

# A conversation with Stephen Parker, author of *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life*

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19 April 2016

Several of us from the *World Socialist Web Site*, Sybille Fuchs, Stefan Steinberg and myself, spoke for some time to Stephen Parker, author of a new biography of the German playwright and poet, *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life*. We posted a review of the work yesterday.

Parker, professor of German at the University of Manchester, is articulate and thorough in conversation, as he is in print. Even when we expressed sharp disagreements with his views, he remained gracious and thoughtful.

Our interview was carried on between participants in three countries—Germany, the UK and the US. Stefan Steinberg opened the conversation by asking Professor Parker about his background and the intellectual origins of the Brecht volume. Parker explained that the book emerged out of his focus on German culture and history and, specifically, research into postwar society in East Germany (or the German Democratic Republic, GDR).

In the course of that effort, “Brecht was constantly present.” Parker had found important material on the writer, he explained, in the archives of both the German Academy of Arts, which existed (under various names) in East Berlin until reunification, and the East German literary journal *Sinn und Form* (“Sense and Form”).

He told us, “I gained a very different view of Brecht after the war—a view at odds with the presentation of Brecht as a socialist classic author developed by the SED [Socialist Unity Party, the ruling East German Stalinist party] government after his death.”

Parker went on, “There were many ways in which Brecht was a heretic rather than a follower of the party’s doctrine of Socialist Realism. The experience of working in the archives made me realise I had something new to say on Brecht.” In the early 2000s, he developed the idea of writing a biography of the writer, a “huge project” that would eventually take him five years.

We praised the book for its readability and its comprehensiveness, at the same time as we indicated we did not “see eye-to-eye” on a number of important issues—“We have very definite views on Stalinism, on so-called ‘Socialist Realism’ and East Germany.”

Parker thanked us for our praise. He noted that his aim was to produce a book “that was informative and enjoyable.” He aspired to “generate a vantage point,” in the tradition of famed Henry James biographer Leon Edel, “by virtue of a modulation between critical distance and empathy for the subject in question. You can talk about important issues in economic history, and then go on to talk about related issues in aesthetics. ... Essentially Brecht was a committed artist. His was an imaginative engagement, an aesthetic engagement with critical political, social and economic issues.”

In response to a question about Brecht’s generally hostile reception in East Germany after he returned from exile in 1949, Parker expounded in some detail his understanding of the writer’s relationship to the Stalinist authorities.

Parker explained that he had obtained access to confidential GDR files

“stamped for the eyes of ministers only.” What those files made clear, he suggested, was that cultural figures such as Brecht who returned from exile in the West to East Berlin “had aesthetic assumptions which did not correspond with those held by the group that came back from Moscow,” i.e., the leadership obedient to Stalinist policies and put in power in East Germany by Soviet troops.

The hostility of the Stalinist officialdom in the postwar period had a pre-history, Parker commented. When Brecht was editor of *Das Wort* [“The Word”], a literary journal published in Moscow (the playwright was then a refugee from the Nazis in Denmark), numerous attacks were launched against him by pro-Stalinist figures such as Alfred Kurella and Georg Lukács. “Brecht’s experimental approach was deemed virtually unusable,” our interviewee observed.

He added that “the only way to understand a work like [*Life of*] *Galileo*”—Brecht’s play about the Italian scientist under attack by the Catholic Church and its Inquisition in the 17th century, a drama written after the genocidal Moscow Trials—was to see it as a response by the playwright to the “enormous pressure” exerted by the Stalinists on him “to recant his views.”

Parker continued, “After the war, Brecht’s position was quite untenable for the GDR bureaucracy and Brecht scholars in East Berlin, such as Werner Mittenzwei and Ernst Schumacher, really doctored the record, to put it bluntly. The first version of *Galileo* [written in Denmark in 1938] remained unpublished until 1988.”

