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## MARXISM AND POLITICAL THEATRE

Political theatre is not, here, the same as theatre about politics or the State. If it were, it would include plays like the *Oresteia* and *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's histories, *Le Cid*, and many more. In the particular sense relevant to Brecht, political theatre is more akin to the Jesuit didactic theatre of the seventeenth century. It begins with the French Revolution, and, as we are beginning to discover, there was much more of it at that time, at least in France, Spain and Germany, than used to be supposed. This was theatre deliberately aimed at changing the attitudes of audiences, as in *Die Aristokraten in Deutschland*, published 'in the fourth year of Liberty', and mocking the pretensions of German nouveaux-riches while contrasting them with the French soldiers of the revolutionary armies.<sup>1</sup> It had no popular success, since it was given no place in the established theatre. More acceptable, politically, were plays like Heinrich von Kleist's *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* (1811, though here too recognition was delayed) and Friedrich Hebbel's *Agnes Bernauer* (1851), inculcating total submissiveness to the State.

In Germany, the connection between theatre and politics has always been more prominent than in England. Though the German Jacobin theatre had no following, the revolutionaries of a later generation turned to the theatre in the same way, trade unions and political clubs producing plays of their own to educate the workers into a recognition of their situation. As early as 1847, Friedrich Engels composed a one-act play about revolution for a Brussels club-theatre (a recently discovered play of his, *Rienzi*, had been written in 1838–40), and in 1858–9 an equally prominent Socialist, Ferdinand Lassalle, wrote his unwieldy tragedy *Franz von Sickingen*, the subject of much correspondence between Marx, Engels and the author.

There were already in the established repertory several plays by the classical dramatists, Goethe and Schiller, dealing with the

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revolt of the Hamlet-like or Robin-Hood-like outsider. *Götz von Berlichingen*, *The Robbers* and *Fiesco* are all concerned with the revolt of a 'great individual' against the society of his time. But they are all defeated, and either look forward wistfully to a better age to come, or condemn themselves for their arrogance in supposing that they could ever effect reforms by their own powers. The classical tradition in Germany, taken up later by Grillparzer in Austria, tends politically to acquiescence in the long run, as does even the more radical but fatalistic theatre of Georg Büchner.

The revolutionary drama itself was still tinged with this, in the early stages. The point of Lassalle's tragedy was to demonstrate that although the revolutionary idea might be pure enough, the revolutionary leaders trying to put it into practice were certain to make compromises. Being merely single individuals, they could not grasp and realise in practical terms the new Idea – in Hegel's sense, of a force at work in all historical events – and could only buckle under the strain, and even become corrupted.

The revolutionary movement, Lassalle believed, derived its strength from its complete certainty about the omnipotence of the Idea. History was moving towards socialism, inevitably, but the revolutionary was involved in an insoluble contradiction, when his finite reason attempted to use that omnipotence: he was thus doomed to failure, and Lassalle was more inclined to trust to gradual reforms, leading by degrees, perhaps, to the ultimate realisation of the Idea on earth, rather than risk the cataclysmic changes which Marx and Engels believed to be essential. Lassalle's tragedy was meant to underline his point.<sup>2</sup>

Marx and Engels condemned Lassalle for continuing in the tradition of many German philosophers who saw the Idea or the Will or the noumenal world as beyond human experience, or in some other way separated from mankind. As Marx saw it, there was no such separation. 'With me', he said, 'the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.'<sup>3</sup> In other words, the prime mover was not some god or demigod, as Hegel proposed, but man himself. The revolutionary ideal could be attained because man produced it; it was not falsified through using him as an intermediary.

The working-class theatre in Germany followed Marx, in this

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respect, rather than Lassalle. It flourished as it did partly because the German working-classes – unlike those in England, who flocked to theatres to see sentimental melodramas about people like themselves<sup>4</sup> – were only recent city-dwellers, and theatre-goers scarcely at all, the city-life of the Industrial Revolution having begun much later in Germany. It also flourished partly because Socialists were more persecuted in Germany, especially after the notorious ‘Socialist Laws’ had been passed in 1878.

