

Surrender to and Reconstruction of Machine-made Identity in Brecht's *Man Equals Man*

Fuhua Liu

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

Abstract

The present paper is an analysis of Brecht's *Man Equals Man* from the perspective of surrender to and reconstruction of the main character Galy Gay's machine-made identity. After introducing alienation in a capitalist society, the paper continues to analyze Galy Gay both as a surrenderer and a reconstructor of his machine-made identity.

Keywords

alienation, surrender in identity, reconstruction of machine-made identity, Brecht, *Man Equals Man*.

1. Introduction

Since 1921, Brecht had been reflecting on the question as to what a man can be changed into as a subject for a play. At that time, he was fascinated by city life, its mass attractions such as boxing matches and bicycle races, and the ruthless struggle for survival among large sections of the population which left no room for individual development. From his extensive studies of the American way of life, Brecht has expressed the idea that "in modern industrial society, man only functions as an insignificant particle in a great mass, or as an expendable cog in a machine" (Speidel 48) even in his early plays, such as *Man Equals Man*. Because man is controlled by outside forces, what goes on in the soul is no longer of interest.

2. Body

2.1. Alienation in a Capitalist Society

According to Marx's theory of alienation, alienation refers to "the social alienation of people from aspects of their human nature" (Marx 173) and is "a systematic result of capitalism" (173). Based on the observation that workers inevitably lose control of their lives and selves in emerging industrial production under capitalism, Marx's theory of alienation mainly focuses on people of working class who have never become autonomous and self-realized human beings. In a capitalist society, with each individual functioning as an instrument instead of a social being, alienation occurs, and this alienation accelerates the depersonalization of an individual.

As for the relationship between individual development and society, Brecht has always convicted that "people not only do change with time but that they ought to, and that not to have done so is nothing to be pleased about" (Speidel 46). For Brecht, there is no doubt that people cannot be expected to keep their former selves over time and their behaviors depend far more on external than internal factors. In modern industrial society, man only functions as an insignificant particle in a great mass, or as an expendable cog in a machine. It is a subject to which he frequently refers in his writings, particularly in his *Man Equals Man*. The chosen theme in fact reveals Brecht's attempts to create a new type of theatre based on Marx's theory of alienation. Therefore, it is not surprising that Brecht's concept of the individual and its relationship with society that determines the individual's social behavior have become one of the major issues debated by Brechtian scholars.

Under the conditions of modern factory production, the average worker is nothing but a replaceable cog in a gigantic and impersonal production apparatus. Where armies of hired operatives perform monotonous and closely supervised tasks, workers have essentially lost control over the process of production and the relationships they should have with each other. Consequently, they have become estranged from their human nature which should be free and productive. Since capitalism limits people's autonomy on identity recognition by controlling them in the sphere of politics, workplaces and economic life, real liberty does not exist unless workers effectively control their workplaces, the products they produce and the way they relate to each other.

2.2. The Surrender of Identity

Man Equals Man holds an unusual place among Brecht's dramas because it revolves about the restructuring of a human being's identity. As early as 1917, Brecht had discovered that human identity is interchangeable. Brecht has created his own special plot in *Man Equals Man*. The place is Kilkoa, India. Galy Gay, a poor Irish dock-porter, sets out one day to buy fish for himself and his wife. On the way, he is befriended by three British Tommies who must find a replacement at all costs because they have lost their fourth companion, Jip. Consequently, a curious and fascinating process is set afoot to convert Galy Gay into Jip, a process he only too willingly submits to, in anticipation of profit, even to the extent of denying his own wife. Further to ensnare him and bind him to them, his companions beguile him into selling a fake elephant, charge him with the swindle, sentence him to a mock execution, and bring him to the point where, having denied his past and his name, he even pronounces a funeral oration over the presumptive body of his former self. So thorough is the transformation of Galy Gay into soldier Jip that he becomes an efficient battle-machine. When the true Jip finally returns, he is unrecognized, and is turned into Galy Gay.

Remarkably, it is the first time in Brecht's writings, the element of change begins to play a part. Man is changeable. Unfortunately, the changeability is a negative one. Galy is pliant putty in the hands of external forces that do with him what they desire. In the past few years, Brecht has been asking people to sit back and watch the futile conflict of human beings and their striving for contact in a world without form and void at a wrestling or boxing match. But for this time, he is asking people to scan a figure, Galy Gay, as he allows himself wittingly to be changed into anything society wishes. Though in the other plays he has already suggested the social interplay of forces, the social forces that play upon Galy Gay in *Man equals Man* become more clearly identified.

