

Bertolt Brecht's *The Measures Taken*

Once Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) began in 1927 to develop a systematic interest in Marxist thought, he turned against what he considered the tragic legacy of Western theater as configured in Naturalist drama. Humanity cannot change natural laws and is doomed to conform to them: This false necessity was invoked by the Naturalists to generate Aristotelian pity for human fate, he argued. The tragic and the religious collaborated to produce mythologies that control the imagination. In his comments on Karl Korsch (Tom Kuhn & Steve Giles, eds.: *Brecht on Art and Politics*, 2003, 109-11), Brecht urged that revolutionaries must wrest the mythological hold on reality, showing that the tragic and the religious are historical phenomena whose necessity is escapable. "Brecht asserts that the audience can no longer experience the fate of Naturalist protagonists as tragic in a world where catastrophes can be explained without reference to religion or mythology. Indeed, Brecht takes the very notion of tragedy to be an ideology that must be resisted, because dilemmas which had once been perceived as inevitable and inescapable can, in fact, be resolved by adopting practical social and technical measures" (61).

In the late 1920s his new project, a Marxist one, was to invent a ["total artwork"](#) that mobilized even more arts than the Wagnerian one but put them to entirely different uses. To that effect, between 1929-33 Brecht wrote nine learning plays/plays for learning (*Lehrstücke*), highly innovative intermedial works focused on reception/consumption. They also work as teaching/didactic plays in the triple sense that they are plays that teach, plays about teaching, and plays in the form of teaching which educate performers/producers not in political action but in dialectical thinking that transcends the conventions of bourgeois theater. As Brecht wrote in 1935, "the Aristotelian play is essentially static; its task is to show the world as it is. The learning-play is essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed)" (John Willett, ed.: *Brecht on Theatre*, 79). Brecht sought to bridge performers and audience, stage and auditorium, to make production and consumption coincide, to

train actors to view their own performance and learn from it, and ultimately to cultivate an active/participatory audience.

According to his so-called Major Pedagogy, the *Lehrstücke* are not intended for performance but as an occasion of learning for actors. “Properly understood, the *Lehrstücke* would need to be rewritten each time a committed cast works on it” (Michael Patterson: “Brecht’s Legacy,” in Thomson & Sacks, eds.: *Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, 284). They are meant to be a pedagogical experience for performers only, and dispense with spectators. If there is any audience, it should be taught how to think critically and politically, and not be moved to pity and purged of its compassion. Instead of identifying morally, developing feelings of compassion and pity, and going through a catharsis, the audience should be challenged to reach a verdict. Plays are composed of a series of verdicts. The roles played are not characters with psychological qualities but demonstrations of certain social types; the actors do not play persons but embody sets of actions.

Through the *Lehrstücke* Brecht experimented with the apparatus of theater as an [institution](#). “Brecht’s learning plays ... involve a kind of foundational theater: a theater that attempts to constitute itself and stage the conditions of its own possibility” (William Rasch: “Theories of the Partisan”, *The Brecht Yearbook* 24, 1999, 329). It is therefore remarkable that, while rejecting techniques traditionally associated with tragedy (and renounced by the contemporary [messianic critique of tragedy](#)), Brecht based his most didactic plays on Kantian [antinomies of autonomy](#), on tragic dilemmas that preoccupied Western culture since Romantic drama and Idealist thought. *The Measures Taken* (1930), in particular, is a supreme example of dialectical thinking caught between freedom and necessity as dramatized since [Schiller](#) and debated since Schelling.

The Measures Taken [*Die Massnahme*/The Measure] (written and published in 1930, premiere and 2nd edition in 1931) is a cantata in speaking parts, choral parts, recitatives, and songs for tenor, 3 actors, mixed choir, and small orchestra created with Hans Eisler and co-authored with Slatan Dudow, who also directed the premiere, and Elisabeth Hauptmann. Other English titles suggested for the work include *The Disciplinary*

Measure (FBI), *Steps to be Taken* (Brecht before the Committee), *The Expedient* (1936 in London), *The Decision* (John Willett), and *The Rule [or Doctrine]* (Elizabeth Hanunian).

