



BRECHT'S CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE: A TRIUMPH OF MARXISM AS AN IDEAL MODEL

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ABSTRACT: Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was a German dramatist, poet and theorist born in Augsburg, Germany where his father worked at a paper company. Although his father was a catholic and his mother a protestant, both parents influenced him immensely. Brecht abandoned his medical career and became a theatre critic. From 1922 onwards, he made several visits to Berlin, the centre of theatrical activities. Samuel Leiter says that Bertolt Brecht's first directorial job was Arnot Bronnen's *Patricide* in 1922. Thereafter, his play *Drums in the Night* opened in Munich at the *Kammerspiele* and later at the *Deutsches Theatre* in Berlin. He was awarded the prestigious Kleist prize for young dramatists. Bertolt Brecht initially read Karl Marx's works but Marxism did not become a determining factor in his works until the 1930s when he started writing didactic plays. These plays were of dramatic economy. He fled from Germany in 1937 with his major actress and later wife Helen Weigel and their three children as a result of the Second World War. Bertolt Brecht's theatre and Marxist aesthetics are an investigation of the theatre's apparatus, political efficacy and theatrical contours. Brecht's theatre epitomizes his radical desire to change the world, replacing it with a higher level of sane humanity. This paper examines Brecht's fascination with the Marxist bug and how this ideological bent is brought to bear in his dramatic oeuvre, especially *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, a parody of war and the torpedo of capitalist materialism which is the seedbed of greed, corruption and oppression of the poor and vulnerable. The paper submits, therefore, that with Brecht, the world has witnessed an open theatre which is characterized by its leftist and liberalized theatre practice which remains dateless.

KEYWORDS: Marxism, Capitalism, Materialism, Proletariat, Bourgeois.



INTRODUCTION

Brecht's dramatic and theoretical activism ... are often replete with Marxist–Socialist ideologies anchored on pedagogies of the oppressed ... they also bear a lot of allegories and parables that ally them as tribunal on man's inhumanity to man (EddeIji 6).

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was a German dramatist, poet and theorist born in Augsburg, Germany where his father worked at a paper company. Although his father was a catholic and his mother a protestant, both parents influenced him immensely. Brecht abandoned his medical career and became a theatre critic. From 1922 onwards, he made several visits to Berlin, the centre of theatrical activities. Samuel Leiter says that Bertolt Brecht's first directorial job was Arnot Bronnen's *Patricide* in 1922. Thereafter, his play *Drums in the Night* opened in Munich at the Kammerspiele and later at the Deutsches Theatre in Berlin. He was awarded the prestigious Kleist prize for young dramatists.

Bertolt Brecht initially read Karl Marx's works but Marxism did not become a determining factor in his works until the 1930s when he started writing didactic plays. These plays were of dramatic economy. He fled from Germany in 1937 with his major actress and later wife Helen Weigel and their three children as a result of the Second World War. When the Nazis came to power in Germany, Brecht wandered and lived in Denmark, Sweden, Finland and came to California, USA in 1941. At the end of World War II in 1945, Brecht returned home to Germany in 1948. In this year, Brecht set up the Berliner Ensemble and together with Helen Weigel made it a theatrical hub. Brecht received the National Prize, First Class in 1951. In 1954, he won the international Lenin Peace Prize. Unfortunately, Brecht died on the 4th of August, 1956.

Bertolt Brecht's dramaturgy was radically new and entirely revolutionary in his time. Both Bernard Shaw and Brecht advocated a non-Aristotelian theatre, characterized not by a carthaticemotional effects but by preachment, protest and persuasion. Both playwrights (Shaw and Brecht) were absorbed with the materialistic motive behind human ideals. Referring to Brecht and Shaw, Robert Brustein says:

Outwardly, both are social rebels, attempting the salvation

And both involuntarily overcome the narrow utilitarian

limitations they impose on their art (231).