2.3. The Reconstruction of Machine-made Men

Depersonalized as a formidable human fighting machine, Galy Gay, nothing more than the product of external social pressures, can be changed at will, and therefore make himself totally adaptable to the capitalist social environment. "He is entirely passive, and what we traditionally regard as the most important aspect of the self, its true identity, has become entirely externalized and socialized" (Speidel 48). For Galy Gay, personality is a dangerous possession as he has cried out, "Do nothing for the sake of your name! A name is something unsure—that you can't build upon that" (Brecht *Man Equals Man* 69). When the mutilation has taken place, Galy Gay muses: "That's lucky for me. Now I see to what a pass stubbornness can bring one, what a bloody mess it can turn out to be for a man who is always dissatisfied with himself and makes such a to-do over a mere name" (69). In the opinion of Uria, one of the other soldiers, Galy's capacity for a change is a proof of vitality. And Galy supports that view when at the end he remarks: "I would have been happier if they had named me Nobody-at-all, instead of Galy Gay" (74). Thus, Brecht has foreshadowed the alienation of the machine-made man and social conformism.

As for the reconstruction of a man, no tool can be more efficient than the military. Galy Gay is as natural as a thorough war engine. Does it matter what war is for and against whom? The play answers: "When they need cotton, it's Tibet; and when they need wool, it's Pamir...We haven't as yet been told which country we are to invade. But it looks more and more like Tibet" (66). Significantly, Galy Gay's successful transformation lies in the fact that he ceases to be a private person by acquiring strength to join a large mass of people. Similarly, his extraordinary military victory can only be explained because he apparently carries out the absolute will of a large number of people. Does the value of the human beings lie in numbers, not in individuality? The seemingly uncomplicated fascination with the phenomenon of the mass and the depersonalization of the individual are very much of a piece with the vigorous capitalist cultural iconoclasm and admiration for Marxist alienation theory that the working class will easily lose their identities under the capitalist industrial production. As an apologue on the transformability of man in the age of machines, *Man Equals Man* marks an important and necessary step in Brecht's research on the development of individuals and collectives. Yet the collective is as fraudulent as the individual, for it cheats both the actors and those acted on. Galy's soldier companions are not different from Galy himself. The imperialist army is a collective too—a collective of destruction. There is a near-pathos that is horrifying in Galy Gay's ultimate refusal to look into the coffin, where his own body is presumably lying:

I could not, without instant death
Gaze into a crate at a drained face
Of some person once familiar to me from the water's surface
Into which a man looked who, so I realized, died.
Therefore I am unable to open this crate
Because this fear is in the both of me, for perhaps
I am the Both which has just come about
On our earth's transformable top surface.....
And I, the one I and the other I
Are used and accordingly usable.
And since I never gazed at that elephant
I shall close an eye to what concerns myself
And shed what is not likable about me and thereby
Be pleasant. (61)

How can other men, better instructed and informed, bear to look at themselves, in their own mental and moral coffins? Under the destruction of the collectives, Galy Gay has been technically transformed into an indifferent fighting machine that never cares about his true self with the abnormal characteristics. In the capitalist society, Galy disowns not only himself but everything and everyone around him.

3. Conclusion

Brecht realizes that an individual in the modern age can falsely realize himself in the terms of mass although the collectives will make him lose his own identity. In *Man Equals Man*, people encounter the element of change which exemplifies the unheroic heroism of that time for it is passionless, false and opportunistic. Yet in Brecht it reflects the very image of bourgeois society that has become faceless, nameless---mere "identification cards" which may even be interchangeable.

References

- [1] Brecht, Bertolt. *Man Equals Man*[M]. Trans. Gerhard Nellhaus. Eyre Methuen, 1979.
- [2] Speidel, Erich. "The Individual and Society"[A]. *Brecht in Perspective*. Ed. Graham Bartram, and Anthony Waine. London and New York: Longman, 1982.
- [3] Marx, Karl. *Captia*, Vol 1[A]. New York: Penguin, 1976.