Das Subjekt Herr Keuner: Auf dem Weg zu einer Ethik Brechts


This article deals in the first place with a series of criticisms that have been launched against Brecht's Marxism. In different ways, they all emphasize that Brecht's Marxist affiliation prevents him from providing a proper account of the subject. The article concentrates in the second place on three mainstream criticisms of the relationship between Marxism and ethics. I show that they all share their incapacity to articulate the subject as simultaneously knotted along the registers of the economic-social, the ethical, and the legal-juridical. This is due to the fact that they view Marxism as thinking the social in terms of the architectonic metaphor of the base and the superstructure. Finally, the article offers an alternative, which is based on Brecht's Marxist conceptualization of the ethical subject in Die Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner.
The Subject Herr Keuner: Towards a Brechtian Ethics

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1. Marxism and Ethics

Although the Marxist idea according to which the determination of subjective life by material life (i.e. by the economy) has been historically fundamental to Leftist movements, politics, theory and art, it is also true that today a great amount of Leftist theory and politics does not want to deal directly with economic problems, and concentrates instead on cultural, identity or “merely political” issues.¹ In fact, today a great deal of Leftist theory and politics reject Marxism altogether, and with this rejection also goes a great part of its intellectual and artistic inheritance, including of course that of Brecht’s corpus. According to this contemporary understanding, then, Brecht’s Marxism is to be erased or put aside as if it didn’t exist or as if it were a failure of his that we are supposed to bracket—or at most consider his personal mistake.

The tenor of contemporary criticisms of Marxism generally underlines how it collapses the irreducible autonomy and contingency of political, symbolic, ethical and subjective life into the objectivistic metalanguage of the economy. The individual is always and necessarily inserted in a wider context (the social and the economic); and this wider context, when fully taken into account, does not leave any space for the wealth of the individual, for her ethical life, for her responsibility, for the complexity of life. This is a problem that is seen to pervade the entire tradition of Marxism, starting obviously with Marx. It is thus argued that Marxism dangerously tends to a very strong reductionism that prevents any correct explanation of subjectivity, particularity and multiplicity, and the ways in which these express themselves in history via contingency, free play, and creativity. Historical materialism, so the argument goes, enacts inexorable and abstract laws of history as if these were capable of being formulated scientifically, the consequence being that no space is left for the theorization of the possibility of random events, the singular agency of subjects, or the expression of discursive differences and modes of existence.² This is its purported scientific and mechanistic flaw, the claim according to which Marxism explains away real history in its construction of all-encompassing and deterministic cause-effect laws of history, where no accidents and lived experience are allowed to be perceived at all. But it also amounts to its metaphysical inclinations, the fact that it tends to see all social reality through the lenses of class analysis, as if the only real and existing subject were the proletariat, destined to appropriate history through its praxis. Ernesto Laclau has termed this problem of Marxism its “Platonic cave of class reductionism”.³ In its stubborn emphasis on class,

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Marxism was wrong in that it didn’t conceive of other forms of identity formation besides class (e.g. gender, race, nation, etc.); in that it only conceptualized the working class in terms of production, and not in terms of symbolic or other kinds of historical experience; and, finally, in that it ended up having a naive faith in the missionary and revolutionary role of the proletariat: it expected that once the proletariat had learned of its subjective position and implication in the capitalist mode of production, this self-consciousness would ineluctably and radically transform history.

More specifically, as pertains to the contemporary rejection of Brecht’s Marxist affiliation, which is what primarily interests us here, it is usually claimed that his lack of a proper account of subjective wealth is clearly noticeable in his disdain for humanist concerns. This disdain is concomitant to his modernist appraisal of scientific experimentation and economic production, and to his belief in useful scientific and economic knowledge. Thus, Brecht is depicted as someone who believes in a form of artistic creation that simply mirrors technical skill, as both are rooted in the collective and emancipatory development of industrial production. It should be stated, however, that nobody affirms that Brecht fell prey to the belief in a historical (economic or technological) force that would achieve a predetermined revolutionary goal. Rather, his problem has something to do, according to his critics, with his incapacity to properly theorize the subject. Indeed, it was another Marxist, Georg Lukács, who already pointed at how Brecht’s characters were merely abstract functions in a formal dialectical method of class struggle: disembodied, not really individualized figures totally emptied out of psychological traits. This tendency to abstraction is certainly compatible with what other critics have perceived as his contempt for individual or personal issues, which vanish to nothing in the face of his paramount concern with the collective (be it the factory, the army, or the government) or with the belief in a collectivist orientation. In fact, as Marc Silberman contends, “Brecht insisted, of course, on a political and sociological definition of class as the primary or hegemonic articulation of subject identity,” with the consequence that he was sometimes unaware of “a much more complex intersecting of needs, demands, fears, and desires”.

So even if Brecht himself conceived of his work as a “new, social and antimetaphysical art,” his alleged use of an epistemological model of “false consciousness” as applied to the subject could be easily criticized as falling prey to metaphysics. That Brecht only used a model of false or reified consciousness for his ideological critique of culture is an argument that is repeated, even by those commentators who are generally very sympathetic towards his work. What this model usually entails is a clear-cut differentiation between an ideological bourgeois consciousness, absolutely and illusorily embedded in a false representation of the
economic base, and the real active consciousness of the proletariat. It is metaphorical to the extent that proletarian subjectivity is seen as more authentic and ontologically more aware of the actual conditions of existence than its counterpart, bourgeois morality, but also in that the economic base is established as having ontological priority to the ideological superstructure, which serves as a disguise of real material interests, and which is supposed to float substanceless on top of the base. Not only juridical and state institutions and practices, but also subjective claims to universal morality or individual ethics are seen, according to this model of false consciousness, to be part of the ideological framework of the capitalist mode of production that illusorily presents itself as independent, without acknowledging its ultimate determination by the real material conditions of production.