The pre-war disagreements between Brecht and the Stalinist political and artistic authorities were merely a “prologue to what took place in East Berlin, and some of the same political-cultural figures were involved. The recent publication of letters to Brecht demonstrates just how far the editors in Moscow were pursuing the campaign against Brecht and which figures recur in postwar East Berlin. The person who orchestrated things was the [East German Stalinist leader] Walter Ulbricht.” Parker said, “I would maintain that the SED leadership in Moscow never wanted Brecht in East Berlin.”

Stefan Steinberg raised the issue of Brecht’s attitude to the workers’ uprising in Stalinist East Germany in June 1953. “The first thing that Brecht did publicly,” Steinberg commented, “was to write a letter to Ulbricht giving unconditional support to the party [the Stalinist SED], suggesting that the two men do a joint radio programme. In your book, you cite Brecht’s many often scathing comments about Stalin and Stalinism before the war. After all, some of Brecht’s closest collaborators in the USSR were picked up, persecuted and even killed in the course of the purges. But at the same time, publicly Brecht always maintained his loyalty to the Stalinist party. How do you account for this disparity, based on your research?”

In his reply, Parker addressed himself first to Brecht’s relationships with the GDR Stalinist apparatus, arguing that Brecht was “put under huge pressure” prior to the June 1953 events, when a strike by East Berlin construction workers over threatened wage cuts sparked strikes and

protests throughout the country against Stalinist repression and anti-working class measures.

Parker described a series of actions the East German regime had taken, starting in the autumn of 1952, against Brecht and his company, the Berliner Ensemble. “So it very much looked like Brecht was on his way out, they didn’t want him. This was the cultural prong of the SED’s pursuit of its policy *Aufbau der Grundlagen des Sozialismus* [“Building the Foundations of Socialism”].”

As for Brecht’s offer to Stalinist leader Ulbricht, at a time when tens of thousands of workers were expressing their opposition to conditions in the “socialist” GDR and the policies of the SED, Parker argued it was part “of a consistent theme in Brecht’s writings of the time, where he insisted that there had to be a ‘great conversation’ with the people conducted by the [Stalinist] party. That request was included in his letter to Ulbricht as part of his proclamation of support. It was then cut along with other elements of the letter for publication, making it look as if Brecht’s letter was simply a bare statement of support. Brecht was furious.”

Brecht had come to view SED cultural policy, Parker observed, “as being in some respects similar to Nazi cultural policy. This included the use of crude language like *das Volk* [the “folk”, the people], and the determination to eradicate what proponents of Socialist Realism, just as Nazi cultural figures, called ‘decadence.’ This term referred to the avant-garde and modernist types of art produced by Brecht and his supporters. Ulbricht had no clue how to mount a ‘great conversation.’ He was a figure who was incapable of carrying people with him.”

If this is true, of course, it is even less excusable that Brecht would seek to proclaim essential “support” for such a reactionary regime and its policies.

Parker pointed out that the June 1953 revolt, suppressed by 20,000 Soviet troops and 8,000 East German police at the cost of dozens of lives, led to the SED bureaucracy backing off, “in some shock for a couple of years,” on the cultural front. “They only returned to the offensive after the autumn of 1956 after Brecht’s death.” Parker offered this overall defense of the playwright’s relationship to the Stalinist regime: “He was not always direct in his challenges to power, and who could be?”

Along the same lines, Parker took note of Brecht’s many critical comments about Stalin, the Soviet Union and the Moscow Trials. “I think it’s clear that by 1938, Brecht was taking a very different view on the Moscow Trials compared to the position he’d taken at the outset of 1936. He took the view that Stalinism had become a reactionary phenomenon and that Stalin was behaving more like a monarch than the leader of the Marxist-Leninist revolution.”

However, Parker continued, “Brecht would never go public on these issues because he felt there was a greater loyalty, i.e., to the first socialist state formed by workers’ revolution.” This was, of course, the false reasoning of many “left” intellectuals and artists in the 1930s.

Parker then pointed to the writer’s personal situation: “Brecht could see no other force that would enable him one day to return to his country from exile than the Red Army. The Red Army’s actions remained a very important point of reference for him until 1945, so I don’t think it is hard to see how Brecht sought to maintain his loyalty to the first and only socialist state that could combat fascism.”