Brecht rejected the naturalism of Stanislavsky or Max Reinhardt, as it portrays only the limited picture of man's relationship with particular elements of his environment, such as his family or his place of work, and failed to portray man within a more general landscape – that of the whole of his society. The removal of the painted backdrop by the blank screen symbolized a more universal and less specific setting (James Roose-Evans 68).



For Brecht, the Aristotelian drama stresses the creation of “terror and pity” in the spectator, to purge his emotions, so that he emerges relieved and refreshed. For such spectator, according to Brecht, the theatre will be a means of mental refreshment but leaving no lasting trace behind. Brecht thus regards the art of the theatre as more than a mere article of consumption and he frowned at what he called “Culinary theatre,” meaning a theatre which merely provides mental foodstuffs to be gobbled and then forgotten. Hence, James Roose-Evans avers thus:

Brecht wanted to stimulate a reaction rather than encourage the kind of passive acquiescence found in the old bourgeois theatre. Once in a production, Brecht would often rewrite a play depending on the audience’s response. The play thus became an ‘encounter’ and an ‘experiment’ with the audience functioning both as interpreter and critic (68).

In like manner, Robert Cohen explains that Brecht’s theatre is entertaining, familiar and aesthetically satisfying for audiences, asserting further that:

If Beckett’s theatre stimulates the intellectual pessimism of the post-modern, Brecht’s stimulates its parodic and self-referential delight and the theatre’s self-deconstruction as it throws issues back to the audience (298–299).

Brecht wanted a form of theatre where the audience never forgets that it is in an auditorium watching a theatrical re-enactment of the past. To this end, characters/actors step out of their roles. The Brechtian stage is akin to a lecture hall to which audiences come to be instructed but also as a circus arena where an audience devoid of identification or illusion watches the actors perform. The audience must not lose its critical attachment by identification with the actors/characters. Thus the audience must maintain a separate existence by being aloof – no emotional attachment to the actors/characters. This is the meaning of ‘*verfremdungseffekt*’ – ‘the alienation effect.’

Erwin Piscator (1893–1966) a German theatre director first propounded the ‘epic’ style in playwriting and theatrical production in the late 20s but it quickly became associated with Bertolt Brecht. Essentially, epic theatre, according to David Krasner:

Attempts to make the audience accept the drama as frankly theatrical storytelling with definite social and political implications – a sort of dramatic parable. To this end, the dramatist utilizes songs, narrative, episodic plotting and a number of other techniques to



keep the spectator from becoming emotionally involved in the characters' fates (173).

Bertolt Brecht, in his theatre, jettisoned illusion, magical effects and orgies of emotion from his theatrical enactments, replacing them with lucidity, rationality and elegance. Among Bertolt Brecht's plays are *The Good Women of Setzuan*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The Three Penny Opera*, etc.

Brecht's Marxist Fervour

Brecht's affinity with the Marxist canons is clearly manifest in his dramatic oeuvre *Das Kapital* written by the German thinker Karl Marx, which changed and shaped the 20th century from the Great Revolutions of Russia in 1917 through that of the 1949 Chinese Revolutions to the unforgettable Cuban Revolution a decade later. Owei Lakemfa remarks that the ideas of *Das Kapital* produced many of the romantic figures of the 20th century into the present age: Vladimir Uylanov Lenin, Bertolt Brecht, George Orwell, Chairman Mao Tse Tung, Fidel Castro, Ernesto CheGuevera, Pablo Picasso, Nelson Mandela and others (31).

Karl Marx propounded in *Das Kapital* that new classes of society had developed: the proletariat (Working class) and the Bourgeoisie (Capitalist class). He said the new system of capitalism is based on exploitation and that just as the Slavery Age (Slaves vs Slave-owners) gave way to the Feudal System (Serfs vs landlords), so will the Capitalist System give way to the Socialist System which will transform into the Communist System (Classless or Stateless Society). Karl Marx postulated that the capitalist would always want to exploit labour to maximize profit which would lead to resistance and the overthrow of the Capitalist System. To Karl Marx, capitalism is in essence producing its grave diggers (Owei Lakemfa 31).