It should also be emphasized that these readings of Brecht’s Marxism that we are briefly putting forward here need to be located and understood historically, according to the different stages and political contexts of the reception of his work after his death. To grasp the different constellations of ideas about Brecht in this period, I will just very quickly divide it into three moments (1960s, 1970s, and 1980s-1990s); and will only refer to the artistic and philosophical reception, without properly addressing wider historical and political issues of the last 50 years. Stephen Mulke reminds us that in the 1960s Brecht’s Marxist model was praised by the student movements, and taken as the main reference and source of inspiration by play and film writers such as Max Frisch, Peter Weiss, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and many others. This appropriation was not without certain distancing, for, as Jane Shattuc has also argued, Brecht was considered by some of these new cultural movements part of the “old Left,” i.e., the established Left that was accepted by the Left in power (the SPD in the FRG and the SED in the GDR). Although he himself a great follower of Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt, Fassbinder declared that his own alienation techniques were stylistic, as opposed to Brecht’s, which were merely intellectual. This was not entirely disconnected to Lukács’ earlier claims that Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt tried to mistakenly bring together the method of science with that of aesthetics, and thus ran the risk of “excessive conceptualization, of being connected from Signal System 1 to Signal System 2”. In France, Roland Barthes had been praising Brecht since the 1950s and proclaimed that the only political theater that was taking place at that time in Europe was the one developed by the German author. In his view, it was a theater that tried to connect to the people, that owed its inspiration to historical materialism in its view of the world as class struggle, but that, contrary to any deterministic view of history, it never tried to reduce individuals to mere pawns on a chessboard, or mere signs of a historical algebra. Also in France, Louis Althusser published an article on Brecht in his book On Marx in which he discussed Brecht’s method as a critique of psychological identification and ideology,—where ideology includes morality, politics and religion.
Hannah Arendt had of course a very different perspective on Brecht. In the chapter dedicated to him in her book *Men in Dark Times*, she clearly displays great admiration for his poetry, his innovation in the German language, and even for certain traits of his character (such as his lack of self-interest, or his love of anonymity, - but even in this respect she qualifies her praise, as she thinks of these as a gift he possessed which easily turned into a curse). She also recognizes the difficult times that he had to live through, not only during the exile period in Denmark and America, but also when he finally settled in the GDR and had to constantly maneuver to maintain his political independence, and to keep his art autonomous. But all in all Arendt cannot but think of Brecht as a poet who naïvely went beyond the limits that are assigned to poets, as he committed the worst possible mistake in being a Marxist and following the doctrinaire communist ideology. Her overall reading is to separate completely one Brecht, the exceptional witness of an epoch of darkness and catastrophe, from another Brecht, the trivial Marxist who supported the communist variety of totalitarianism.21

In the 1970s, and certainly due to Heiner Müller’s well-deserved rise, it was generally accepted that Brecht had introduced a very important new angle into theater that had to be pursued by the new generations of writers. However, what was felt as Brecht’s orthodox Marxism was seen to impose a very rigid and conventional structure onto the writing process, one that didn’t allow for new experimentations. Müller stated that the only way to remain faithful to Brecht was by strongly criticizing him. He thus argued that instead of attending to the essential contradictoriness of the social, Brecht’s Marxism just tried to offer very quick ethical solutions. And this was more so the case in parables such as *Geschichten vom Herr Keuner*, which were seen to be very rigid in that they adhered to fixed systems of reference, at least in comparison with another master of parables, Kafka and his suggestive alienating effects.22 Müller hence tried to develop Brecht’s conception of gestus, but now in order to show contradictions at a micrological and subjective level, leaving open and mainly undecided the path of action of the characters, thus eliminating from his work what was characterized as Brecht’s dialectical machine of readymade solutions.

Stephen Mulke argues that, except for a few names, Müller’s image of Brecht still dominated in the 1980s and 1990s, and especially since 1989.23 During this period, Brecht tended to be condemned on moral grounds, that is, as the last representative, in art, of the dangers of a highly ideological and even totalitarian epoch. What was to be rescued in Brecht, partially following Müller, was the non-Marxist Brecht, i.e. the great creator of the Verfremdungseffekt, - now merely understood as an example of sophisticated humor and postmodern irony —, or as the theorist of Gestus, - merely tantamount to Nietzschean or Artaudian figures of
excess. One great exception that we should obviously keep in mind is Fredric Jameson’s critique of this outlook in *Brecht and Method*,24 which steered clear of any culinary and not-useful (Brecht’s words, of course) reading of Brecht, and never renounced his Marxist allegiance.

Now, if these are the main coordinates from which Brecht’s Marxism has been received and analyzed, it should come as no surprise the difficulty that one encounters today when trying to study the more specific Marxian ethics that could follow from his approach. There is obviously no space in this article to discuss in depth the wider issue of Marxism and ethics, although above I have already pointed at a few problems. The relationship between Marxism and ethics has been extensively investigated by Marxists and non-Marxists alike, although today not with the same intensity as it was done till the 1980s or early 1990s. This is certainly because of the crude problems that we have already mentioned with respect to Marxism in general, but also as a consequence of the global political situation since 1989. For the sake of argument, I will just roughly distinguish between three extreme, but quite generalized, positions that have been traditionally advanced with respect to the relationship of ethics and Marxism. We will see below that they share very crucial presuppositions, all of which need to be criticized.

