

Analysis of Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* under the Theory of Economic Materialism

Fuhua Liu

School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Jiaotong University, Dalian, Liaoning 116028, China

Abstract

Under the theory of economic materialism, the present paper analyzes Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*. After introducing the term "economic materialism", the paper, based on the plot of the play, proceeds with its analysis from the angle of the crisis of the meat industry and the canonization of useful martyr by capitalism.

Keywords

Brecht, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, economic materialism.

1. Introduction

Marxist economists prefer to define economic materialism as how a person or a group chooses to spend their resources, particularly money and time in general. Literally speaking, "a materialist is a person for whom collecting material goods is an important priority" (Sowell 76). Taking the economic materialism as the main characteristic of bourgeoisies, Bertolt Brecht has connected the capitalist insatiability behind morality, economic crisis and war economy with essence of materialism in his play *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* under the guide of Marxist economic theory.

2. Body

2.1. Plot of the Play

The plot in *St. Joan* begins with the capitalists who run the stockyards in the person of scheming mega-tycoon Mauler who executes a deal that will advance his position while at the same time devastate the lives of the 50,000 workers whose livelihoods are in the stockyards. Joan is one of the leaders of the Black Hats, a Salvation Army type organization whose events draw dozens of workers to hear their songs and prayers. Desperate to find a way to connect the workers, Joan finagles a tour of the stockyards. She is stunned by the bestiality of the workers but does manage to stun Mauler with her simplicity and beauty. When a worker offers her a dangerous position in order to advance herself, she takes it, and finds herself trapped among the workers as she begins to see the corruption in all the larger institutions, including her own black hats.

Brecht's play sticks to the point of view that communism is the only way for mankind to proceed and progress. Brecht has taken a classical theme from history—a traditional "heroic" subject—and married it to the contemporary economic struggle in order thereby to lay bare the operative forces in modern society at a time of crisis. The scene was to be set in the Chicago stockyards, but once more the locale would be the world at large and Germany in particular, discussing the common problems about economic crisis shared by the whole capitalist world.

2.2. The Crisis of Meat Industry in Parody

Saint Joan of the Stockyards was written by Brecht before the apex of crisis, which was never to be produced in pre-Hitler Germany except for a partial radio performance on April, 1932.

In this play, he has set the meat industry in parody, because he was demystifying the modern heroism of the stock market, at the same time he was demystifying the heroism of a classical tragedy. Undoubtedly, this writing style has clarified the characteristics of the roles before the audiences. Meanwhile, it has strengthened the inevitability and severity of the bombing of meat crisis in the capitalist society.

As for Joanna Dark, the protagonist of this play with the goodness in her heart and the mission of God in her soul, she believes she can alleviate the ills by attending the workers in the packing industry to make an appeal to the finer instinct of the industrial magnate and meat baron, Mauler. She starts a number of “descents” into the lower regions of the industrial hell, and each experience brings her, if not renewed comfort, at least a bitter knowledge of the reality. To instruct her in the wickedness of the laboring classes, Mauler sends her down into the stockyards, where she does find that poverty and unemployment bring about moral and spiritual degradation. As Joan’s education proceeds, she becomes aware of how the meat-packers find the Black Straws useful instruments in pacifying the workers, by giving them God. Now brought almost to the point of despair, she drives the money-changers from the mission and is booted out of her job in consequence. In the meantime, unemployment and starvation have driven the workers to a strike, in which the Communists have gained a leading role. Joan, a neutral, is recruited to convey one of the crucial messages to another factory. However, she is seized by doubts, weaknesses, and defaults on her urgent mission. The general strike collapses; the leaders are arrested, and the workers are defeated. Mauler has succeeded in cornering the market, and becomes triumphant. The factories reopen once more. Joan, heartbroken, is dying and brought back to the mission where the meat-packers proceed to canonize her with their exalted liturgies down out her last passionate pleas.

As for Mauler, however, he is waging a powerful campaign to obliterate his competitors. With the skill of a great manipulator and an expert’s knowledge of the mechanics of the meat exchange, he brings his competitors to the verge of bankruptcy and the workers practically to despair, driven by the adoration of money. Mauler rises to the true epic majesty when he delivers his apostrophe to Money:

What an edifice!

From days forgotten built up again and again,

Because ever crumbling—tremendous still;

Though demanding sacrifice,

Hard to set up again—and yet with groans

Again set up—but still inescapably

Wresting the possible from a malign planet—

Be that much of little—and so at all time

Defended by the best. For see, should I

Who have much against it, and sleep badly—

Should I abandon it—it would only be as if a fly—

Had ceased to stem an avalanche. At that very moment,

I’d turn to nothing—and over me it would sweep.