This work, which exists in six versions, is the most advanced of Brecht's learning plays. Operating within the tradition of "the play within the play," it consists in the performance of a performance, as four revolutionaries perform/represent before a chorus what happened in a mission. To escape what he criticized as limitations of tragedy, Brecht drew on three very different traditions of public performance: Noh theater, agitprop theater, and courtroom theater.

a) The piece is one of the four learning or didactic works Brecht wrote in 1929-31 based on the 15th-century Japanese Noh play *Taniko*/The Valley Hurling by Zenchiku which tells the story of a purificatory measure of human sacrifice taken by Buddhists on a pilgrimage to a sacred mountain. The communist didactic work adopted the Shintoist structure of the Noh play: A young individual joins a collectivity and participates in a mission; he endangers the mission; he must be sacrificed in order to save the cause and affirm the collectivity; the victim is reconciled with the group that kills him through his conscious consent to his murder.

b) Brecht was also inspired by the amateur-theater agitprop groups and choruses staging short, didactic events aimed at radicalizing workers in factories, taverns, and the streets of Berlin in the 1920s. "Part of his knowledge of agitprop came from Hans Eisler, who ... had been involved in the agitprop movement as the musical director of one of the many popular workers' choirs" (Yasco Horsman: *Theaters of Justice*, 2010, p. 101).

c) Last, this is theater as courtroom, play as trial. "Understanding the moment of learning as a moment of judgment, Brecht modeled his theater on a courtroom hearing. An excellent example of this new model, *Die Massnahme* consists of a set of trials and verdicts embedded within each other. ... In his play, Brecht thoroughly investigates the didactic possibilities of theater as trial, and trial as theater, by a tripling of a moment of judgment in a theatrical setting, or rather, of a theater modeled after a trial" (11). The play consists of a series of embedded trials: During a revolutionary mission, a young communist was judged and

killed by his comrades. Upon their return, the four agitators give their report to the Control Chorus by demonstrating his behavior in various situations (and taking turns to play the young comrade) and ask the Party to judge their actions. Interpreters of the play, whether they include audience members or not, are invited to judge both the verdict of the comrades and that of the Party.

Various approaches embedded the play in additional theatrical frameworks of trials. When Brecht was summoned and appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, he was cross-examined at length about *The Measures*. In addition, “reverberating during this particular hearing were echoes of another series of show trials, the Moscow trials, which aimed to purge the Soviet Union of so-called enemies of the people. These trials, furthermore, served a political-didactic, propagandistic role. The proceedings were publicized via newspaper, film, or radio, so that they could instruct a wide audience in a series of political lessons” (121). While giving such lessons, the Moscow trials “were typical of a larger interest in the theatricality of court-room proceedings in the Soviet Union, which dates back to the staging of so-called model trials in which traveling agitprop troupes and left-wing theater companies during the first years after the revolution staged political lessons – a practice that may have had a direct influence on Brecht during his writing of *Die Massnahme*” (122).

Despite his extensive use of radical alienating/estranging techniques, Brecht could not avoid the dramatic structure of tragedy which in this play consists in a tension between moral integrity and political strategy – two incompatible kinds of responsibility, two mutually exclusive sets of obligation. A revolutionary political program has no room for moral feelings. “There is only one virtue, and that virtue is advancing the cause of revolution, no matter what other virtues may suffer in the process” (William Rasch: “Theories of the Partisan,” 2000, 340). Revolutionaries must sacrifice their moral feelings and principles to apply the teachings of communism. The Young Comrade is asked to sever his relations with family, erase his self-image, lose his identity, sacrifice his life, and even disappear physically in order to dissolve himself completely into the communist collective. The messianic promise of the revolution is that, when in a future moment of

“justice to come” (Derrida), this Party comes to power, the division between the individual and the collective, morality and politics, will be overcome, the dead will be “resurrected,” and all sacrifices will be redeemed.