The three positions on Marxism and ethics are: (1) Marxism guarantees that a fully socialist society entails an entirely moral and ethical individual. This is the radical position of Lukács in 1919, which is based on the belief that such a society is possible at “the point at which individual and class interests converge” and due to “increased production, a rise in productivity and a corresponding strengthening of labour discipline”.25 It has its origin in Marx’s own claim, put forward in the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, according to which in a communist society individual being and human species being would coalesce in the full development of their capacities. As the above quote makes clear, it entails a very deterministic view of productivity as the motor of social change.26 Lukács adds to this utopian view the idea that in such a society there would be no need for legality, which he understands as merely compulsive and restrictive with respect to the individual and collective goal of freedom.

(2) Marxism and morality are incompatible. Marxism shows that any claim to abstract universality—in the form of human rights, for instance—forms part of the ideological and superstructural framework of society. This is, for instance, Steven Lukes’ thesis, based on his reconstruction of Marx’s views about morality in *The German Ideology* (with Engels), the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, and some passages in *Capital* in which Marx criticizes Proudhon’s abstract views of equality and justice.27 According to Marxism, Lukes maintains, any conception of abstract universality in the form of rights or obligation, as valid for all members of society, and
as autonomous of particular interests is necessarily ideological. And by ideological he means "spurious" and "illusory": "They serve to conceal the real function of principles of Recht, which is to protect the social relations of the existing order". 28 Marxism's main task, therefore, is to unmask and unveil this self-portrayal of morality by showing the real bourgeois interests that it serves. Lukes doesn't do it in this article, but one could possibly argue that it would follow from this position that the only morality that is not illusory is some kind (or ideal?) of proletarian ethics, one that does not disguise its interests in false universal claims.

(3) Finally, the idea has been put forward that a defense of ethics and legality would require abandoning Marxism, whilst still being "Marxist". This was, for instance, Drucilla Cornell's extremely paradoxical reply to Lukes's essay in Praxis International. Her views on what it meant to be a Marxist amounted to the defense of a theory of justice based on abstract principles of right such as those proposed by Jürgen Habermas in his jurisprudential model of communication and formation of discursive will. It obviously exceeds the limits of this article to discuss in detail Habermas' theses, or Cornell's appropriation of them. However, in order to grasp the motivation that is at the basis of their position, it should suffice us to quote Cornell's own words, when she states that "the move beyond Marx is consistent with the early Marx's underlying critique of right and with his staunch support of the free press and of universal suffrage". 29 Except the adjective "Marxist," not much of Marx is left in her (or arguably in Habermas') position. 30 As explicitly stated, the idea is to "move beyond Marx" as Marxism (and it should be noted that by Marxism Cornell only takes into consideration Lukes' version of Marxism) is incapable of having a proper account of ethics, and concomitantly tends to dangerously negate legality. This mistake "undoubtedly has its roots in the later Marx's own reliance on scientific rhetoric," 31 so the only thing that is worth rescuing in Marx, she concludes, is the liberal impulse that inspires his early writings. We can also dismiss as "scientific" the analysis of the economy or of the capitalist mode of production.

I would like to claim that what these three positions about Marxism and ethics share is their incapacity to articulate the subject as simultaneously knotted along the registers of the economic/social, the ethical, and the legal/juridical. It follows from this incapacity that the subject is either viewed as a pure proletarian subjectivity (Lukács and Lukes), or as a purely political (liberal) subject, as we have seen in Cornell. To put it briefly, in the utopian socialist view of Lukács, the proletarian subject is a pure economic subject, inserted in the full development of the forces of production. That is, someone who actually bypasses the problem of the juridical (which is precisely what Cornell sees as being so problematic in Marxism). Similarly, in the reductive Marxist view of Lukes, the juridical and morality are mere forms of false consciousness, that is,
illusory representations of the real economic conditions of production. Nevertheless, Lukes doesn’t actually derive from this view any alternative model of ethics that could allow us to properly give an account of how to conceptualize a Marxist model of an ethical subject. Finally, Cornell just takes the last step of actually getting rid of Marxism altogether, with the unavoidable problem that she can only thematize the subject as a liberal one, thus completely ignoring the register of the economic (and the problem of capitalism altogether).

What these three positions also have in common is the idea that Marxism inevitably leads to a reduction of the legal or the ethical to the metalanguage of the economy, i.e. the essentialist idea according to which the economy (the forces and relations of production) determines all modes of existence including of course ethics and subjective responsibility. This is certainly what Lukács is defending when he states that in a perfect socialist society the realization of morality is tantamount to the full development of the economy, or what Lukes is writing about when he affirms that in capitalism the ethical and the juridical are simply illusions or false representations of the actual relations of production. It is also what is lurking behind Cornell’s arguments when she abandons Marxism in order to endorse an abstract model of legality in the form of ideal intersubjective or discursive ethical principles. At the end of the day, what they all presuppose is that Marxism can only think of the social in terms of the architectonic metaphor of the base and the superstructure: the idea that there is a real or material base (of real or material conflict between forces and relations of production) upon which a spurious or illusory superstructure (which includes all kinds of ideology: from religion and the juridical, to of course ethics) erects itself.

