecticians.[9] He thought that the learning plays would radically revolutionize the theater apparatus. Thus they should not be seen as minor works as many critics have suggested; rather, they should be viewed as important examples of Brecht's concept of political theater. Brecht did in fact return to epic theater with the advent of fascism and conditions of exile, for the learning plays were viable only in contexts where there were political groups who could perform them and an audience who could relate them to revolutionary practice. In his last years in the GDR after World War II, he again turned his attention to the learning play and suggested that *The Measures Taken* should be considered as the model for a revolutionary theater of the future (Steinweg, *Lehrst, ck* 102-103).

## Me-ti: Materialist Dialectics in Literature and Brecht's Political Contradictions

During the exile period, Brecht was forced to develop new aesthetic forms since it was often difficult to find theaters to produce his work. Thus, I believe that the prose works of the exile period such as *Me-Ti*, the Keuner stories, and the *Tui* novel, as well as Brecht's *Arbeitsjournal*, can be seen as an extension of his aesthetic experiments to the realm of prose literature. One such experiment, *Me-ti*, embodies the principles of his political aesthetics in the prose domain, while articulating the political conflicts of the times and, as I see it, unfolding the contradictions and ambiguities in Brecht's own political position.

The text was written in exile during the 1930s and 1940s and was deeply influenced by Brecht's collaboration with Korsch. Brecht began collecting fragments for a book on social ethics with the title "B, chlein mit Verhaltenslehren" (Booklet on Moral Teaching) (GW 12: 2\*). During the period in 1935-36, when Korsch stayed with Brecht in Denmark, he continued working on the project and expanded it from a book on social ethics based on the teaching of the ancient Chinese philosopher Mo Tse (in German: Me-Ti) to an aphoristic reflection on the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union and a vehicle to play out in aphoristic form the debates of the era.

*Me-Ti* is subtitled "Book of Changes," a concept influenced by the classical Chinese text the *I-Ching*, or book of changes. The text is especially valuable in articulating Brecht's complex position toward Marxism because it exhibits a dialogue between major Marxian theorists using Chinese pseudonyms for the classic Marxist theorists. Brecht himself was drawn at once to the ideas of democratic socialism espoused by Luxemburg and Korsch and to the authoritarian communism of Lenin and Stalin.[10] A tension between Brecht's work and orthodox Leninism in both politics and aesthetics surfaced in the hostility of the German Communist party to his work, and in the polemics with Lukacs over the official aesthetic doctrine of Socialist Realism.[11] Although Brecht had an ambivalent position within the communist movement, he presented himself as an orthodox Marxist, a fervent devotee of Lenin, and publicly defended communist orthodoxy in the Stalin period. The private Brecht was torn by ambivalence and doubts concerning Stalinism and developments in the Soviet Union. These doubts, which Brecht confided to Marxian heretics such as Korsch and Benjamin, found literary expression in *Me-ti*, one of the most important sources for measuring Karl Korsch's influence on Brecht and Brecht's political contradictions.

There are formal similarities between the *Me-ti* novel and Brecht's learning plays. Both provoke thought and discussion of revolutionary theory and practice, rather than simply promulgate ossified doctrines or a party line. The main topics of *Me-ti*, "the grand method" (dialectics) and "the grand order" and "the grand production" (socialism), are presented in the form of aphoristic debates in which Leninism, Stalinism, and the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union are measured against the ideas of Marx and Engels, Korsch, Luxemburg, and Trotsky. The reader is forced to think through the opposing positions of the Marxian classics and contemporary Marxian theorists and to evaluate for her or his own self events in the Soviet Union. In addition, the reader is presented with fragments of political morality through which one can judge contemporary events.

Although Brecht inserts himself in the aphoristic dialogues, he does not represent a privileged

point of view, nor does *Me-ti*, *Mi-en-leh* (Lenin), *Meister Ko* (Korsch), or any of the other participants. The readers of this literary experiment are thus co-workers who contribute their own thought to produce revolutionary critique and reflection on Marxian theory and practice, as well as on practical ethics. Indeed, Brecht sees ethics and politics as intertwined and one of the goals of *Me-Ti* is to make this connection explicit and convincing.

Throughout *Me-ti*, Brecht applies the materialist concept of history to the history of historical materialism, as Korsch did earlier. As I shall show, Brecht accepted much of Korsch's critique of Stalinism and took seriously Korsch's argument that workers councils (the Soviets, or *R"te*) were the authentic organs of socialism and not a party bureaucracy.[12] Like Korsch, Brecht analyzes how later Marxian theories and practice realized or failed to realize Marx's ideas, which in turn were critically appraised in terms of the results they produced (or failed to produce). A passage, "The Opinion of philosopher Ko Concerning the Construction of the Order in Su" (Brecht, GW 12: 537), reveals the complexity of the situation Brecht was analyzing when he related Marxism to the developments in the Soviet Union. He indicates that Lenin "created a powerful state apparatus for the construction of the grand order, which must necessarily become a hindrance for the grand order in the foreseeable future."

