

Introduction to Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on Brecht'

These four short paragraphs, translated here into English for the first time, were sketched out in Walter Benjamin's hand on a sheet filed alongside a transcript for his radio talk 'Bert Brecht', broadcast on Frankfurter Rundfunk in June 1930.¹ In content, they resemble ideas developed in other texts from this period – 'Destructive Character', 'Karl Kraus' (both 1931) and 'Experience and Poverty' (1933), but they go beyond the positive figure of 'poverty' developed there as a 'new barbarism' or 'inhumanity'. Here, Benjamin stretches towards 'theoretical foundations'.

Thought is to be 'impoverished' (*verarmt*), a claim nested within a set of pragmatic concepts – socially realizable, *productive* completeness, applicability. Struggle against *doxa* is repositioned as the elimination of the private wealth of opinions, complicating accomplice to the present order. Effective thinking produces upheaval – it is publicity measured by a richness of outcomes, not by means–end rationality.

Brecht's *Versuche* introduced his character Herr Keuner, 'the thinker'. In his radio talk, Benjamin explains:

Now Herr Keuner concentrates his attention on showing that the plethora of problems and theories, theses and worldview, is a fiction. And the fact that they all cancel each other out is neither accidental nor grounded in thought itself; rather it is grounded in the interests of people who have placed the thinkers in their posts.²

The answers offered by current thinking constitute a 'tidal sludge', an 'unfiltered wealth' benefiting only the few. In 'Experience and Poverty', this same wealth, a 'swamp', is oppressive. All that is implicated and complicit must be taken away, hence impoverished. For the sake of actualization, the 'thinker must work with the few applicable ideas that exist, the writer with the few valid formulations that we have'.³

Here is the crux of Benjamin's counter-concept of 'quotability' (*Zitierbarkeit*). In its opposition to

'originality', it is the key to the gnomic formulation: 'Brecht says: At least once people no longer need to think on their own, they are unable to think on their own anymore.' An individual who insists on working all by themselves (*ganz allein*) is, according to Keuner, capable only of constructing 'cottages'.⁴

In another Keuner story, 'The Question of Whether There is a God', we find:

A man asked Mr. K. whether there is a God. Mr. K. said: '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.'⁵

From here, and from Benjamin's neo-Kantian origins, we can see the affinity with pragmatism, clearly intimated in the early unpublished essay 'On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy' with its stress on *productive* metaphysics.

If William James asked after the 'cash value in experiential terms' of the metaphysics of private beliefs, then the later Benjamin seeks the revolutionary value of ideas: what interrupts the status quo without being false? A double demand. On such reasoning, the concept of history needed impoverishment: its idea of progress had to be eliminated. Whether the 'messianic' has applicability today, or has been appropriated as private riches for ornamented standpoints, is another matter entirely.

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Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934*, Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 365–71.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 368.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 370.
4. Bertolt Brecht, *Stories of Mr. Keuner*, trans. Martin Chalmers, City Lights, San Francisco, 2001, p. 13.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

On theoretical foundations

Theses on Brecht

Walter Benjamin

Einiges über die theoretischen Fundamente. Statt sie in systematischer Folge zu entwickeln, empfiehlt es sich, ihnen die handlichere Form von Thesen zu geben:

1 These. Jedes andere Denken als das in einer Gesellschaft realisierbare, ist zu zertrümmern. Erklärung: Wahrheit ist nicht durch Schweifern festzustellen, nicht durch Sammeln und Addieren des Denkbaren, vor allem nicht durch eine beliebige Abflucht von Folgerungen. Es muß vielmehr in jeder Etappe und an jedem Punkt immer wieder konfrontiert werden mit der Realität.

2 These. Es muß mit dem Vorurteil gebrochen werden, an heute gebundenes Denken sei durch diese Gebundenheit inkomplett. Nicht die formalen Anforderungen des Denkens – Berücksichtigung sämtlicher Standpunkte, Verfolgung sämtlicher Einwände, Verteidigung sämtlicher Konsequenzen – führen zur wahren, das heißt fruchtbaren Vollständigkeit. Vielmehr wird diese echte Vollständigkeit garantiert durch denkbar engsten Anschluß an die gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeit. Vollständiges Denken heißt: Denken, das gesellschaftlich folgenreich ist. Und zwar folgenreich sowohl bezüglich des Lebens wie auch des Denkens selber. Daher die

3 These. Denken soll verarmt werden, es soll nur soweit zugelassen werden, als es gesellschaftlich realisierbar ist. Brecht sagt: Mindestens seit der Mensch nicht mehr allein zu denken braucht, kann er nicht mehr allein denken. Um aber zu einem wirksamen gesellschaftlichen Denken zu gelangen, muß er seinen falschen komplizierenden Reichtum aufgeben, nämlich den Reichtum an privaten Wertungen, Standpunkten, Weltanschauungen, kurz den Reichtum an Meinungen. Wir stoßen hier auf genau den gleichen Kampf gegen die Meinung, die *δοξα* im Interesse der Wahrheit, den vor zweitausend Jahren Sokrates kämpfte.

Some thoughts concerning theoretical foundations. Rather than develop them in systematic sequence, it seems preferable to give them the more convenient form of theses:

1 Thesis. Every thought, other than that which is realizable in a society, is to be destroyed. Clarification: Truth is not to be secured through wandering, nor through collecting and adding up what is conceivable, and above all not through any flight from outcomes. Thinking must moreover at every stage and at each point always be repeatedly confronted with reality.

2 Thesis. It is essential to break with the prejudice that thought bound to the present is incomplete owing to this constraint. The formal demands of thought – the consideration of all standpoints, the close examination of all objections, defences for each and every consequence – do not lead to true, that is to say, productive, completeness. Moreover such authentic completeness is guaranteed by the closest conceivable connection to social reality. Complete thought means: thought which is rich in social results. And in fact 'rich in results' with regard to both life and thought itself. From that [follows the next thesis]

3 Thesis. Thought should become impoverished, it should only be permitted in so far as it is socially realizable. Brecht says: At least once people no longer need to think on their own, they are unable to think on their own anymore. But to attain an effective social thought, people must give up their false and complicating wealth, namely the wealth of private assessments, standpoints, world-views, in short the wealth of opinions. Here, we are touching upon exactly the same struggle against opinion in the interest of truth – against *doxa* – in which Socrates engaged two thousand years ago.

4 These. Die Meinungen werden frei gegeben, das heißt: die Gesellschaft versucht nicht etwa, dem Einzelnen bestimmte Meinungen aufzuzwingen sondern sie erklärt ein für alle Mal ihre gänzliche Gleichgültigkeit gegen private Standpunkte und Überzeugungen. Ihr Anspruch auf sogenannte. Richtigkeit wird gar nicht geprüft. Das einzige, wofür das Gemeinwesen sich interessiert, ist ihre Verwendbarkeit.

4 Thesis. Opinions are freely given, that is to say: society does not seek to force determinate opinions on individuals; instead once and for all society declares its thoroughgoing indifference towards private standpoints and convictions. The latter's claim to so-called validity has simply not been put to the test. Their applicability is the only thing in which the communal body is interested.

c. 1930

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