

Brecht's Political Awareness and Antagonism in "In the Jungle of Cities"

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Abstract

Based on the analysis of Brecht's political awareness and antagonism, the present paper elaborates on how Brecht's political attitude is reflected in his play *In the Jungle of Cities*. The main characters' features as fighting machines and their failure to attain freedom are analyzed in detail. The conclusion is that Brecht had been a budding socialist even at the time of the creation of the play.

Keywords

Brecht; political awareness and antagonism; In the Jungle of Cities.

1. Introduction

In the Jungle of Cities is one of the few of successful works in Brecht's early period of creation. First with the title *In the Jungle* in 1927, Brecht revised the play to produce in the final form with the title *In the Jungle of Cities* and the subtitle *The Fight between Two Men in the Great City of Chicago*. Beyond any doubt, political antagonism in this play serves as one of Brecht's main tendencies towards bourgeois society.

2. Body

2.1. Brecht's Political Awareness

Bertolt Brecht was "not only a passive observer of the struggle of the revolutionary workers' movement and a sympathizing reporter. He also wanted, in his own way, to take part in this movement" (Fetscher 12). During the last years of the Weimar Republic, he attempted to support the development of class consciousness and disciplined struggle with his instructive plays, addressing himself directly to workers' choruses and amateur struggles.

As John Willett has claimed, "even before Brecht became a revolutionary socialist, he was a 'theroretician of struggle'. He was fascinated by it, and Marxism became an aid in replacing his early preoccupation with combat as an absurd phenomenon of nature with meaningful, historically striving" (187). Repeatedly, he demonstrated an awakening consciousness of a necessity for political confrontation. After 1927, Brecht began to change into a true political writer and it was impossible to understand his plays without knowing the form of Marxian peculiar to him, a kind of Marxism that was derived from his own studies and the influences of friends, such as Karl Korsch. In brief, one cannot comment on and resolve all the contradictions of the writer and fighter Bertolt Brecht who evolved in a time of war and class struggle, in a time of social incongruities and moral conflicts.

2.2. Brecht's Political Antagonism

In his essay, Iring Fetscher has noted that "antagonism is hostility that results in active resistance, opposition, or contentiousness for the whole human community" (16). In politics, the proletarians work in enterprises at projects that are not of their choosing, or find themselves excluded from productive process. The politics, acting as the "civilized weapon" of bourgeoisies, crushes community and destroys the natural world, so the proletarians should

unite to fight against the bourgeoisies consistently and completely. “During the years of exile, Brecht’s hostility towards elite bourgeois art, its traditions and its institutions, was manifest in a rather cynical form and in the character representation of great plays (Wirth 201). At the same time, his adoption of Marxism-Leninism, in opposition to liberal democracy and fascism, served to reaffirm the touchstone of use value in art and the associated acceptance of a relative artistic autonomy, which was informed by political antagonism. In that way, Brecht’s writing embodied a form of cultural capital that drew on partisan Marxism-Leninism as well as more radical attack on the bourgeois value.

2.3. Leading Characters as Fighting Machines

Repeatedly, the hostilities between Shlink and Garga, the isolation of the individuals and the impossibility of communicating through language have been seen as the elements prefiguring the Theatre of Absurd by many critics. However, absurdism is informed by existentialism. In Brecht’s story, a motiveless fight to death results from his abandoning of the conditioning factors of European thought and its drama. The struggle is not absurd, but has the logic of the boxing-ring. The audience at a boxing match will not stop to ask why the boxers are fighting; neither will the audience at *In the Jungle of Cities*. “Suffice to say that they choose to fight and all the other elements of the drama, the other characters, the American environment, even the Salvation Army, are employed by the fighting machines solely to end” (Meech 74), which can suggest that the ultimate achievement of a society based on the primacy of the individual should be the total breakdown of communication and the complete isolation of the individual, even with his enemies. Searching for an enemy anywhere, Shlink, living in the capitalist society, unexpectedly considers fighting as the whole meaning of life. Without fighting, there will be no life. There is a commonly held view that this bleak image of the world has been recognized by Brecht for his acceptance of a Marxist analysis of human relations and the functioning of society.