2. A Brechtian Ethics

Bertolt Brecht consistently lamented the tendency of Marxist thought to ossify into a formal and formalist framework insensitive to the wealth, and contradictoriness, of ethical experience. In what follows I would like to argue, concentrating on a text of Brecht that I have already mentioned, *Die Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner*, that not only can we dismiss as false an alleged essentialism of Brecht, but also that, contrary to the contemporary rejection of his Marxist thought, the latter in fact allows for the theorization of an ethical model of action that takes into account, in one go, economic and subjective issues, material and cultural problems. My claim will be that, at his best, Brecht neither neglects economic issues, nor dismisses the subjective responsibility and fundamental contradictoriness that lies at the source of ethical actions. By carefully analyzing a few passages from the above mentioned, and wonderful, text, I will try to show that Brecht tries to integrate the political, the juridical, the ethical and/or the subjective into an analysis of the economic; in other words, that he tries
to effectively do away with the rather tried and overplayed metaphor of the ideological superstructure and the economic base. According to this metaphor, there is, on the one hand, at one level, the economy ruled by its own deterministic laws, and on the other hand, at another distinct level, the rest of life. A great amount of interpretations of Marxism maintain that Marxism effectively does away with the second level by reducing it to the determination of the economy, as if the economy were a metalanguage that could account for everything human—that could end up eliminating, in its dryness and abstraction, the contradictoriness and wealth of subjectivity. These interpretations are not entirely incorrect; as we have already seen, a great deal of Marxism has indeed tended to reduce subjectivity to the determinations of the economy. Keeping this in mind, I will argue that in Brecht's model of ethics, the economy is never a metalanguage that underpins and explains political, symbolic or subjective contingency, but rather the space or field of forces where this political, symbolic, ethical or subjective contingency is allowed to irrupt or come to the fore in the first place.

**Motives instead of Principles**

We will begin by considering a few ethical motives in *Herr Keuner*. The first thing that I would like to argue is that from the different situations depicted in each of the stories one cannot derive universal principles in the sense of generalizations, laws or rules of action valid in any case or circumstance, or for everybody. Rather, these stories put forward ethical motives in which a subject is forced to confront or deal with a concrete situation, and whose response will necessarily have important effects on other people. What they prove is that Brecht is not operating here with a base/superstructure model of representation, i.e. that the depicted actions do not attempt to portray mediations between two supposedly distinct levels: the political and the ethical, on the one hand, and the economic or material, on the other. The reason for this lack of mediations in his mode of representation lies in the simple fact that for Brecht an ethical or political act is always already economic and material. I will also try to show that Brecht's mode of representation tries to thematize one single level, that of the capitalist mode of production—but one that, at any moment, can be altered, reshaped and contested by the insertion of subjectivity, or the possibility of an ethical act, or even the political, within it.

The opening of the economy by the subjective ethical act is, I would maintain, the main characteristic of Brecht's dialectical method: in his work, he carefully observes a situation in which an ethical response is required; he also reveals that this ethical response is in itself only relevant, or even made possible, by the consideration of material or economic elements (in his words: needs, satisfactions, hunger—the economic in the broadest sense), and, finally, he shows that these material elements
appear to be, without the need for mediations, completely impregnated by ideas, philosophy, ideology, etc. As we shall also see, the intertwining of ethical or subjective and economic motives will also help us explain the political struggle in which Brecht locates himself. His objective is to combat ideological (he would like to say: philosophical) attitudes that do not take into account the material motives that are necessarily intertwined with them.

I will consider and analyze, then, two kinds of motives that appear in Herr Keuner in order to show how Brecht tries to avoid any architectonic framework of base and superstructure. The economic, the political, the legal and the subjective co-imply each other, without gaps or mediations. In order to anticipate the meaning of the anecdotes and clarify the motive that is at stake in each case, I will also provide tentative titles to each of them. The two kinds of motives are:

1) Ethical and subjective motives
2) Ideological or philosophical motives

**Ethical motives**

a) The primordiality of the practical. In the story “The question of whether there is a God,” Brecht writes that somebody asked Herr Keuner whether God existed. Herr Keuner’s reply is the following:

I advise you to consider whether, depending on the answer, your behavior would change. If it would not change, then we can drop the question. If it would change, then I can at least be of help to the extent that I can say, you have already decided: you need a God.\(^{35}\)

Two aspects come to the fore in this parable, both of which point at the insertion of the subject’s own position in the question that is being posed. Firstly, Brecht replies that you need to observe your own behavior. This self-observation will give you the answer to the question about God. However, the moment you ask not only about God, but also about why you are asking about God, you come to realize that the first question did not demand a theoretical answer, but rather a question about your own behavior. Secondly, Brecht writes that you have to observe what you already do, that you don’t have to look for the answer somewhere else. The primordiality of the practical in Brecht’s model is tantamount to the fact that the truth about yourself is something that is already there in you, that you are, so to say, already accomplishing or executing it. In the last instance, therefore, even a question about God’s existence is a question about your own practice, about ethics.
b) The truth is already there: it is a practice, it is being realized. In “About truth” Brecht juxtaposes the question of truth with the price one pays when buying fish:

Deep, the student, came to Mr. Keuner, the thinking man, and said: “I want to know the truth.”