All in all, Karl Marx advocates that social condition is directly linked to the material reproductive forces that are the summation of the economic structure of the society on whose foundation rests the legal and political structure which corresponds to forms of social consciousness in a society. In essence, the mode of production of materials, political, social and intellectual life is directly based on this structure (Eni Kenneth Efakponana 91–92). Marx further posits that it is the consciousness of a man that determines his being. At the point where men are conscious enough to take the reins and effect a change in their conditions, there arises a conflict in the bourgeois materialistic milieu. As Efakponana, quoting Karl Marx, posits:

The Bourgeois relations of production are the last agonistic

form of social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individuals.

At the same time, the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create material condition for the solution of the antagonism (92).



Art therefore becomes salient in this antagonism. As Simon Umukoro reiterates:

It either reinforces or undermines the efforts of the proletariat.

Karl Marx ... advocates a form of art, which would help to educate and develop the consciousness of the proletariat, and develop the consciousness of the proletariat, and mobilise them closer to victory over the bourgeois (24).

Borrowing from Karl Marx, Bertolt Brecht anchored his dramatic canon on the concept of collective struggle for political, social and economic liberation. Brecht rejects the stratification of society along the lines of the poor and the rich. Robert Cohen calls Brecht's Theatre an Open Theatre characterized by its leftist, liberalized or democratic theatre culture. In the words of Cohen:

The deconstruction of the theatre, promoted by its most stellar luminaries – Beckett and Brecht among them – made us painfully conscious of the Theatre's challenge to fully reflect the humanity inside us and the society around us... (299).

Brecht believes that the rich exploits the poor indiscriminately and the rulers oppress those they rule over. This explains why there is a yawning gap between the haves and the have-nots. Brecht is trenchant in his opposition of the rich and the ruler's exploitation and oppression of the poor. This, according to David Essi, is the kernel of the Marxist theory of collective and continuous class struggle (48). Solomon Ejeke refers to Brecht and his Marxist leaning thus:

Aiming at a theatre that instructs, Brecht postulates that the arts have a social and political role and can make impact on the world we live in. In his plays and other theoretical discourses, he painstakingly spelt out this double functionality of the arts to the benefits of the audience. He designed his dramas to instruct society through a scientific analysis. He set out situations very impassionately and objectively, thus helping the audience to have a better comprehension of the social realities in society (99).



Brecht uses the theatre to create social awareness in the proletariat as he mobilises them to take the reins of the forces of production. In Brecht's dramaturgy, David Essi informs that the ordinary man (antithesis) is juxtaposed with the bourgeois class (thesis) in order to vehemently destroy capitalism and install a socialist order (synthesis) (48).

Evidently, Bertolt Brecht's dramatic oeuvre comprises sermons of social change because he believes that all the activities of man are political and theatre is one of them (Essi 49). Brecht equally believes that the theatre is a powerful weapon for effecting social and political change.

It is on this template that we examine Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as a Marxist model.

Synopsis

The Caucasian Chalk Circle is set in the post-World War II Soviet Georgia around 1945. The play begins with a prologue which is about a dispute over a valley. Two groups of peasants lay claim to an abandoned valley at the end of the war. The valley used to be inhabited by one group of peasants who herded their goats there. The other group comes from a valley close-by and wants to plant fruit trees there as well. A delegate is sent to give judgement on the valley in question. The fruit farmers say they intend to irrigate the valley and ensure a bountiful harvest of food. The goat-herders lay claim on the valley based on the reason that it is their ancestral land. In the end, the fruit farmers are given the valley because they will use the land better. Thereafter, a party is held by the peasants and a singer agrees to tell them the story of the Chalk Circle.

