

Epic Theatre: Transforming the Worldview

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Abstract

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), a German poet, theatre director, and playwright was an established Marxist of 20th century. Being a theatre expert, he contributed to the dramaturgy and the growth of theatre. His invention of epic theatre was a revolt against the main stream modern theatre wherein Brecht explicitly declares that theatre need to be 'political'. Since Brecht was not content with the bourgeois society, therefore he was of the view that proletariat class needs to take active part while watching a theatre performance and pay attention to the questions raised in such a performance. This will help bring in a transformation in the worldview to form a better world. In the paper under study, I shall present how Brecht thinks the concept of epic theatre can transform the society and how it served as a basis of Brecht's own ethics.

Keywords: *Epic theatre, Marxism, sociology, literature, proletariat, bourgeois.*

Bertolt Brecht is among the most important literary figures of Twentieth Century. Apart from being a celebrated poet, he is best known for his plays and directions. He had been a Marxist from 1920s to his death in 1956. He was strongly against the bourgeois nature from his young age. He didn't like the established bourgeois society. He wrote an intensely bourgeois play *Baal* during 1918-19, which was associated with expressionism. He also wrote *Drums in the Night* in 1919 which depicted the disappointment caused by World War I as well as German revolution. He was strongly influenced by the version of materialist dialectic of his Marxian teacher Karl Korsch.

Brecht developed the concept of Epic Theatre to change the consciousness of the proletariat. He formed his epic theatre particularly as a revolutionary aesthetic to begin a Marxist revolution. Through epic theatre, he attempted to focus on the historical characteristics of an environment so that he can depict how this environment formed, influenced, injured and destroyed the characters. Brecht was not interested to focus on the worldwide elements of human condition and destiny, but in the outlooks and behavior of people toward each other in particular historical conditions.

In this way, in *Mahagonny* and *Threepenny Opera* Brecht depicted the relation of people with each other in a capitalist society; in *Mother Courage*, he depicted the relation of trades people to the soldiers and citizens during war in an developing market society; in *The Measures Taken*, Brecht demonstrate the radical associations in the conflict in China. It was his belief that we can adopt a critical outlook toward our society if the existing social measures and institutions are taken as historical, temporary, and likely to be changed. Brecht attempted to show that epic theatre show emotions, thoughts, and behavior not as the explanation of human essence but as products of the particular social situations and they response to the same.

The major theatrical device of epic theatre is the “Verfemdungseffekt”. The purpose of this device is to alienate the spectator and thus prevent identification with the characters and situation and permit to adopt a critical attitude toward what they watch in the play. By avoiding the sympathetic illusions or an imitation of reality, epic theatre attempts to expose the functioning of the processes of the society and human behavior, and in this way, depicts the behavior of the people in particular society and the reason behind the same. For instance, the greediness in *Mahagonny* and *The Threepenny Opera*, sufferings of *Mother Courage*, or Galileo’s tyranny, were to be taken as historically particular components of a social setup and the theatre was to encourage the audience to think on why all this happened. Hence, it provides the spectator with better knowledge and understanding of the history.

In the words of Walter Benjamin, we should response to epic theatre by saying that “things can happen this way, they can also happen a quite different way.” It is aimed at creating an experience of inquisitiveness, amazement, and surprise; raising questions like “is that the way things are? What produced this? It’s terrible! How can we change things?” Such critical and interrogative outlook was also raised by a mixture of images and series of distinctive social displays which Brecht named “gests”. He wanted that his audience should work with the help

of these examples and take part in a dynamic process of critical attitude which would provide them with the understandings of the workings of society. He also wanted them to identify the need for vital social change and to implement the same.

Brecht's epic theatre is not like the culinary theatre which provided the audience with a pleasing experience or such a moral that can be digested easily. He denounced theatre which attempted to create a delusion of reality. He believed that such theatre attempts to reconstruct the dominant ideology and encourage the audience to take bourgeois ideologies as reality. Brecht applies Korsch's theory which takes ideology as material force which is an essential tool of domination; both of them took ideology as a deceptive force and people should be liberated from the same. They made efforts to produce works which would encourage people to avoid identification with such ideologies.

Thus, Brecht's thought of destructing and superseding the ideology is based on Korsch's idea of ideology-critique and rational action. The epic theatre of Brecht provided a substitute for the dominant bourgeois theatre. The objective of such a theatre is to make the audience to reflect and to see the world more critically. For him, epic theatre was a practice of critical involvement in the bourgeois culture which would examine it from inside. Hence, Korsch and Brecht saw intellectual action, and political and aesthetic theory, as significant moments in radical practice.

Brecht's concept of aesthetic production is similar to Korsch's theory of the workers' councils as the genuine organs of Marxist practice. Korsch advised a democratic participating activity of coproduction in the provinces of labour and politics. Similarly, Brecht advised co-participation in aesthetic production. Whenever possible, Brecht worked in collectives wherein a group of co-workers joined for production. He was interested in radio and film because both these are the examples of highest growth of forces of production and they involve a new kind of collective work. For him, his co-workers played a vital role in the process of creation. All of them were encouraged to add to the production of art work. The objective of this revolution in the idea of creation, denouncing the concept of the author as the only genius, was to change aesthetic production completely, similarly to the workers' councils which attempted to transform industrial and political establishments. Thus, it provided an anticipatory notion for socialist cultural organization.