“Which truth? The truth is well known. Do you want to know the truth about the fish trade? Or about the tax system? If, because they tell you the truth about the fish trade, you no longer pay a high price for their fish, you will never know the truth,” said Mr. Keuner.36

Herr Keuner needs to explain his first rather cryptic answer about the truth being well known by stating that the truth is in the very act of buying their fish. There is no need to dig very deep in order to see what is the truth of profit making, or even about production; the truth is realized each time one buys or sells. The truth is related to the subjective element of taking part in the whole (objective) process. It is known precisely because it is a practice. It is already there, being realized each time one buys or sells. One cannot find a final theoretical answer to the truth about the fishing industry, or to the truth about anything. The truth about any situation lies in the subjective and ethical insertion of the question that is being posed about the content of what is being said. Therefore, knowledge is first of all a practical thing, a process that constantly requires studying.

In a similar vein, Brecht writes in “Socrates” that Herr Keuner doesn’t like those philosophers who present things as unknowable—those who, like Socrates, claim to know nothing at all.37 One has to study. Indeed, as Brecht’s friend Walter Benjamin recalls in his texts on epic theater, Brecht had on a window ledge in his room a little donkey that nodded its head. Brecht had put a little notice around its neck that said: “I, too, must understand it”.38

c) Procedures and formulas have nothing to say about justice and ethics. In “A good answer” Brecht comes up with another interesting example that can help us understand the previous idea:

In a court a worker was asked whether he wanted to take the lay oath or swear on the Bible. He answered: “I am unemployed.” “This was not simply absentmindedness,” said Mr. K. “By this answer he showed that he found himself in a situation where such questions, indeed perhaps the whole proceedings as such, have become meaningless.”39

Brecht is here trying to show how on certain occasions the usual set of questions about which formula to use, even more, the whole procedure,
do not make any sense. But isn’t the worker’s comment something one would never say in front of a jury? Why? Because it belongs to an order that is presupposed, which is always already there, and which requires no further consideration. According to this implicit order, it is known that you have to have the material means that allow you to make a statement in front of a jury. However, this knowledge does not need to be explicitly discussed, it remains, so to say, in the background. One could add: it is a practice that is not even known in the sense of anyone having a full awareness of it. It is something that is being practiced. Like the truth about you or the situation in which you are, it is already there, and is effective. One could phrase this idea in a different way: the economic motive (uttered by the worker) and the statement in front of the jury (about the procedure) are in the same world, but it is as if this world was split itself in two: one side which deals with economics, another which deals with procedures, formulas, symbolic rituals, and so on. Are they in some way connected? Brecht would say that they belong to the same world, that the statement in front of the jury leads without mediations to the question of the material needs, and vice versa, that the statement about economics has also something to do with the order that allows us to presuppose certain silence about it. Brecht’s dialectical thinking/acting would consist in grasping both statements simultaneously, as one reality that is split into two.

d) “Form and content”. There is another thought of Herr Keuner that allows us to see the necessary connection between the material needs of practical life and, in this case, art:

Mr. K. looked at a painting that gave certain objects a very unconventional form. He said: “When they look at the world, some artists are like many philosophers. In the effort to find a form, the content gets lost. I once worked for a gardener. He handed me a pair of shears and told me to trim a laurel tree. The tree stood in a pot and was hired out for celebrations. For that it had to have the form of a sphere. I immediately began to prune the wild shoots, but no matter how hard I tried to achieve the form of a sphere, I did not succeed for a long time. First I lopped off too much on one side, then on the other. When the tree had at last become a sphere, the sphere was very small. Disappointed, the gardener said: ‘God, that’s the sphere, but where’s the laurel?’”

In this parable, Brecht is once again emphasizing the interrelation between material and practical motives and artistic or intellectual ones. One cannot lose sight of the content at the basis of the laurel, that is, one cannot erect a so-called autonomy of the form executed by the artist as it
could be abstracted from the practice into which it is built. This doesn’t mean—and at this point, however, we would move a little bit beyond Brecht—that form is to be neglected at the expense of content. That is, that one could speak of a content that is prior or more substantial or real than form. Content only exists in a specific form. What Brecht is defending is the possibility of a consideration of a practice that, in the terms that he employs here, allows for a form that doesn’t deny or suppress its constitutive content. But, what content is Brecht talking about here?

e) Change. The previous question could be addressed considering the anecdote called “Meeting again”: “A man who had not seen Mr. K. for a long time greeted him with the words: “You haven’t changed a bit”. “Oh!” said Mr. K. and turned pale”. 41 In “Knowledge of human nature” writes Brecht: “Thinking means making changes”.42 These two reflections on change point at the priority of the practical as the insertion of the subject into that which is being said/done. They can also underline the idea of self-transformation, in the sense that the subject who inserts himself or herself into what is being said/done is always on the make, always within a certain field of forces and responsible for the effects of his/her actions. Another interesting anecdote about change is “Mr. Keuner and the flood tide”:

Mr. Keuner was walking through a valley when he suddenly noticed that his feet were walking through water. Then he realized that his valley was in reality an arm of the sea and that high tide was approaching. He immediately stood still in order to look round for a boat. But when no boat came in sight, he abandoned his hope and hoped that the water would stop rising. Only when the water reached his chin did he abandon even this hope and begin to swim. He had realized that he himself was a boat.43