(Brecht *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* 62)

In fact, Mauler’s seemingly bewildered attitude towards money paradoxically uncovers his true obsession with money. From Mauler’s soliloquy on his pursuing and fascination on money, readers can realize that the only social value for the bourgeoisie remains the appreciation of money.

By portraying Joan and Mauler in parody, Brecht has underlined the distorted relationship between workers and bourgeoisies and the influence of economic crisis on capitalist society in

a radical and destructive way. It is clear that the workers can't obtain the real fair treatment from the bourgeoisies through the strike.

As for the meat crisis, into the meat baron, through Mauler's lips, Brecht puts similar lofty verses which have hinted the necessity of the eruption of meat crisis to some degree. Mauler has just received advice from New York that the meat market is due for a crisis. In reply to his partner's question about his depression, he replies:

Remember, Cridle, how some days ago

We passed through stockyards—it was eventide,
And stood beside our brand-new packing machine.
Remember, Cridle, the huge blond ox
That dully gazed up at the sky
As blows fell on him. It was I was struck down,
I felt—ah, Cridle—our business is a bloody one. (3)

The parody goes beyond the language into the situations. From the confession originated from the deep heart of Mauler, a bourgeoisie, people can form the standpoint that the capitalist business flows with the "blood" of proletarians especially under the economic crisis. Now for Brecht:

JOANNA. You are Mauler.

MAULER. No, he's there. (Points to Slift)

JOANNA. You are Mauler...

MAULER. How do you know me?

JOANNA. Because you have the bloodiest face of all. (20)

The purpose of Brecht's arranging the special dialogue between Joanna and Mauler is to present the direct description of the hatred of the worker toward the bourgeoisie and the evil side of exploitation of the bourgeoisie from the color of his face, reiterating the passive influence of economic materialism under the capitalist situation.

2.3. Capitalism Canonizing its Useful Martyr

Through revelation of Joanna's naïve actions, capitalism canonizing its useful martyrs is proved in the case of Joanna's mission step by step. At the beginning she firmly believes that "misfortune, like rain, comes from no one knows where—no one makes it, yet it comes" (10). Her pleas have a biblical sincerity and intensity, even when directed toward Mauler. When everything is revealed, she even warns him of Judgment Day but has nothing else to deal with the problem. Instructed by the packers and cattle breeders that the wretched poor have no morality, she asks in anger, "where should they get their morality, if not by stealing" (38)? Finally, her eyes have been opened, and she addresses the packers, telling them she sees through them and their uses of religion. She learns now that their interests and those of the poor are not alike. Therefore, she has come to understand the "system" and drives the money-changers from the mission. At the end of the play, having betrayed the cause of the working people, she sees their leaders being led off by the soldiers, and stands stupefied with admiration at the sacrifice of the anonymous. Before she dies, she confesses her disenchantment:

I, for example, have done nothing.
For count nothing as good—no matter how it seems,
But that which truly helps.
And nothing as honorable—except it charge
The world once and for all. That is what I needed.
As if in answer to their prayers I came to the oppressors.

O goodness without fruit! Barren intentions!
I have changed nothing.
Fast vanishing from this earth without fear:
I say to you:
Take heed that when you leave the world,
You were not only good, but leave
A good world. (106)

Having realized the uselessness of her naïve actions on mission, Joanna ends her life with the transformation from a blind radical leader of the mission into the sacrifice of the capitalist economic crisis. As she lies dying, loudspeakers announce the coming of the great world economic crisis. At the command of Mauler, flags are lowered over her body, symbolizing capitalism's canonizing on its useful martyr who has done the bourgeoisie a good favor blindly on the premeditated reduction of workers in the coming economic crisis.

3. Conclusion

Having treated the contemporary economic crisis so brilliantly, Bertolt Brecht produced *Saint Joan of Stockyards* far from being an oversimplification of the economic structure of the capitalist society. As a simplification of a complex process, the world of competition, of markets, of goods cornered, of the classical appropriation by exploitation, of word and poverty, is exposed. As a matter of fact, the play gives audiences an unusually astute depiction of various stages of the economic crisis: the end of prosperity, overproduction, crises, and normal restoration, which deeply unveils the role of economic materialism as the rule of dealing with all the business in the capitalist society.

References

- [1] Brecht, Bertolt. *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*[M]. Trans. Frank Jones. London: Eyre Methuen, 1976.
- [2] Sowell, Thomas. *Marxism: Philosophy and Economics*[M]. New York: Morrow, 1985.