Thus, if politics is considered more Sisyphean/tragic than millennial/messianic, “then the aim of revolution is precisely the abolition of politics, the abolition of conflict and dissent” (337). From the perspective of an agonistic politics that embraces struggle, “the demand for revolution can only be seen as an eschatological appeal to a singular vision of the good life, the actualization of which would eventually preclude further political conflict” (337). This is what makes any revolutionary measures taken tragic: “These two visions of the political are mutually exclusive. Either one defines politics as conflict immanent to a given system, or one aims at violently transforming the world by transcending the system’s limits” (337).

When the Young Comrade tears up the “the classics” of communism, rejecting their “instruction,” the Three Agitators admonish him: “Open your eyes to the truth!/Yours is an impetuous revolution that will last a day/And be throttled tomorrow./But our revolution begins tomorrow./It will conquer and change the world./Your revolution will end when you end./But when you have come to your end/Our revolution will continue” (Brecht: *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke*, 1977, 28). This messianic faith justifies their decision to use “divine violence” (Benjamin) to exterminate their comrade: “For violence is the only means whereby this deadly/World may be changed, as/Every living being knows./And yet, we said/We are not permitted not to kill. At one with the/Inflexible will to change the world, we formulated/The measures taken” (32-3). The question arises, then, whether it is possible to found an immanent governance without devising a (self-)annihilating revolutionary self-discipline as a new state of domination.

Scene 6 of *The Measures Taken* was first called “Rebellion against the Teachings” and later “The Betrayal.” In it, the Young Comrade rises against the rules of the revolution he has been serving. Is this a “rebellion” or a “betrayal”? That is the basic question of the entire play. In the scene, radical elements among the workers press for an immediate uprising. Ignoring the Agitators’ position that the workers are not fully prepared, the

Young Comrade defies the disciplinary regimen of the Party, disobeys its decisions, tears up its classical teachings, and shreds his mask, disclosing his identity and endangering the secret mission of the group. Is his action an act of “rebellion” against revolutionary discipline (which makes him a model rebel and martyr) or a “betrayal” of the revolutionary cause (which makes him a traitor who later repents and consents to his execution)? Is the dilemma of the learning play unresolvable and tragic or moral and propaedeutic?

Recent discussions of the play have downplayed any propagandistic/moralistic elements and emphasized its deeply tragic character which they attribute to a variety of features. One feature is that “the Party as Destiny” (John Orr: “Terrorism as Social Drama and Dramatic Form,” in Orr & Klaić, eds.: *Terrorism and Modern Drama*, 1990, 53) functions like the gods in ancient drama. Another is that the sacrificial Young Comrade functions like an ancient hero: “With his acquiescence to his elimination, he ultimately remains up to the bitter end a tragic hero who thereby also resisted *The Measures Taken* as a learning play wanting to overcome traditional theatrical forms. Brecht embroils his characters in indissoluble paradoxes. His play puts the formal idiosyncrasies of a tragic text on stage, on the one hand, to overcome them there performatively and, on the other hand, to let his characters fall into traditional role schemata” (Oliver Simons: “Theater of Revolution and the Law of the Genre,” *The Germanic Review* 84:4, 2009, 337). A third feature is the “tragic effect” produced by the contradictions of Leninist morality: “A person who accepts Leninism because he is morally outraged at Capitalist society and wants to create a truly moral world can thus find himself in situations which require him to violate his own morals” (G. E. Nelson: “The Birth of Tragedy out of Pedagogy,” *German Quarterly* 46:4, 1973, 571). This tragic feature is “a remainder ... that escapes the dialectic, that testifies to the pain of unresolved contradictions” (Elizabeth Wright: *Postmodern Brecht*, 1989, 17).