At first, however, the ‘workers’ drama’ was largely composed of comedies, humorous dialogues, satires on contemporary figures, in which the representatives of capitalism are defeated by more resourceful employees. Jean Baptiste von Schweitzer, Lassalle’s political successor, followed him also in composing a dramatic dialogue, *Der Schlingel* (The Rascal), written in 1867–8, intended to make workers acquainted with the main points of Marx’s *Capital* in an entertaining way. He had great success with it, Marx himself admitting that Schweitzer had ‘done his homework’, and though it was not meant as a play, the dialogue was frequently performed by working men’s dramatic societies all over Germany. It was followed in 1869 by Schweitzer’s *Die Gans* (The Goose), a play in which a woman demands to know why she should receive less wages than a man. The employer who tries to talk her out of it is quickly put in his place by a trained Marxist.<sup>5</sup>

These were plays with definite points of instruction: *Der Schlingel* is concerned with the theory of surplus value, *Die Gans* with women’s rights, and a third play, *Der Verunglückte Agitator* (The Accident to the Agitator) is concerned with the resolutions of the First International at Basle, on the issue of landed property. Tragedy was at first not represented, nor did working-class dramatists concern themselves with political martyrs like Paul Beutler: if tragic events occurred, they were seen in the optimistic light of a dawn that was about to break for the whole of mankind. Working-class characters were shown as brave, clever, and tough, with significant names like Roth, Fels, Stein, and Frei: Red, Rock, Stone, Free. The general motto, taken from Bader’s *Das Gesetz* (The Law) was ‘Fight, not weep’ (‘Nicht flennen, kämpfen’).

All this was at a time when the English theatre, so far as it portrayed the working-class at all, either sentimentalised them

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as in T. W. Robertson's *Caste* (1867) or melodramatised them as in Tom Taylor's *The Ticket-of-Leave-Man* (1863). It was not that workers in England were denied what they sought in the theatre. For many years there was such a period of mob-rule in the English theatre that the pit and the gallery could dictate to the stage the matter and style of their entertainment. But as often as not the entertainment took the form of seeing workers like themselves, in pitiful conditions, lost in the maze of London or forced to eke out an existence under railway arches, with no thought of improvement other than the chance of some totally unexpected legacy, which often enough supplied the denouement. The 'philosophy' is that of a ruling class: as Robertson's military hero says, marrying a ballet-girl: 'Oh, caste's all right. Caste is a good thing if it's not carried too far. It shuts the door on the pretentious and the vulgar; but it should open the door very wide for exceptional merit. Let brains break through its barriers, and what brains can break through love may leap over.'<sup>6</sup>

The main stream of German drama was capable of such sentiments. Unlike the English, it also had a strong under-current of amateur plays of Marxist character. August Bebel, the Socialist leader, recalled in 1913 how in the 1860s there were hundreds of working men's educational clubs, many of which produced plays with their own home-made scenery and costumes, and flourished for more than a decade.<sup>7</sup> During the period of the anti-Socialist laws, between 1878 and 1890, it became impossible to perform or print political drama, but as soon as Bismarck allowed the laws to lapse – in the expectation that the Socialists would take enough rope to hang themselves – the flood began. The popularity of the Social Democrats, that is, the Socialists, had in any case risen despite the suppressions, and despite the brutal expulsions of Socialist politicians and agitators. The votes given to Social Democrat candidates rose during the twelve years from about half a million to a million and a half, and were to rise during the next twenty years to four and a quarter million. During the last decade of the century, more than thirty plays – little enough, compared with the hundreds of plays performed in professional theatres – were published by Socialist presses, and performed all over Germany, most of them 'agitation-plays', or didactic plays', though Scaevola's *The French Revolution, an Epic Dramatic Poem in 12 Living Tableaux* was highly popular. At the same

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time, the didactic element squeezed out the more humorous tone that had been present before 1878. The idea of the theatre as a place of political education rather than amusement began to take hold in a way that has no parallel in English theatrical history.

During the 1890s, acknowledged literary figures adopted working-class or revolutionary themes. Friedrich Bosse, who introduced both factory-workers and class-conscious agitators into his plays, is scarcely known today. Gerhart Hauptmann's *Die Weber* (The Weavers), on the other hand, is still widely known, and accounted one of the best plays of the German Naturalist movement.

Hauptmann had no revolutionary intent. The document on which he based his play, a report by Wilhelm Wolff on an uprising in Silesia in 1845, explicitly called for 'a refashioning of society on the principle of solidarity, mutual aid and community, in a word, of justice'. The play, though it was held up at first by censorship, and hailed by Socialists as a work calling for revolution, carefully withholds itself from any such political statement. It is factual, a statement rather than a manifesto, like the dreary picture of Berlin working-class life in Holz and Schlaf's *The Selicke Family* (1890), though less crudely naturalistic. Dramatists who were not at all Naturalists also remained politically uncommitted, though Sternheim and Wedekind, in *Bürger Schippel* (1912) and *The Marquis von Keith* (1900) respectively, were satirical about middle-class characters. Even Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* and *The Death of Danton*, written in the 1830s and first resurrected by Hauptmann in the 1890s, were fatalistic and oppressive in tone, despite the fact that one was the first play ever to take a common soldier as its main character, while the second concerned the possibility of successful revolution.