Here Brecht is referring to Marx's doctrine of the withering away of the state in the transition to a higher stage of socialism. The implication is that precisely the construction of a bureaucratic order as in the Soviet Union will provide a deadly obstacle to the creation of a more democratic form of socialism -- as indeed it did. Brecht then refers to Korsch's critique that "the orderer would be a hindrance to the order," in reference to Korsch's belief that the Stalinist bureaucracy would prevent the development of an emancipatory socialism. Brecht also advanced Korsch's position that "actually the apparatus always functioned very badly and continually putrefied, throwing off a sharp stink."

Further, Brecht cites Korsch's position that the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky portended a surrender of Leninism, and that Trotsky merely "proposed rather doubtful reforms." The conclusion that "those principles proposed by Ko showed a clear weakness where *Mi-en-leh*'s principles were strongest, but Ko characterized excellently the weaknesses of the principles of *Mi-en-leh*" indicates that there are serious weaknesses in Leninism and suggests that there were sharp tensions in Brecht's political views. While Brecht did not accept all of Korsch's sharp attacks on the Soviet Union, Leninism, and Stalinism, he continually reflected on Korsch's views and frequently incorporated them into *Me-ti*.

For instance, an aphorism on "The Trials of Ni-En [Stalin]" is sharply critical of Stalin's trials and suppression of his opponents (GW 12: 538). Indeed, it is interesting that the Chinese character Brecht chooses for Stalin (*Ni-En*) signifies "no," a character of negation, thus implying that Stalin is a negative force, that he is a negation of authentic Marxian teaching. Yet Stalin is seen as "useful" in Brecht's phrase for the construction of socialism because he has actually done something to construct socialism, unlike intellectuals (Brecht's *Tuis*) who merely talk and do not have the burden of making real decisions. Brecht also seems to imply that while it might be useful to remove the enemies of socialism, even through trials, the showcase trials run by Stalin did a disservice to the people, thus presenting a nuanced, though problematical, position toward Stalin's trials through which he eliminated his opponents and set up a system of terror and death

camps.

Yet Brecht criticized in *Me-Ti* Stalin's autocratic rule in the aphorism "Autocratic Rule of Ni-en" (GW 12: 538). Here Brecht clearly chastises Stalin's autocratic rule and reversion to the authoritarian form of the Emperor. Brecht points to the lineage between Lenin and Stalin, the achievement of Lenin in seizing power, and the regression of Stalin. Brecht suggests that the backwardness of the Soviet Union, stressed by Lenin, helped produce a situation in which an autocrat like Stalin could wield absolute power in the absence of more developed democratic traditions.

Brecht continues his critique -- strongly influenced by Korsch -- in the aphorism on "Construction and Regression Under Ni-en" (GW 12: 539). Brecht praises here the advances in collectivizing industry and agriculture and suggests that all wisdom was directed toward economic construction and "chased out of politics." For Brecht, socialism constituted a better mode of production and Brecht seemed to think that the Soviet Union had at least revolutionized production and could be commended from a strictly economic point of view. Yet in politics, the Soviet Union was developing a form of autocracy and not democracy. Following Korsch's criticism, Brecht also notes how communist parties outside of the Soviet Union and good critical communists inside were harmed by the lack of political democracy. Yet Brecht criticizes Master Ko (Korsch) for turning away from the grand method -- a criticism only partially true because Korsch continued to believe in the power of the dialectical method and to believe in a democratic and workers councils based socialism, although Korsch clearly rejected the form of communism developed in the Soviet Union.

The *Me-Ti* aphorisms may be regarded as merely a literary experiment that Brecht never published and finished, and one might argue that they were points of view Brecht was proposing for discussion and did not express his own position. He never published *Me-ti*, which indicates a reluctance to attack Stalin and the Soviet Union openly. The same ambivalence toward Stalin and the Soviet Union, however, are found in his *Journals*, where he considered Korsch's critiques with the utmost seriousness.[13] *Me-ti* represents Brecht's most comprehensive juxtaposition of Korsch's positions with "official" Marxian doctrines and shows that throughout the exile period he pondered questions of practical and theoretical Marxism. *Me-ti*, Brecht's letters, and his *Journals* show that he continued to reflect upon and to contrast his own views with the ideas of his teacher and friend Karl Korsch, the theorist who helped provide the foundation for Brecht's Marxist aesthetic.

### Conclusion

After World War II, Brecht left his exile in the United States and was invited to form a theater group in East Berlin, the Berliner Ensemble, and eventually was given a theater in which he served as head dramatist in the GDR. Although Brecht remained a somewhat orthodox communist he cannot really be considered an apologist of Stalinism for, as I have demonstrated, he was deeply influenced by the heretical Marxism of Karl Korsch and was sharply critical of Stalin in his unpublished writings.[14] During the 1953 workers uprising in East Berlin against the Stalinist regime, Brecht made some cryptic comments that seemed to support the cause of the workers, but managed to keep his official position with the Berliner Ensemble.