According to this parable, instead of waiting for the situation to improve, one transforms oneself into what one thinks the situation requires of oneself. A more straightforward (and certainly utopian today, in the age of global mass media) example of a similar phenomenon is given in “Mr. Keuner and the newspapers” when somebody called Herr Wirr (Mr. Muddle) complains about newspapers. Herr Keuner says that a complaint serves no purpose; that one has to imagine, instead, how one would like a newspaper to be, and then try to do something about it: “Mr. Muddle thought highly of man and did not believe newspapers could be made better, whereas Mr. Keuner did not think very highly of man and believed newspapers could be made better. ‘Everything can be better,’ said Mr. Keuner, ‘except man.’”44 Instead of assuming the givenness of the world, one transforms it by actually taking part in it. The matter
about which Brecht talks is an action which doesn’t neglect nor suppress one’s own subjective insertion into what is being said/done. Only in this way does one stop theorizing about man and starts transforming the world and oneself. Similarly, Herr Keuner repeats a thousand times that a complaint that is not productive serves no purpose except that of the sheer reproduction of the given. And it starts to be productive when one decides to change oneself by transforming the conditions in which it is uttered.

f) **Productive complaint.** When you complain, it has to be heard: this statement is repeated by Herr Keuner throughout the entire work. If injustice is done to you, make sure you are heard; otherwise you don’t deserve to complain. The parable “The helpless boy” illustrates this point:

> A boy was crying to himself and a passerby asked what was wrong. ‘I had saved two dimes for the movies,’ said the boy, ‘when a big lad came and grabbed one from me,’ and he pointed at a lad who could be seen some distance away. ‘Did you not shout for help?’ asked the man. ‘I did,’ said the boy and sobbed a little more loudly. ‘And didn’t anyone hear you?’ the man went on, stroking him fondly. ‘No,’ sobbed the boy and looked at the man with new hope. Because he was smiling. ‘Then give me that one as well,’ said the man and took the second dime out of the boy’s hand and walked away unconcerned.45

Herr Keuner is disturbed by the boy’s complaint, yet not so much by the content of the cry itself, but by the fact that it is not loud enough. When a complaint is not effective, when the cry is not loud enough, it is as if it wasn’t really uttered. So why utter it in the first place? The acknowledgment of one’s subjective position in what is being said/done demands that the complaint is made productive, that it has effects, that it is useful (“usefulness” is another expression Brecht always liked).

This kind of coldness and lack of sympathy in Brecht has been fiercely criticized. Philosophy has termed this attitude “consequentialism” in the sense of only taking into account the consequences of one’s actions, not the moral motivations that ground them. One fast Brechtian answer to this kind of position would be: but who is fully aware of one’s own motivations? Are individual motivations or individual moral grounds good indicators of anything? Brecht would not deny that there are motivations and principles; what he would question, however, is the kind of subject that a purely principled theory of ethics implies. For what this kind of theory implies is a subject that fully identifies with his or her principles, who is capable of rising above the contradictoriness of
the social. Brecht’s Herr Keuner is not self-identical, he is not fully aware of his desires and principles: in fact, he only knows what takes place, and sometimes only when it is too late, never before the action. This is precisely his ethical stance.

**Ideological or philosophical motives**

a) The need to interrupt those who speak, so they don’t construct wholes. Brecht’s suspicion of philosophy and intellectuals in general is well known. Its most important manifestation appeared in his last play, *Turandot*, where intellectuals (also called “Tuis”) are considered to be whitewashers, the great creators of ideology. We can already discern in Herr Keuner a few reasons for this suspicion. Brecht writes in “On systems” that Herr Keuner likes interrupting people. This is because of their tendency to construct deceiving wholes in which all the parts seem to fit perfectly, as if there was no rupture between them and everything functioned harmoniously. According to Brecht, there are different elements that introduce this rupture—which can be disruptive in the order of knowledge—and that one always needs to look for.

b) The subjective positioning (or attitude) is intrinsic to philosophy. As we have seen, in Brecht’s view, the content of what is being said/done, is necessarily connected to the place from where it is being said, its subjective enunciation. Brecht also states that the content of what is said is in immediate relationship with how it is said (for instance, the posture, attitude, gestures, voice etc.). A very remarkable story exemplifies this idea:

A philosophy professor came to see Mr. K. and told him about his wisdom. After a while Mr. K. said to him: “You sit uncomfortably, you talk uncomfortably, you think uncomfortably.” The philosophy professor became angry and said: “I didn’t want to hear anything about myself but about the substance of what I was talking about.” “It has no substance,” said Mr. K. “I see you walking clumsily and, as far as I can see, you’re not getting anywhere. You talk obscurely, and you create no light with your talking. Seeing your stance, I’m not interested in what you’re getting at.”

This dialogue between the philosopher and Herr Keuner exemplifies Brecht’s inversion of the common idea according to which knowledge or wisdom amount to the content of what is being said. For him, the content doesn’t matter so much; at least if it is considered independently of how, and by whom, it is being said. Herr Keuner’s reply to the professor inverts that common idea by declaring that wisdom is a consequence of attitude,
and not the other way round. Attitude is at the root of any act, also of thinking. Herr Keuner tells us elsewhere about the necessary attitude intrinsic to ethics and philosophy:

A false student came to Mr. Keuner, the thinking man, and told him: "In America there is a calf with five heads. What do you say to that?" Mr. Keuner said: "I don’t say anything." The false student was pleased and said: "The wiser you were, the more you would be able to say about it."

The stupid man expects much. The thinking man says little.  