The genuinely political drama, in the sense being used here, meanwhile devoted itself to documentary reports on the many widespread strikes which took place during the 1900s, or offered entertainment of a political kind to crowds at election meetings. The distinctive feature remained, as before, a cheerful optimism, such as none of the 'literary' dramatists, to whom the established theatres were still open, thought possible or desirable.

Before Brecht began his career as a dramatist, at the end of the First World War, there was thus a long-standing tradition of

political drama in Germany such as no other country has to show. It was all ephemeral; none of it is likely to be revived on the stage today. But the recognised dramatists, unlike Brecht, had taken no active interest in politics, and it was his role to bring political theatre to a level not hitherto achieved.

The complexities of the task were large. Marxist thought is not easily given dramatic life, and Brecht did not generally manage to give it any: where he is most Marxian he is least theatrical. Basically, however, there were dramatic potentialities in Marxism. One of Marx's chief contentions against Hegel was that he sought to crystallise and apotheosise the existing state of things, and thereby maintain the political *status quo ante* as the highest achievement yet attained by the Idea, in its historical self-manifestation. The opposite view, which 'regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement . . .' and 'lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary'<sup>8</sup> ought at least to lend itself to the flux of drama. Again, the fact that Marx, like Hegel, conceived of the whole world in terms of a dialectical play of complementary opposites, constantly circling round and interpenetrating one another, could easily supply the conflicts and confrontations that are the stuff of plays.

The economic aspects of Marx offer less dramatic potential, though they too exploit the dialectic. The broad pattern of history, as Marx sees it<sup>9</sup> is one of opposition between the expropriator and the expropriated, between the capitalist and the worker whose property-rights in his own labour the capitalist exploits. As a pattern, it is extremely simple: the capitalist first gathers together in one factory the various skills which formerly belonged to individuals, and establishes under one roof the industry that had formerly been scattered widespread. Unknowingly, he sows in this way the seed of his own destruction, since the unified control of labour becomes a first step on the road to socialism. The 'opposite' whom he has thus incorporated into his own system does not remain content within it, but recognises, if properly instructed, the fact that he has been expropriated. With the necessity of a living organism, the worker must then take back his property. But in doing so he takes it back not as an individual, but as an integral part of the mass, the community, to which he belongs. Thus a paradoxical situation arises: the ex-

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propriator has been expropriated, but there is no return to a simple individualism. Rather, the opposites come together in a permanent fusion of individual and corporate rights. To quote Marx himself:

The capitalist mode of appropriation, the result of the capitalist mode of production, produces capitalist private property. This is the first negation of individual private property, as founded on the labour of the proprietor. But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation. It is the negation of negation. This does not re-establish private property for the producer, but gives him individual property based on the acquisitions of the capitalist era: *i.e.*, on co-operation and the possession in common of the land and of the means of production.<sup>10</sup>

There is nothing a dramatist can do with that. The potential is entirely in the dialectical tradition, which Brecht shares with Thomas Mann, Nietzsche, Goethe, and many other writers whose sole connection with Marx is that they thought 'in opposites'. The distinctively Marxist feature is the vision of a society in which not only individual property will have disappeared, but all other forms of division, the family, the national State, political parties, and every line of demarcation whatsoever. Negation will cease to exist, once it has itself been negated, and there will remain only an undifferentiating affirmation of all existence. Echoes of this can certainly be found in Brecht, though they are not always what Marx made of them.

Equally relevant to an understanding of the political background of the plays is the Marxist debate on how the classless society was to come about, or be brought about. Lassalle had supposed that the individual must corrupt the absolute reality by limiting it to himself. How was the discrepancy between the ideal and the real to be overcome? Since each individual mind must reflect reality in its own way, how was the distortion of the ideal, which Lassalle foresaw, to be avoided? Or was the ideal only the reflection of the material world, an exact copy of it?

Marx and Marxism have two answers to this. On the one hand Marx claimed to have discovered a law of Nature, to have demonstrated by reference to historical and economic facts that human society must progress as he predicted. This part of the claim was, however, an absolute one: it was as though history

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could be predicted precisely, while still continuing to change incessantly.

The other part of the claim advanced by Marxists concerns the role of the Communist Party, and this is a more flexible, fluid one. The Communist Party is not in the position of Lassalle's private individual, attempting to achieve the ideal, it is a corporate body, and though of course it is not the totality of all humanity, it may claim more than a purely individual authority. In addition, the Party, though it assumes or is *prima facie* convinced of the truth of Marxist doctrine, is not rigidly bound to any one view of the course to be adopted. It realises the truth of Marx's assertion that every affirmative recognition is also accompanied by a negation, that there is continual flux, and it continually revises its plans in accordance with this. It adapts itself to the passing moment in order to bring about the ultimate moment. But in this dual role, grasping the Absolute or the Ideal with one hand, as a given fact, and the passing moment with the other, as a manifestation of the material world, there is always the possibility of confusion and ambiguity for the Party. When the ideal and the real are not clearly separated from one another, when one can be the reflection of the other, and when a group of individuals known as the Party is held to be in the right yet constantly adapting to change, false claims are certain to be made.