There is a mutiny in Grusinia: the Governor's brother, the Fat Prince, the mastermind of the insurrection, kills the Governor on Easter Sunday. Natella, the Governor's wife flees the city with her expensive clothes and belongings but leaves her son (Michael) behind in her haste. Grusha, a kitchen maid in the Governor's palace takes the child and begins her long arduous run to safety. She finally arrives at the home of her brother (Lavrenti) who lives in the Northern Mountains. Grusha's sister-in-law (Aniko) is not comfortable with Grusha and the child in their home because her religion (Catholic) forbids an illegitimate child in their home. Grusha's brother (Lavrenti) suggests that Grusha marry Jussup, the son of a peasant woman in order to give the child (Michael) a legitimate status. Jussup is on a deathbed. The marriage will be a marriage of convenience since it is assumed that Jussup will soon die and Grusha will be free once again. A monk is called who solemnize the marriage. During the wedding reception, the guests learn that the war is over and that the Grand Duke has raised an army and returns. Hearing that the war is over, Jussup gets up from his deathbed and demands for his wife. Grusha is in a dilemma because she is engaged to Simon who has gone off to war earlier. Grusha is arrested by the Ironshirts and brought before a judge (Azdak). The child's (Michael's) mother, Natella shows up demanding for the child because, without the child, she (Natella) cannot take over the late Governor's (her husband) estates. Grusha wants to keep the child whom she has raised for the past two years. The judge (Azdak) draws a Caucasian Chalk Circle, puts the child in the centre and asks the two women to pull the child. The one who pulls the child out of the circle will be declared the mother. Grusha refuses to pull the child as she says:



Grusha: I brought him up, shall I also tear him to bits? I can't. (206)

Natella, however, pulls the child. Adzak, the judge declares Grusha the mother of the child. And to Natella, Adzak says:

Azduk: (To the Governor's wife) ... And you, disappear
before I fine you for fraud (206).

Azduk confiscates the child's (Michael's) estates and turns them into public gardens. Grusha too is free finally to marry Simon.

Marxist Aesthetics in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

Bertolt Brecht is expressing here in the play his disillusionment with the Second World War (1936–1945): a senseless war according to him. The play opens with a description of Governor Georgi Abashwili as a wealthy government official who possess many horses in his stable, many soldiers in his service, but there are many beggars at his doorstep... The Governor is wealthy yet his subjects live in penury. Clearly discernable in the play is the observable distinction between the rich and the poor, the high and the low, the privileged and the less privileged. Bertolt Brecht explores exploitation of the masses by those in authority. This speech by Natella is quite apt in this context.

The Governor's wife: What do you, Arson, at last Georgi has
decided to start building the east wing.

All these wretched slums are to be torn
down to make room for the garden (125).

The Governor (Abashwili) displays a stupendous lifestyle amidst a society of beggars, petitioners and invalids. The Governor is on his way to church for Easter Mass, yet he shows no sympathy for his suffering subjects. Moreover, Governor Abashwili's court is packed full of poor petitioners with different pleas: some seeking release for their sons who are drafted into the army; war amputees seeking material help, and others pleading for tax relief. This comes at a time when the Governor's son (Michael) has two doctors attending to him.

Capitalist materialism pervades the entire play. At the beginning of the play, Natella, in spite of the danger facing her and Michael, her son, is more concerned about saving her expensive clothes and belongings. Her husband, Governor Abashwili has just been executed yet Natella displays her selfishness in abandoning her son, riding on a carriage to safety. The greed for power is so overwhelming that Prince Kazbeki (Fat Prince) plans the execution of his brother, Governor Abashwili.

Azduk, in the trial, declares Grusha the mother of Michael. By this action, the late Governor's estates which are bequeathed to Michael are handed over to the State. Azduk, in doing this, puts a final nail on the coffin of capitalist materialism in Grusinia by redistributing wealth to the people who deserve it. Likewise, the disputed valley is awarded to the fruit farmers in spite of the fact that it is the goat herders who owned it initially – it is their ancestral land. Marxism (Socialism) propagates community ownership as against individual ownership



of property. The manner in which the disputed valley is handled is for the welfare of the community – a community which intends to use the resource well, a redistribution of a resource which is a Marxist ideal.