But it is in his actual work that the influence of Marxism is most apparent and important, and his major work thus presents an important example of an aesthetic theory and practice influenced by Marxism, albeit of a critical nature. Indeed, in retrospect Brecht's faith in the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union was misplaced and Korsch's criticisms of Stalinism and the deformation of socialism in the Soviet bloc turn out to have been more accurate. Yet it was precisely Korsch's interpretation of Marxian theory that provided key impulses for Brecht's own aesthetic theory and production and despite the collapse of communism many of those Marxian ideas remain useful today.

It is an irony of history that Marxian theory has proved more valuable than actual Marxian politics, in view of the collapse of the entire Soviet socialist bloc in recent years. Yet Bertolt Brecht found Marxism a productive source of ideas both to understand the work and to revolutionize art. Thus, ironically, the Marxian revolution had more fruitful results in theory and cultural practice than in actual politics.

### Notes

0 Brecht's relationship to Karl Korsch was first discussed by Rasch. Other contributions include Miller, Muenz-Koenen, Steinweg, Bruggemann, Buono, and Mittenzwei. See also the two issues of the periodical *alternative* 41 (1965) and 105 (1975).

1 See *alternative* 91 (1973) and 93 (1973). Interpreters who downplay or denigrate Brecht's Marxism include Esslin and Bentley tries to disassociate Brecht from Marxism and to associate him with Beckett.

2 For a detailed reconstruction of Korsch's political activity and theory, see Kellner, "Introduction."

3 Brecht consulted with Korsch on theoretical and aesthetic issues throughout the exile period. See the Korsch-Brecht correspondence published in *alternative* 41 (1965) and 105 (1975). Much of Brecht's "Marxian Studies" is a dialogue with Korsch: see the passages that summarize Korsch's works and set out theses developed in Korsch's seminars, GW 20: 68-72. Yet Brecht was also critical of Korsch, seeing him as an intransigent intellectual who refused to compromise with political realities; see "On My Teacher" in GW 20: 65-66. See also his critique of Korsch's Karl Marx as being too "formalistic," too much an abstract presentation of Marx's dialectics, rather than demonstrating dialectics in action as Brecht himself tried to do; Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*: 19.

4 See Korsch, "Socialization?" and "Fundamentals."

5 Such issues would take us into biographical questions beyond the scope of this study, but one might argue that Brecht tended to exploit his coworkers, especially women, and did not live up to the democratic, participatory and collective principles that he espoused. This position was been documented recently by Fuegi. Yet at many stages of his life, Brecht engaged in genuinely collective work and the principles in Brecht's aesthetic practice remain consistent with a version of Korschian democratic Marxism, even if Brecht himself did not realize this principles in adequate fashion.

6 See Marc Silberman, "Brecht and Film" in this volume.

7 For Brecht's attack on Lukács' and his argument that the revolutionary artist should

revolutionize form as well content, see Brecht, "Against", 36-38. On the aesthetic differences between Brecht and Lukács in the so-called expressionism controversy, see Gallas and Bronner.

8 In the same Journals entry of 25 February 1939 Brecht praises the learning play fragments "Fatzer" and "Der Brotladen" (The Breadhsop) as technical models. My interpretation of the learning plays is much indebted to Steinweg and the issues of *alternative* (78/79, 91, and 107) dedicated to Brecht's learning plays.

9 See Brecht, "Gespräch" and Steinweg.

10 Brecht admired the left-communists Korsch and Rosa Luxemburg because of their activism and adherence to the concept of the workers' councils which they believed contained the authentic institutions of socialist democracy. In Lenin, Brecht respected the ability to translate revolutionary theory into practice. Stalin -- as *Me-ti*, the *Arbeitsjournal*, and unpublished manuscripts and clippings in the Brecht archives attest -- elicited an ambivalence in Brecht that has prevented consensus among critics on the subject of Brecht and Stalin. Very little inquiry has been made into his attitude toward Trotsky because there is little evidence. In the *Arbeitsjournal* during the period when Trotsky was heatedly debated within the international communist movement, Brecht offered no substantive discussion of the "Trotsky question," though there are references to the debates in *Me-Ti*.

11 Many commentators have stressed the tension between Brecht's communism and his aesthetic practice; however, most fail to see the tension and the ambiguities within Brecht's Marxism due to the conflict between the democratic Marxism of Korsch and Western Marxism opposed to the authoritarian Marxism of Lenin and Stalin. The tension was played out in Brecht's ongoing dialogue within the communist movement in the twenties and thirties and especially in his literary works.

12 Regarding Brecht's acceptance of Korsch's position that the workers councils were indispensable to the construction of socialism, see Brecht's theses "On the Model R [Rote=workers' councils]" as a moment of the proletarian dictatorship; see GW 20: 119 and Brecht's letter to Korsch in 1941 where he asks Korsch to write a historical account of the relationship of the councils to the party explaining the suppression of the councils system (*alternative* 105 [1975]: 252).

13 For a more critical perspective on Brecht's Marxism and attitude toward Stalin, see Dahmer. Dahmer, however, neglects many passages in *Me-ti* and wrongly says that Korsch's views on the development of the Soviet Union are not included in *Me-Ti* (67).

14 Völker points out that in addition to a rather cool obituary notice for Stalin at his death in 1953, Brecht only referred to Stalin twice in his published works. See Brecht: 354).