It was out of this situation that the German Marxist parties were created.<sup>11</sup> Although Lassalle died in 1864, his influence continued in the programme of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (S.P.D.), as crystallised in the Erfurt Programme of 1891. On the one hand, the Erfurt Programme continued to assert, in a Marxist spirit, that the Communist programme had the force of a natural law, which nothing could hinder in the long run. It also asserted that only the working-class could bring about the necessary change – the working class was the element through which alone change could function. (This was a doctrine which had serious effects on Brecht, who seems from his plays to have thought of himself as born outside the working-class, and so rather in the position of a convert to, say, Judaism. The idea of a 'chosen people' may well have influenced Marx, as a Jew, in making this kind of emphasis.) But on the other hand the Erfurt Programme was not strictly revolutionary, or not immediately so. It held that the time for the advent of Commu-



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nism was not yet, and accordingly planned for a number of ameliorations which were, in some cases, not so much socialistic or communistic as radical – votes for women and abolition of capital punishment were included in the aims of the S.P.D. And in general the history of the S.P.D. from 1891 until quite recent times was more often empirical and pragmatic than theoretical: it held to the flux, rather than to the principles of Marxism (if the two can properly be distinguished), and this was to lead to a sharp division, coming to a head between 1914 and 1919, a time when Brecht was in his final years at school, and first going out into the world.

For the main body of the S.P.D., the war of 1914 presented a dilemma. They had sworn repeatedly in the preceding years never to fight against their socialist brothers in France and elsewhere, and appeared to be entirely opposed to any war fought in the interests of Imperial Germany and Austria. Yet when war was declared, it was represented as a defensive war against Tsarist Russia, an enemy of socialism even greater than the Germanic Empires could be. For this and other reasons, German Marxists found themselves pledged to fight in a war which seemed in some respects to be fought against their socialist comrades in other countries, and as it went on they found themselves at the mercy of almost any pretext that could be thought of. It was necessary to fight the war because it was a defensive war against Tsarist Imperialism. When that no longer appeared true, it was necessary to go on fighting because a defeat of Germany by foreign capitalist powers would mean also defeat for the strongest socialist party in Europe (which the S.P.D. was, up till the Russian Revolution of 1917). Even a German war of conquest, which the S.P.D. had at first abhorred, could be justified on the grounds that a purely defensive war was more likely to lead to defeat than an aggressive one. And even when Germany was defeated, and the S.P.D. took over the government from the German Emperor's temporary successor, it still found itself unable to make radical changes. Order had to be maintained, if only to keep up food-supplies, and the only order maintained was the old one.

In contrast to this were the revolutionary voices, only a few of them at first, led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.<sup>12</sup> From the beginning of the war, these urged that no compromise

be made, and that the international solidarity of the working-class be maintained. The changes of pretexts for continuing to support the war, such as the S.P.D. continually had to make, looked irresponsible in comparison with the insistent, unchanging demand by the extreme Left that the system itself be changed, though in fact the centre and Right wing of the S.P.D. were acting with a great deal of careful thought, within their own frame of reference. For Liebknecht and Luxemburg, capitalism was responsible for the war; all compromise was useless, and could only lead to more and more compromise; nothing but a revolutionary change had any value, and only the party of the working-class could bring this about. After the Russian Revolution they could claim that their case was stronger, for there was no possibility of maintaining, now, that the war was being fought against the Tsar, whereas the refusal of the Russian working-class to fight for the fatherland was a model for Germans to follow. The first stage of the international revolution had begun, and Germany had only to continue it for a world-wide eruption to take place, as Marx has predicted.

The attempts at establishing this revolution which were made in Berlin and in Munich, where there was a short-lived Soviet Republic in 1919, were unsuccessful, not least because Luxemburg and Liebknecht were assassinated. So far as Brecht is concerned, they matter because this was the world into which he was born. On the one hand, compromise, going with the flux of things, adapting to circumstances; on the other, a complete break with the capitalist system, realsing the ideal if not at one stroke, then at least very swiftly: both points of view could claim Marxist ancestry, and both were to find a place in his dramatic work.

Just as important for understanding Brecht are the apocalyptic expectations of many Germans in the years immediately after the armistice of 1918. The 'last fight' in the words of the 'Internationale', had begun, and the war was the Armageddon which announced it. If Germany were to follow the Bolshevik example, victory for the international working-class might be imminent.

The importance of drama was quickly appreciated by the Bolsheviks themselves. Lenin had announced the programme that all literature must be party-literature. 'Literary activity must become part of the general proletarian cause, a cog in the