Religious hypocrisy is brought to the front burner in the play. Governor Abashwili, Aniko and the Monk have all made a mockery of the Christian religion. A messenger comes in at the beginning of the play to report the outbreak of war to the Governor, but the Governor does not want to see him (messenger) until after church service (mass). The following dialogue attests to this.

The Adjutant: (Point at the Rider, who steps forward) Won't

you hear the message from the capital, your

Excellency? He arrives this morning.

The Governor: Not before service...(126)

Grusha's sister-in-law (Aniko), because of her religion, is not comfortable with Grusha and the child in their home. Bertolt Brecht reprimands society for accepting a child who was conceived out of wedlock (Jesus Christ) as the son of God but does not accommodate Grusha who finds herself in the same situation. It is unacceptable for Aniko not to accept a helpless woman like Grusha simply because she has a child who has no father (<https://kklaszle.wordpress.com>). Furthermore, a Monk who is supposed to be a religious model is the opposite. He is a drunk and is materialistic. Jussup's mother refers to the Monk as:

The Mother-in-law: ... A fifty piaster Monk like that has no dignity (200).

The question of morality is thrown up in this text. Natella demands for Michael, after running to safety with her expensive clothes and belongings. Brecht is actually saying that those who value a thing should have it. Natella does not value her son and cannot have him. The princes conspire against the Grand Duke in his war in Persia by taking payments for contracts for the supply of horses and food to Grusinia's army in Persia. The princes fail to deliver the supplies and the same princes cite the defeats in Persia as a reason for overthrowing the Grand Duke in a bloody coup. Prince Kazbeki (Fat Prince) brings his nephew whom he appoints as judge so that he can be delivering judgements in his favour. Surprisingly, the nephew is outsmarted by Azdak. In a radical move, Azdak takes charge of the court and dispenses justice in a most curious way. He frees poor defendants while fining rich complainants; most notable is the case of the innkeeper against his stableman whom he accuses of raping his (Innkeeper's) daughter-in-law. Azdak, as judge, pardons the stableman but charges the lady (Ludovica) with assault. Azdak's reign as judge can be seen as a revolution by the proletariat. Eddelji, quoting Robert Cohen, informs that the "Brechtian theatre was struggling to change (to save) the world and create a higher level of society" (43). Furthermore, Irakli, a bandit, gives help to a poor widow who lost her only son in the Persian war. Irakli helps the widow who is about to be evicted by a rich farmer for non-payment of rent. Interestingly, Irakli gives the widow a cow and a ham stolen from the rich farmer – another Marxist aesthetics of redistribution of resources. In the same vein, Governor Abashwili's garden which was initially a slum belonging to the people, is repossessed by the state and given to the poor people of Grusinia as a recreation park.



Inferred from the foregoing is the Marxist concept of collectivism against individualism Brecht empowers the proletariat (masses) who are now owners of Governor Abashwili's garden turned recreation park for the people of Grusinia. This is the triumph of collectivism over individualism as Iji posits that:

Brecht's gospel of change, emphasizing the malleability of
man capable of rising from grass to grace or from grace

to grace, depending on circumstances: Horatio Alger's story,
the Cinderella fable and changeable chance fortune. This is
an epitome of Brecht's pedagogue of the oppressed, using
the media as a tribunal for redressing depressed human
condition in favour of the less privileged (23).

Aristocratic hypocrisy is equally portrayed in the text. While the people are drafted into the war, the aristocrats are enjoying themselves at home as Azdak sings:

THE SONG OF INJUSTICE IN PERSIA

...Our men are carried to the end of the earth, so that great
ones can eat at home. The soldiers kill each other, the
marshals salute each other... (176).

Iji resents this as Brecht's:

...condemnation of man's inhumanity to man, signified in recurrence
of wars, which can also be regarded as Brechtian anti-war stance,
anti-Hitlerism and all whose stock-in-trade is war! war! war! Rather
than Jaw! Jaw! Jaw! (54)

Apart from being trenchant in his condemnation of the war (Second World War), Brecht equally avers in the text that in every war, millionaires and billionaires are made as emergency contractors. Azdak's speech attest to this:

Azdak: No princes fought. Fought for war
contracts (182).

