I know what you want. You want a story that won’t surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won’t make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story.

Yann Martel, *Life of Pi: A Novel*

‘In Brecht what is fatal is always the failure to learn’, notes Fredric Jameson.¹ The revolution hinges, for Brecht, on the capacity of the oppressed to undertake a unique kind of self-learning. At his best, this preoccupation makes Brecht a superb dialectician. After all, for both Marx and Hegel, dialectics pertains not to the study of objects and events ‘out there’, in the independently existing objective world, but also to self-understanding, to the ways in which we, as human agents, are already out there (and the ‘out there’ in us), the ways in which knowledge of self and world coincide. Dialectics accomplishes this by grasping human activity as the moment of intersection and interpenetration of subject and object. This is why world-changing and self-changing are moments of a single process. Revolutionary transformation of society simultaneously entails tremendous processes

¹ Jameson 1998, p. 91.
of individual and collective learning in which masses of oppressed people
rid themselves ‘of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society
anew’. At the heart of dialectics, therefore, is the dynamic relationship between
subjects and objects, self-transformation and world-changing. To theorise this
requires forms of thought that break down rigid dualisms, destabilise static,
classificatory approaches, and grasp the dynamic movement that is experience.
Yet, this dialectical approach has been repeatedly lost within the history of
Marxism: one need only think of the efforts of Gramsci, Lukács and Korsch,
during the revolutionary wave of 1917–23, to reaffirm dialectics in the face
of vulgar materialism.

Undialectical ‘Marxism’ freezes historical materialism into a set of static
axioms about the world ‘out there’, axioms that are resistant to the living
pulse of real struggles. Rather than a dialectics immersed in concrete historical
activity, schematic thought prefers transhistorical ‘laws’ that can be applied
to any and all situations. Axiomatic ‘Marxism’ has often been the refuge
currents hostile to the open-endedness of materialist dialectics. When
new problems of theory and practice – such as mass strikes and workers’
councils – are thrown up by historical events, the schematist refuses them,
invoking formulae that recite past positions. Precisely where dialectical theory
and practice perceive new challenges requiring the actual development of
thought and practice, mechanistic materialism clings to ritualised (and reified)
positions, foreclosing dialectical development. In the name of orthodoxy, a
refusal to learn is worn as a badge of honour.

These theoretical trends have often been widespread within the radical Left
as well, contributing to enduring problems of dogmatism. Indeed, so pervasive
are the dominant forms of bourgeois thought that, only a few years after
Marx’s death, Engels publicly confronted the axiomatic thinking that many
brought to their readings of Marx. Readers, he urged, should not expect
fixed, cut-to-measure, once and for all applicable definitions in Marx’s works.
It is self-evident that where things and their interrelations are conceived,
not as fixed, but as changing, their mental images, the ideas, are likewise
subject to change and transformation, and they are not encapsulated in rigid
definitions.  

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2 Marx and Engels 1976, p. 60.
3 Classic examples are the opposition of mainstream social democracy to Rosa
Luxemburg’s enthusiastic reception of the Russian mass strikes of 1905, or social-
democratic support of parliament against workers’ councils in Russia and Germany.
4 As quoted by Ollman 1971, p. 4.