What does this parable mean? Besides the fact that it is important to separate between important questions and nonsense, it also tells us about Herr Keuner’s silence as an accurate response to a fool. There is no content to what Herr Keuner replies, for there was no real content in the fool’s question, except the fact that he wanted to mock his master, to put him down. To this intention, a reply would have meant surrender.

c) What is an attitude? Or, what is the condition of possibility of a certain attitude? We have seen that Brecht places attitude—or the subjective act—at a higher level with respect to content. The condition of possibility of this attitude is to be aware of one’s needs and to act according to one’s subjective insertion into what is said/done. The following thought of Herr Keuner is in this respect revealing:

I often observe, says the thinking man, that I have my father’s stance. But I do not do what my father does. Why are my deeds different than his? Because what is necessary is different. But I observe that the stance endures longer than the form of action: it resists what is required.

Attitude or stance is similar to character: one can act in different ways depending on the circumstance (it is impossible to generalize about rules of behavior), but one’s stance depends on a subjective disposition to act in different ways. This subjective disposition is different to the way one acts, but it can only be known by acting.

d) What is a need? We recall at this point the answer the worker gives to the jury when he is asked about the way he would like to formulate his oath. A need disrupts the normal functioning of any kind of order, pointing at other elements that should be considered. But this does mean that need (i.e. material need or interest), as the source of disruption, is not affected by knowledge, theory, or by the ideas we live in: "The principal reason
that interests need to be satisfied is that a large number of ideas cannot be
thought because they run counter to the interests of the thinkers. Ideas
are rooted in interests’ satisfaction. Every enterprise (philosophy too)
is materially grounded—it produces some kind of material satisfaction.
(“I can be hungry anywhere,” says Herr Keuner elsewhere.) But ideas
also have an impact on the possibility of this satisfaction, hence Brecht’s
combat in the world of ideas. “If it is impossible to satisfy interests, it is
necessary to point to them and to emphasize their dissimilarity, because
only in this way can the thinking man think thoughts that are of service to
the interests of others.” Ethical ideas are those that expose the fact that
some people’s needs are not being satisfied.

3. Brecht’s Marxist Subject

The idea according to which there are two different spheres (the economy
on the one hand, and subjective life on the other) derives from the
metaphor of the base and the superstructure, which implies that society
has two distinct levels, and the latter is reducible to the former. Contrary
to this extremely problematic explanatory scheme, in Brecht’s Marxist
ethics, the subject is inserted in a complex and contradictory field of
forces which is both material and ethical, and which demands action
in terms of the economy, but not at the expense of other spheres of life.
This is simply because all spheres of life (politics, the juridical, and even
the religious, as we have seen) are operative within the same mode of
production—capitalism—and, as such, are not totally independent of it,
even if they partially function according to their own rules. Contrary to
what some of his critics have pointed out, we have seen that neither do
dryness and abstraction reign in Brecht’s stories, nor do his characters
imperiously distance themselves from the complexity of human affairs.
In fact, if they try to think beyond themselves, beyond their own personal
interests, it is only due to the fact that capitalism is a mode of production
that operates beyond the individual, i.e. it has effects on every sphere of
the individual’s life, and in many instances these are totally beyond his
or her individual control. Consequently, the Brechtian model of going
“beyond the individual” is not tantamount to the abolition of the subject,
but rather the opposite, the recognition of his subjective implication in the
situation depicted,—a complex and contradictory field of forces.

Let’s consider another motive, which could be called How to revolutionize
the law, in order to begin to put forward a few conclusions. It points at
how Brecht’s ethical model of action, to reiterate, demands the subjective
implication of the ethical agent in spheres that are usually taken for

I know a driver who has the traffic regulations at his
fingertips, obeys them, and is able to use them to his own
...Another driver I know proceeds differently. Even more than in his own route he is interested in the traffic as a whole and he regards himself as a mere particle of the latter. He does not take advantage of his rights and does not make himself especially conspicuous. In spirit he is driving with the car in front of him and the car behind him, with constant pleasure in the progress of every vehicle and of the pedestrians as well.\textsuperscript{54}

In the case of the second driver, the law is not felt as a coercive structure imposed upon the subject, but a mode of action that is not only endorsed, but also recreated by the subject in his implication in it. This is the reason why the second driver tries to consider not just his own individual interests, but also those who share the rules with him. He is acting from the perspective of his own subjective insertion in the common law.

This paper has tried to show that, contrary to the contemporary rejection of Brecht’s Marxism, which is based on his supposed tendency to reductionism and abstraction, it is precisely his Marxism that allows him to have an account of ethics and the subject in the first place. One can of course disagree about Keuner’s (or Brecht’s?) motives of action in each of the depicted situations.\textsuperscript{55} One can also dislike the consequences of Keuner’s actions. And today — a time in which only the Right (for instance, Sarkozy) or the church appeal to ethical authorities — one could also find a bit outdated, or even too “Brechtian”! — Brecht’s very authoritative voice and/or his recourse to the figure of the master or educator.\textsuperscript{56} But Brecht’s Marxism is precisely what allows him to articulate a non-essentialist notion of the subject, that which prevents him from lapsing into economic reductionism. Brecht’s model of action shows that in the capitalist mode of production the economy can be opened and disrupted by the ethical act, and that the subject is knotted along different registers, none of which can be reduced to the rest.

