

D. Suvin: NOTES ON WAR, CAPITALISM, PEOPLE (2,000 Words)

(Introductory to *Mother Courage and Her Children*, for Brighton University UK, Feb. 2024)

Articulating the past historically ... means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger.

Walter Benjamin, Thesis 6

### 1. Some Presuppositions

For half a century now, about 2 billion people have been in abject poverty and a majority of the rest is sinking towards it, while growth of millionaires and billionaires as well as environmental destruction is out of control. Statewide and global financial systems have expanded into the major means of transferring wealth from the population to the super-rich, and classical exploitation of physical work has expanded into dispossession of working creators through biopiracy, patenting, and licensing. Our age is one of upper-class warfare against the great majority leading to deep immiseration and savagery. Mass dying follows not only upon what I call coronisation (the economico-political treatment of the Covid-19 pandemic) but also hunger and other diseases, plus the truly enormous climate-destruction upheavals to come – met often with intensified exploitation and oppression.

Thus the contradictions of capitalism, where huge productivity is used for death instead of life, have never been more obvious. They begin with in the *ecological collapse* of our air, water, and soil. Its twin is incessant and ever more destructive *global warfare*. The destruction of *psychic sanity* resulting from stunted lives may be less obvious but is worst of all. The present economic crisis arising from the wilful breakdown of health services and peaceful coexistence is cynically manipulated into the coming about of a total surveillance society (I refer those interested in this section to arguments in my essays on X Y Z on my internet sites).

Conversely, an underlying yearning for radical change is to my mind also present. So macro-events crucially depend on people's individual and collective understanding.

I have studied statistics and believe they speak clearly. The authoritative *World Inequality Report 2022* shows that the poorest 50% of the world's population owns just \$4,100 per adult (in purchasing power parity), while the richest 10% owns \$771,300 per adult. Income inequality is equally harsh: the richest 10% take 52% of world income, leaving the poorest 50% with merely 8.5% of world income. As to the top 1% of the ultra-rich, by 2021 they had 38% of global wealth while the bottom 50%, almost 4 billion people, had only a frightening 2% of global wealth. At the same time, the share of global wealth owned by the ultra-rich rose from 70 times to 110 times the average or middle-class share, and is largely untaxed. This obscene wealth entails that the ultra-rich have a decisive amount of power over economic survival and information, which means tens of millions of preventable deaths among the poor to survive. The unbearable vertical organization of the world, from top down, obtains also between countries: the World Bank foresees that 92 of the world's poorer countries will, between 2020 and 2024, suffer a cumulative loss equal to roughly 1/3 of their Gross Domestic Product. Wars

thrive amid such desperation, for those in the armed forces usually eat, and their commanders have power.

The main question is: how can the huge trend towards Fascism 2.0 be halted? Politically speaking, this can only be done by a program of radical societal justice, usually called Left. In his early unflinching verses after the 1933 defeat by Nazism, Brecht wrote a poem “To Him Who Hesitates“ (*An den Schwankenden*, GKA 12: 47); here is a fragment:

Oh we have made mistakes, there's no denying it.  
 Our numbers are dwindling rapidly.  
 Our precepts are in confusion. Some of our words  
 Have been twisted by the enemy beyond recognition.

What is now false of what we once said  
 Some of it or all of it?

(transl. Tom Kuhn and David Constantine)

## 2. Some Positions

Thence Brecht attempted “by indirections find directions out” (Shakespeare). Any position must avoid fake certainties and rosy fantasies by presenting *the denial of the worst*: war, and common people's adherence to it out of insecurity, out of fear or -- as Courage does – out of taking a small cut for themselves and their family. The worst, the price of war as it destroys people physically and/or psychically, is counteracted by “an ultimate irreducibility of narrative as such“ (F. Jameson), grounded in imagining possible worlds. This holds in spades for the sensually present and exemplary stage narrative. Art as experiment, testing its own presuppositions by feedback from the effect in practice of its performance, is at its clearest in theatre. Counting on the audience, Brecht wrote optimistically at the occasion of one of his best plays, *The Good Person of Setzuan*:

The modern audience member does not wish to be the mindless victim of any insinuation .... He does not wish to be patronised and violated but simply to get presented with human material so as to order it herself. (GW 15: 221).

This is a vision akin to Marx's disdain for interpreting the world as something fixed and static, a text to be reproduced by an indifferent actor of the World Play, and Einstein's insistence that, though the universe was not chaotic, there was no absolute perspective from which all events were scaled up or down. One could in Brecht's generation also use the visions of, say, Picasso or Eisenstein. Seeing the world as sets of changing possibilities, it is a reflection on possibilities of human nature, developing within history and as history.