Brecht and Korsch emphasize the major significance of production in social life. Both of them see socialism as a persistent transformation of the relations and forces of production. Hence, opposing the critics like Georg Lukacs, Brecht advocated the need of innovation, experimentation, and production of new aesthetic creations. He claimed that the setup of aesthetic production is not yet in the control of the artists and it did not function for the universal well-being. Therefore, innovative artists should work to transform this setup. One had to include the means of pleasure into a work of instruction, and to transform particular entertaining institutions to structures of mass communication. Thus, the objective of Brecht's art was to provide a revolutionary teaching which would cultivate political instincts, provide political education, and incite radical political practice.

Epic theatre was specifically meant for the proletariat. The aim of this was to transform their worldview. For example, Brecht says:

Our representations of human social life are designed for river-dwellers, fruit farmers, builders of vehicles and upturners of society, whom we invite into our theatres and beg not to forget their cheerful occupations while we hand the world over to their minds and hearts for them to change as they think fit. (BT, 185)

Obviously, Brecht takes this group for historically progressive force which is important for real development. Brecht believed that involvement of workers in a social movement was important for progressive transformation because only they can produce required force for counterbalancing the bourgeois and shift the dialectic union toward settlement. The settlement would imply the historical communistic period where all the resources of production would be possessed collectively, abolishing the means of social resentment.

Though the epic theatre of Brecht was intended for the proletariat, yet its objective of transforming the audience's epistemological center into the material dialectical world view was not limited to the workers only. Brecht felt that bourgeois intellectual can also contribute to the human liberation. For example, in his essay, "Intellectuals and Class Struggle," he states, "the proletariat can use all kinds of intellectuals" and he considers the part of the bourgeois intellectual as significant. Although, undoubtedly, Brecht was a bourgeois intellectual, yet he was critical of the bourgeois structure and thus he worked for the proletariat progressive force.

Brecht wanted to convert as many number of spectators or readers into experts as possible. He wished for a theatre which would be replete with experts. He wished to have experts on history and society and hence turn his spectators into thinkers, statesmen, and engineers of society. Obviously, this implied individuals who looked at the world through what Brecht took as the only potential way to reach the true reality- the material dialectic world view. When an individual had this specific world view, in other words, when they were able to comprehend truth, they could serve as teachers to those who were unable to reach the truth. Through his conversation on radio as a device of communication, he talks of the major objective of transforming the spectators not only into followers but into teachers as well. Apparently, Brecht proposed an exponential development in the number of worldview conversions founded on the idea that converted spectators would themselves serve as converters.

Brecht theory of epic theatre included a philosophy of praxis which is aimed at transforming the epistemological center of the labour class into the material dialectical worldview. Brecht believed that this would increase the proletariat progressive force which would in turn change the dialectical relations of bourgeois and proletariat and produce the situations necessary for the settlement of that bitterness. For Brecht, this settlement means the collective possession of the means of production and, hence, the abolishment of social bitterness. It was his moral concern and he focused his actions toward achieving this goal.

While largely lacking the moral utterances, the epic theatre of Brecht forms a thoroughly figured out ethics, founded on the praxis part of his praxis-theory. In his theory, praxis was the force he used while trying to change the world view of the labour class and bourgeois class. According to Brecht, for social transformation, altering the proletariat world view in particular was an essential precondition. The awareness of the proletariat was needed. This group needed to be aware of its capability, comprehensible historically progressive force.

No doubt, Brecht was not comfortable with the conditions of bourgeois society. He believed that conditions like hunger, hardships, and cold were not an eternal reality and things could be altered under the right conditions. Through epic theatre, he attempted to produce the conditions necessary for social change. He aimed at highlighting the means whereby these burdensome conditions could be abolished. He didn't just want to complain about the conditions of economic misuse but also wanted to get the necessary groundwork done in

order to change them. Therefore, more than theory he looked-for praxis. For him, ideas are helpful only when they serve as the foundation for action.

Thus, we can say that he wanted to change the proletariat worldview and help establish conditions which are essential to abolish the social resentments and worldwide human liberation. In his own words, this “road leads over capitalism’s dead body, but... the road is good one.” (BT, 50)

Conclusion

We have already seen that sociology and literature are complementary for each other. Literature can play a vital role to bring about the social changes. This is what Brecht has attempted to achieve through his epic theatre. It was his endeavor to transform the world. It was a sound expression of Marxian theory-praxis and it depicted his deep ethical concerns.

The paper shows that epic theatre is a specific practice of Marxian praxis theory and it serves as the foundation of Brecht’s ethics. It depicts that Brecht was not content with bourgeois society and he wanted to produce conditions for the growth of a better world. For him, this could be done by transforming the worldview. Thus, we can say that his notion of epic theatre placed him among the philosophers who not only wanted to explain the social conditions but also wanted to change them.

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