The subjective insertion of the subject implies that, in Brecht’s model, it doesn’t make any sense to speak of an opposition between subject-object, or an opposition between the internal/the mind, on the one hand, and the external world, on the other (as in psychology). These oppositions rely on the idea of an individual that is separated from, or who locates himself above, the social. In the humanist version of Marxism, these oppositions stem from the notion of an economic world that totally alienates the supposedly pure or human essence of the individual. The Brechtian subject has no essence and doesn’t rise above the social; it is perpetually non-identical, constantly divided along the registers of the economic, the political and the legal. The Brechtian subject has no non-alienated human essence to appeal to. Principles of action (liberal or so-called proletarian) can be generally formulated as some kind of basic orientation in life, as
rules of thumbs for example, but when it comes to ethics and action, they simply don’t work any more, because ethics is the realm where there is no guarantee for our actions, and no predetermined path for anything. In fact, as we have seen in the examples that we have discussed, principles or procedures have nothing to do with ethics. Marxist Ethics has to do with what I have called before the primordiality of the practical. This is the realization that, when it really comes to ethics, there is going to be no morally elevated goal to be appealed to, no human essence to be rescued, no procedural mode of behavior to ascertain, and no (bourgeois or proletarian) regulative ideal of action to be followed.

Endnotes

1 I use the expression “merely political” following Marx, “Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher (February 1844). Reprinted in www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm (March 2009).


6 Engels and Bebel wrote in the 1890’s that the revolution could be foreseen scientifically, and this became the main premise of orthodox Marxism. See David McLellan, Marxism after Marx: An introduction (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), pp. 31-32.


9 Ibid., p. 11.

10 Ibid., p. 10.


13 This is the way David Bathrick describes Brecht’s appropriation of Karl Korsch’s Marxism: David Bathrick, “The Dialectics of Legitimation: Brecht in the GDR,” New German Critique 2 (Spring 1974), pp. 80-103, here p. 102. Similarly, Bathrick also reviews some other critics of Brecht, such as Helmut Holzauer postulating that Brecht is an
"Aufklärer," who "never goes beyond common utilitarianism just as one can speak at best of his crude historical materialism." Ibid., p. 94.


17 Ibid., p. 37.


26 Agnes Heller offers a good reconstruction of Marx's and certain Marxists' (Plekhanov, Lenin, Bauer, Kautsky and Lukács, amongst others) views on morality, also with respect with the problem of alienation, which I cannot discuss here. Her own position, after rightfully dismissing Marxism's tendency to metaphysics (what she terms its "commitment to the absolute"), too quickly lapses into what I here describe as position (3): a defense of the liberal post-Marxism of Jürgen Habermas. Ibid., pp. 360-3.

27 Steven Lukes, "Can a Marxist Believe in Human Rights?" Praxis International 4 (1981): pp. 334-345. He also discusses Engels' Anti-Dühring, Lenin's claim at the 1920 Komsomol Congress that in Marxism there is not a grain of ethics, as well as Trotsky's pamphlet Their Morals and Ours.

28 Ibid., p. 342.

29 Drucilla Cornell, "Should a Marxist Believe in Rights?" Praxis International 4.1 (April 1984): pp. 45-56. The adjective "Marxist" was abandoned after this debate
took place, once Habermas decreed the end of Marxism, and the entrance into a new epoch of Habermasian post-Marxist discursive ethics and legality. The journal was henceforward named Constellations. The same move was made by Agnes Heller in “The Legacy of Marxian Ethics Today”.

30 A similar debate, also in the 1980s and this time around Marxism and justice, took place in the Anglo-Saxon world. It also ended up with similar conclusions. See an overall view of the debate in Norman Geras, “The Controversy About Marx and Justice,” New Left Review 1/195 (March-April 1985): pp. 47-85. In the more specific field of analytical philosophy, see G. A. Cohen, “Freedom, Justice and Capitalism,” New Left Review 1/126 (March-April 1981): pp. 3-16. Here Cohen argues, in a similar way to Lukes, that ideology is a form of “illusion” and “conceptual confusion”. He then concludes in the most Tui (Brecht’s expression) way, that Marxism serves to convince capitalists of the error they live in.

31 Cornell, “Should a Marxist Believe in Rights?” p. 46.

32 Only four years later Steven Lukes wrote a whole book on the issue of Marxism and morality, where he tried to prove that Marxism is by itself not enough to offer a proper account of morality, because it is “consequentialist,” “long-range and perfectionist,” and because it presumes “to foresee the future, in which its eventual realization is somehow guaranteed, it forswears both the clarification of the long-term consequences by which alternative courses are to be judged”. Steven Lukes, Marxism and Morality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 142 and p. 146. This is similar to what Agnes Heller calls its “commitment to the absolute,” the fact that Marxism is oblivious to real people and their subjective wealth and complexity.


36 Ibid., p. 72.

37 Ibid., p. 41.


39 Brecht, Keuner, p. 33.

40 Ibid., p. 24.

41 Ibid., p. 20.

42 Ibid., p. 61.

43 Ibid., p. 62.

44 Ibid., p. 65.

45 Ibid., p. 16.

46 Bertolt Brecht says in Me-ti: “Not to be identical with oneself, to embrace and intensify crises, to turn small changes into great and so forth— one need not only observe such phenomena, one can also act them out”.

47 Ibid., p. 92.

48 Ibid., p. 1.

49 Ibid., p. 79.

50 Ibid., p. 80.

51 Ibid., p. 68.

52 Ibid., p. 9.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., p. 55.