Therefore, a play or dramaturgy should not be looked at “through the eyes of” (by identifying with) its main characters, which assumes the presuppositions of the play are indisputable. On the contrary, a look at all dramaturgic agents from the audience oscillating in and out of the play can assume the presuppositions of the play as being tested. The play sits in judgement on the audience's age.

I close here with Brecht's poem from about 1937, between the World Wars and immediately preceding the play:

The Coming War

The war that is coming  
 Is not the first one. Before it  
 There were other wars.  
 When the last one ended  
 There were victors and vanquished.  
 Among the vanquished, the little people  
 Hungered. Among the victors,  
 The little people also hungered.

(transl. DS 2022)

3. Notes on Context and Play

--Personal context: At the time of writing the play, Brecht had four children. One, born out of wedlock when he was young, Frank, was to perish as a soldier in the Nazi war on Russia. One daughter survived the bombardment of Germany. A second son and daughter travelled in 1933-41 with Brecht and Helli Weigel from Scandinavia and Russia to the USA.

--General context: It is remarkable how prescient seems the play of the two vaguely science-fictional vogues of the last generation, dominant in mass media: apocalyptic dystopias (e.g. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, 2006, movie 2009) and its twin of clannish wars and court intrigues (e.g. George R.R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*, book series 1998 and ongoing, TV series 2011 on, running for years with huge success and spin-offs). Their common denominator is also twofold: we are shown the dominance of *perpetual brutal warfare* of group against group and often each against each in a precapitalist society, and *there are no causalities* explaining or even mentioning the collapse or absence of capitalism – these are societies totally frozen in history, their time horizon shrunken to perpetual present. Yet comparison with MC&HC shows this decisive difference with an earlier hugely threatened but hopeful age (as suggested in section 2): Brecht has a strong *indignation* against the dominant organisation of human life together. This value-stance (axiology) peeps out here and there in this play but it is seldom formulated and never presented as a conceptual system but as a strongly implied and coherent current between the lines, to be integrated into the play's meaning by the audience.

It might be of use to further compare MC&HC with dystopian strand of classical SF that runs from Mark Twain to the Strugatsky Brothers. In Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur Court* (1889) the axiology is mentioned in the very title and carried by the — ultimately defeated — progressive Yankee engineer protagonist; in the Strugatskys' *Hard To Be a God* (1964, movie 1989, Russian movie 2019) it is implied by the huge -- seemingly godlike but unusable -- powers of the protagonist intellectual on a backward planet regressing into a

combination of Nazism and Stalinism. As in MC&HC, these are awful warnings: despite all, it ain't necessarily so.

--Intro to Play (to be supplemented orally as some scenes are shown): This play was written in 1938-39 (and many details redone 1946-49) in the form of an updated Elisabethan Chronicle play but from a plebeian point of view. Brecht invented for it a unique popular language composed of everyday dialectal words from various German-speaking regions, often with Biblical allusions and very funny. I am sorry to say that my friend Willett translated it into a much more furbished stage language, taking especial liberties with the poems in order to keep the rhymes. The basic tension unifying the play is between two poles: 1/ all the stage agents, in whose magnetic centre is "MC" (Anna Fierling) herself, a small trader following the armies in Europe's Thirty-years' War in order to sell them her goods; 2/ an audience prepared to be both entertained and enlightened by the ups and downs of people, primarily MC and her 3 children, in a war that uses them. The emblem and sign of this tension is the large covered wagon permanently at center-stage, which is her shop and home, and is supposed to get spick and span when she's briefly well off and then more and more ruined. As K. Hollander's introduction to the translation notes, MC is depicted as intelligent and sly in everyday affairs and opinions but also convinced she can take a cut from the war for her small family. At the end, she still believes that, and though her children die, she has learned nothing. The whole play, as seen in Scene 1 with the black crosses of death drawn, is a long descent into death. This is clearly a suggestion for the World War 2 fate of Germany, whom Brecht in a famous poem called a "pale mother" killing her children – or for any other nation or people not resisting war.

It has made theatre history in many languages, and is rediscovered whenever wars rage.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

--The secondary literature on Brecht it is immense. My preferred one is Jameson's below, and I also list my 2 books with essays on him and his plays; those interested may ask me for my essays not so collected.

--On *Mother Courage and Her Children* I recommend to read Hollander's Intro and Notes to the Willett translation, and the golden oldie essays by Barthes and Benjamin. The essay by Farmer uses this play as a springboard from which to discuss US wars up to Iraq. Vork is useful, but the "revolution" in his title is a hyperbole. See also other writings by Brecht on war, e.g. *The War Primer*, and the critics in *Brecht Yearbook* (43 issues so far):

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