It is not hard to see, but that does not make it correct. Brecht was unable, like many of his artistic contemporaries, to orient himself to the working class as an independent revolutionary force, acting apart from the bureaucracy that dominated it and claimed to represent socialism and the heritage of the October Revolution. As was made clear in the review of Parker’s biography, there was of course a viable alternative in the perspective of Trotsky and the Left Opposition.

At this point, Sybille Fuchs remarked that “Brecht’s attitude towards Stalinism and the KPD [Communist Party of Germany] is a very complex question.” On the one hand, the playwright was “loyal to the October

Revolution, and, on the other hand, he tries to criticise the bureaucracy.” As we know, she pointed out, Brecht “praised Trotsky’s writing, but at the same time disagreed with his politics....Why did Brecht reject Trotsky’s position? What do you think of Brecht’s attitude to Marxism?”

This is Professor Parker’s response in full:

“This is a great question and I can’t give an answer that would be completely satisfactory. I have to admit here to real limits in sources, and I did not want my book to speculate. For me, the complexity and ambivalence are very much part of a predicament. Understanding that predicament adds up to a position of integrity—doing what a person reasonably can in a situation.

“I wondered about Trotsky again and again while reading everything I could find. I was fascinated that figures such as Fritz Sternberg [left-wing German sociologist and social critic] visited Trotsky, and visited Brecht around the same time. There was huge anxiety on Brecht’s part about being seen to take up Trotsky’s position because it would have cut him adrift from the focus of loyalty towards the Soviet Union. He was a German writer in exile and wouldn’t take that step.

“You rightly point out his great praise for Trotsky’s writings and also his rejection of Trotsky’s policies, and his view in 1927 that Stalin had taken the appropriate position. Did he study Trotsky’s works? Almost certainly. He cites Trotsky approvingly in the stories that he writes. I think one can look more into that. I did some work on this, but I didn’t feel I could say more than I did.

“The echoes of Trotsky are quite strong when it comes to the discussion of the predicament of the heretic in *Galileo*. A colleague wrote some years ago that *Galileo* is really a cypher for Trotsky. I don’t think one can go that far, but there are parallels, also with [Nikolai] Bukharin [Bolshevik leader executed after the third Moscow Trial in 1938]. Brecht studied the protocols of the Show Trials and used Bukharin’s statement at the conclusion of his trial.”

I then commented that a “satisfactory answer” to Brecht’s simultaneous admiration for Trotsky’s writings and rejection of his revolutionary internationalist views could only come out of “a historical and cultural objective analysis of what was a predicament bound up with some of the great tragedies of the 20th century....Our aim is not to demonise Brecht or anybody else for their failings.”

We were familiar with Brecht’s justifications (echoed by numerous others) for remaining within the Stalinist fold at the time, but, I said, “we reject those arguments because, in fact, Stalin’s policies continuously weakened the Soviet Union: the massacre of the Bolshevik cadre; the Stalinist betrayals of the working class in Spain and France, China, Britain and above all Germany. Brecht’s public refusal to state what he knew to be the case wasn’t simply an individual issue. Artists around the world tragically took the same position.” This was an enormous historical and political problem. The Marxist tendency received savage blows in the 1930s and 1940s, from both fascism and the counter-revolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy.

I added that I felt there were artistic consequences from Brecht’s relationship with Stalinism and his attitude toward Hitler’s rise to power. Brecht, I suggested, alternated between the view “that Hitlerism was the inevitable outcome of German history, on the one hand, or that the German population was responsible for that defeat, on the other,” and that this pessimistic outlook colored his subsequent work. “In our view, this leaves aside the parties and tendencies that were responsible for that defeat. I think that is a big question.”

I argued that while Brecht was unquestionably the major playwright of the 20th century, “it is his early works that interest me the most, that are the most flashing, fascinating and lively. The defeat in 1933 and his exile leads to work that while it is more technically interesting, is less lively, spontaneous and innovative.”