Detecting the mechanistic potential of human beings, Brecht has presented its leading characters as fighting machines in his play *In the Jungle of Cities*, where the flimsiest of motivations of fighting is proffered to justify the taking-apart and reassembling of a human’s living politics as if human beings were a motorcar. In this play, a man is shown to be the sum total of his actions, not of his heredity and psychological development where the subject becomes the object that can be manipulated. If the consciousness of responsibility of human beings is removed, they will be capable equally of the tyranny of the Chicago gangsters or the Nazis. In this extraordinary and uncompromising play, after staring into the void, Garga can still acknowledge the sheer exhilaration resulting from the renunciation of personal responsibility for the sake of a naked struggle for dominance between two men. Although Shlink has been ever from the class of bourgeois and Garga is only a poor proletarian, they all face the similar destiny. That is, they have already totally transformed into fighting machines, leaving emptiness in their minds.

2.4. Unattainment of Anarchic Freedom

For Brecht, the issue of the unattainment of anarchic freedom has been served as one of the main ideas discussed *In the Jungle of Cities*. Garga in this play stands for survival, while Shlink stands for attachment. They live in a world where the only possibility of success lies in loneliness and contact is unattainable even in a fight. Garga can survive only as an isolated human being; this is his “freedom”. And the price for it is his alienation both from other individuals and property. He is an anarchist in an anarchic capitalist society. “Actually, the contest Shlink and Garga are engaged in is less than a fierce boxing match than a deadly chess game, in which the opponents play with human pawns” (117) assumed by Frederic Ewen. Human beings are things, commodities used as the will of contestants. Thus, Shlink debauches Marie, the sister of Garga as well as Garga’s sweetheart Jane, while Garga himself in the deadly

battle against Shlink plays the part of the pander. The dehumanized, abstract characters of the sporting arena reflect the dehumanized world outside as Brecht saw it as well as its dehumanized contestants. The very concept of freedom in this play is a dehumanized and detached one, which has little to do with the family or the community.

But is that sort of freedom attainable? From Garga, audiences can realize the unattainment clearly:

No...We are not free. It begins with coffee in the morning and with a beating if you act the fool; and a monster's tears salt the children's food, and her sweat washes their shirts, and you are secured till Doomsday, and the roots of it dig deep into your heart. And when you are grown up and want to do something with your own skin and hair, then you get paid, initiated, stamped, sold at a high price, and you don't even have the freedom to go to the dogs. (Brecht 29)

"For the commonplace, workday world and its toiling members, Garga has nothing but contempt. But where to find freedom from that?" (Ewen 118). If the proletarians make mistakes in their work time, they will be punished cruelly. For the children workers, they must work all day and suffer from bad treatments. When they become adults, they still have no freedom but have to work for payments, trying to sell themselves to the bourgeoisies at a high price. From what Garga says, it is not hard to find that in the capitalist society. The proletarians are born to be slaves to work and can never enjoy freedom until their death, which indicates Brecht's pity for the proletarians' constraints under the authority of bourgeoisies, suggesting his antagonism towards bourgeois politics.

At the end of the play, Shlink says to Garga:

You did not understand it at all. You wanted my end, but I wanted the battle; not the physical, but the spiritual. (Brecht 132)

To which Garga replies:

Now you see the spiritual is nothing. It is not important to be stronger, but the living one. I can't win over you. I can only trample on you. (132)

From this dialogue, Brecht just describes the metaphysical struggle between the two opponents, the two totally different nervous systems. Because the battle is carried on by one of them blindly and with all the strength of elementary appetite and for the other meant nothing less than life itself, it is relentless and can only end with the destruction of one of the combatants.

During his exile in America, Brecht liked to think himself as detached. Likewise, he imagined that in looking on life he was looking on a sport. One of his great objects of admiration was the middleweight champion Samson-Korner, whose biography he was planning to write, and with whom he was frequently photographed. Therefore, Brecht has endowed his anger towards the capitalist society into his work in a way of battles, protruded by Garga's whiplashes against the society at that time.

3. Conclusion

Even before Brecht became a revolutionary socialist, Brecht has cultivated his political awareness and political antagonism, which is typically shown in *In the Jungle of Cities*. In this play, the two main characters fight with each other in the boxing arena just as fighting machines, representing the breakdown in communication in an isolated capitalist society. And they are sure to fail to attain anarchic freedom as individuals. *In the Jungle of Cities* shows Brecht's identity as a budding socialist at the time of the creation of the play.

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