Thus, the scholarly consensus is that the revolutionary didactic thrust of the learning play is haunted by a fundamental irreconcilable conflict between ethics and politics. To some commentators, this conflict is located within politics, specifically, within the revolution itself: “In so far as the political act *par excellence* is a revolution, two opposing strategies arise here: once can endeavor to separate the noble Idea of the Revolution from its

abominable reality ... or one can idealize the authentic revolutionary act itself, and bemoan its regrettable but unavoidable later betrayal ... Against all these temptations, one should insist on the unconditional need to endorse the act fully in all its consequences. Fidelity is not fidelity to the principles betrayed by the contingent facticity of their actualization, but fidelity to the *consequences* entailed by the full actualization of the (revolutionary) principles. ... This means that there is none the less something inherently 'terroristic' in every authentic act, in its gesture of thoroughly redefining the 'rules of the game,' inclusive of the very basic self-identity of its perpetrator" (Slavoj Žižek: *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, 1997, 377). To others, the conflict between ethics and politics is enacted in "the staging of the tension between an individual's ethical sense of responsibility and the political need to subjugate oneself to a collective (the Party) held together by a set of rules, which the Party calls an 'ABC of Communism'" (Horsman 97-8).

Ultimately, what prevails in the play is the "law of the genre," specifically, the law of tragedy. One possible argument is that both the protagonist and the chorus end up functioning according to the law of that genre which was created in 6th century Greece by the emergence of a hero out of the choral collective, and the ensuing tension between citizen and *polis*: "Strikingly, Brecht's learning play brings to the stage all the characteristics that have, since Aristotle, marked tragedy: the pity, the error of the hero, the hero's comprehension of the error, the guilt of the innocent man, the hero's death, the sacrifice, and catharsis" (Rasch 327). No critical distance can enable the actors to overcome the codes and norms of this performative tradition.

Thus the theatrical lesson of the teaching play is that there-is-no-outside-tragedy: "Brecht's learning play demonstrates that the actors are hardly capable of disassociating themselves from old performance archetypes. They do attempt to play against the theater but cannot completely suppress the law of genre. Even in their play within a play, the agitators do not succeed in taking up a metaperspective. On the contrary, as actors they adopt roles from which they attempt to distance themselves. While acting they entangle themselves in an insurmountable paradox. In its own theatricality, Brecht's *The Measures Taken* seems to encourage a limit, unable to overcome the law of its genre" (Simons 342).

Another possible argument would stress the particular genre of *modern* tragedy, the tragedy of revolution (the very subject of my research project in this web site), and more specifically the tragic “antinomy of duty and inclination” (Rasch 333) which tends to subordinate the latter (the individual) to the former (the cause): “Brecht reproduces the law of the genre he wishes to supersede and entangles his figures in inescapable aporias that have dominated the metadiscourse on drama in revolutionary theater from Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* to Heiner Müller’s *Mauser*” (327).

This argument takes us back to Schelling seeking in Greek tragedy the solution to Kant’s freedom vs. necessity antinomy. Kantian autonomy is a major political technique of government. The paradox of the 3rd antinomy is that the realization of autonomy requires obedience to universal law, the exercise of freedom involves practices of submission. Accordingly, the Young Comrade realizes his freedom not when he rebels against the law of the Party but when he obeys it by submitting his morally self-legislative will to the Party law, that is, by consenting to his own execution. Schelling defined this antinomy of autonomous reason as tragic because it means claiming freedom through its loss, being punished, in the case of the Young Comrade, for succumbing to political necessity only after a fight. What is tragic is that “this guiltless guilty person accepts punishment voluntarily [and] thereby alone does freedom transfigure itself into the highest identity with necessity” (Schelling: *The Philosophy of Art*, 1989, 255). As I have argued elsewhere, when guilt becomes necessary and defiant, when fate turns guilty and heroic, the idea of the tragic is born, finding its archetypal incarnation in a hero who is responsible for a certain crime (and not just an error) yet ethically innocent (Lambropoulos: *The Tragic Idea*, 2006, 39).

Despite their anti-Aristotelian arguments and moralizing aspirations, Brecht’s learning plays show why modern theatrical enactments of revolution present it as antinomic and tragic.