Parker agreed that there were certainly “consequences of remaining

loyal to the Soviet Union. It's documented on a horrific scale and Brecht saw that clearly before the war. He didn't speak out and that would always be held against him. He did not make that break. Why?" Parker then returned to his previous argument, to the effect that Brecht viewed the USSR as "the only force capable of defeating Nazism ... He wasn't convinced by Trotsky's policies, and that a fragmented revolutionary left could combat fascism."

He also enjoyed "those early unfettered and spontaneous works," Parker acknowledged. But "they were dangerously unfettered for him personally. Brecht was living out an instinctual life and realising that he couldn't sustain the consequences. This was an issue in the 1920s which I write about, in terms of his body and his relationship to his body. I refer to a sort of biophysical determinism which underpins much of his writing and gave it a sharply satirical edge. Quite a lot of that survives in exile, and his anti-fascist satires."

Parker argued that Brecht did some of his finest work following his exile. "In my opinion," he said, "the short scenes in *Furcht und Elend* [*Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, also known in English as *The Private Life of the Master Race*] are amongst Brecht's finest writing."

He added, "The works from *Galileo* onwards until 1943 have a definite tone. They were works of someone in exile who was seeking to survive and they are marked by a confessional, personal quality and also a complexity related to the understanding of his predicament, which didn't diminish in the early years of the war....So I don't see him in that period entering into artistic compromises which were inimical to his development."

Sybille Fuchs commented that in going through Brecht's work she was always struck by the complexity of his artistic personality. He can be quite the pedagogue, "thinking about how the spectator should behave and how the actor should play the role. On the other hand, in his lyrics, he is very spontaneous and warm-hearted, as in his early plays—but at other times didactic and formally political."

Parker concurred that Brecht "was a very complex individual, described once as the most complex human being in the past 50 years. He lives out that complexity in his writings and forces contradictions apart. His was a life beyond most lives led. There is an extraordinary combination of acute intelligence and artistic sensibility, which for me relates so much to his relationship to his body, and the acute sense that one must live in the here and now. So we have that enormous spontaneity, an incredible lyrical agility, but also a sensibility from a very early stage which seeks to give shape and form to artistic experience, to achieve a distance to the material from which one can better understand experience."

Toward the end of the conversation, I returned to the question of Brecht's relationship to Stalinism, as it related to his artistic and theatre theories. Faced with the Stalinization of the Communist Party and the series of catastrophic defeats suffered by the working class, I suggested that "Brecht sought to use theatrical technique to get around what were essentially problems of political perspective. One of the chief problems was that he was in the orbit of the Communist Party, which was primarily responsible for the defeat of the German working class. In other words, the issues he was taking on could not be resolved by theatrical technique and organisation alone. He wanted to make his theatre a substitute for a revolutionary party and that could not be done. The problems were profound ones of leadership, perspective, party and programme within the working class."

Parker then reiterated his contention that Brecht was not that close to the Stalinist party and had never joined it, "and maintained a very wide range of relations," with people such as Sternberg, Walter Benjamin, Karl Korsch and others. These relationships were "all part of a bigger, fuller picture; one which I think can help us to overcome some of the limitations we have been encouraged to adopt. Consider Brecht's treatment of the German revolution and his great respect for Rosa Luxemburg. The

German Communist Party, as it was organised in Moscow, was an important point of reference. There's no doubt about that. But after 1935 it was out of the question for Brecht to seek exile in Moscow."

He concluded: "I believe that Brecht's artistic innovations were primarily driven by an artistic sensibility and not by a political imperative. For Benjamin, Brecht was the key writer of that time who actually succeeded in reconciling aesthetic and political concerns."

On that note, having expressed our appreciation to Stephen Parker for his time, we finished our conversation. As we hope the reader will agree, the lengthy discussion—which we could only present in part—covered some vital issues of 20th century art and politics. Clarifying these issues is essential to the rebuilding of an international socialist culture in the working class, to which the *World Socialist Web Site* is dedicated.



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