Iji, as well posits that Brecht's anti-war philosophy appears:

... Action-oriented, in his portrayals of the Manichean
forces replicating the power mongering propensities



at the root of well-known crises of humanities, oriental, occidental or African (28).

The wars in Persia come with devastating consequences; Simon says that “The battle began, gray at dawn, and grew bloody at noon...” (190). People are killed, displaced and maimed. Taxes go up to fund the wars which results in the exploitation of the suffering masses. The prices of goods skyrocket such that Grusha buys a pitcher of milk for three piasters. The old man who sells milk complains that his goats were taken away by soldiers.

Brecht attacks the emptiness of the Royalty. To Brecht, those who we look up to for moral responsibility are outright failures. Hence, Brecht presents Grusha and Azdak as heroes. Grusha and Azdak are anti-hero characters who are far removed from the Aristotelian concept of noble heroes. Brecht portrays Grusha and Azdak as worthy characters of high moral rectitude and intelligence. Brecht takes power, initiative and deportment from the Royalty (bourgeois), and hands over these sterling qualities to the commoners. Grusha and Azdak who are unassuming. Azdak, after his landmark judgement (Grusha vs Natella) says:

Azdak: ...Now I'll take off this judge's gown; it is

hot for me. I'm not cut out for a hero... (206).

We are presented with heroic and sane characters (Grusha and Azdak) in a society where men of class, so to say, are alienated from their own humanity by conflict of material interest. Ronald Speirs, in his assessment of Azdak and Grusha, remarks that their actions “evoke sympathy for a rather different, ... less self-sacrificing approach to the defense of humane values in a hostile world” (167).

In a capitalist system, justice is expensive and only the rich and mighty are able to access it, while the same rich and mighty ride roughshod on the poor, weak and vulnerable. The singer comments on the state of justice in the present asphyxiating dispensation thus:

THE SINGER

...Truth is a black cat in a windowless room at midnight...

And justice a blind bat... (207)

Before the advent of Azdak as a judge, justice was the decision of the high and mighty. The Governor was murdered because the princes had the power. The Ironshirts haunted for the Grand Duke because the princes wanted him dead. Azdak's antics, such as requesting bribes in the court from the rich, is a sad commentary on the ignoble status-quo. Whatever Azdak does is a mockery of the deep rooted capitalist system. He asks Grusha:

Azdak: You want justice, but do you want to pay

for it? When you go to the butcher, you

know you have to pay (206).



Azdak only plays along with the corrupt capitalist system by accepting bribes openly but dispenses justice as it is. He takes from the rich and gives to the poor. After ruling in Grushia's favour, the singer states the principles of justice that Azdak dispenses.

THE SINGER

...What there is shall go to those who are good for it:

children to the motherly, that they prosper...

The valley to the waterers, that it yields fruit (207).

The play thus begins and ends with true justice triumphing over capitalist materialism. Brecht believes fervently that capitalism is the source of oppression, corruption and selfishness. Thus, Brecht in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* proffers the Marxist model as an ideal system which abhors the exploitation and oppression of man in any given milieu as well as the abhorrence of war, greed and corruption by those in authority.

CONCLUSION

Bertolt Brecht is an avowed leftist of the theatre whose dramatic oeuvre are permeated with Marxist-Socialist ethos and nuances which approximates to the ideals and spirits of messianic humanism and capabilities for a desired change in a deep seated capitalist milieu. In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Brecht is trenchant in his condemnation of a dog-eat-dog society which he cleanses and replaces with a mass of freed, egalitarian and altruistic humanity. Understandably, Brecht's fervid humanistic preoccupation in his theatre and philosophy will forever resonate impactfully. But, for those who question the relevance of Brecht's ideals in the 21st century, It is obvious that despite the fall of the Berlin walls, the ideals of Marxist-Socialist ideology that pervades Brecht's pedagogy of the oppressed or theatre as a tribunal to redress human relations' flaws remain very valid (Iji 57).

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