

Analysis of Brecht's the Threepenny Opera from the Angle of Marxist Economic Materialism

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Abstract

The present paper analyzes Brecht's The Threepenny Opera from the angle of Marxist economic materialism. After introducing the social background of the play, the paper proceeds to reveal the abnormal ways of making a living in a bourgeoisie society and the essence of modern bourgeoisie represented by Macheath.

Keywords

Brecht; The Threepenny Opera; Marxist economic materialism.

1. Introduction

Addressing materialism in the economic sense of the word, 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). In common use, the word more specially refers to a person who primarily pursues wealth and luxury. Sometimes, this kind of person displays conspicuous consumption. Considering the economic elements as the soul of capitalism gradually, Bertolt Brecht has endowed some of his plays with the close reflection of the economic materialism under production relations in the capitalist society, especially in his The Threepenny Opera.

2. Body

2.1. Social Background of the Play

The second half of the 1920s was the stable period of the Weimar Republic, starting in 1924, when the effects of the inflation began to be overcome and the new American capital began flowing into the country, and ending in 1929 with the Wall Street crash. In the theatre, it began with a succession of new-style productions with its revelation of the public appetite for literature by unpretentious down-to-earth comedy. Brecht at that time was trying to grapple with the problem of writing plays about modern world, with all its economic complexities and its wide-ranging interrelationships, and this led to a more conscious development of the epic form and to a new fascination with the economic analysis put forward by Karl Marx.

In effect then it could be said that Brecht started the year of The Threepenny Opera with three main irons in the fire. There was his technically and politically stimulating job with Piscator, which was urging him in the rewriting of The Beggar's Opera to suit the revolutionary staging. There were his own incomplete social-political plays which had already been announced on Piscator's prospectus. And then there was the very promising collaboration with Weill, involving also his own preferred designer Caspar Neher. Although the question on capitalist economics didn't obtain enough attention from the Western critics most of whom were urged to appreciate the writing technique and the music, the economic materialism has been more and more informed of by many Marxist critics in modern times.

Focusing on Macheath, an amoral, anti-heroic criminal, the story has its set in a marginally-anachronistic Victorian London. The action that Macheath or Mack the Knife marries Polly Peachum has displeased her father, Jonathan Peachum, who is the controller of the beggars of London and tries to have Macheath hanged. However, his endeavors are hindered by Tiger Brown, the Chief of Police and also Macheath's childhood friend. Outfitting his beggars with signs and clothes in an effort to ruin the coronation parade, Peachum threatens to disrupt the coronation if Brown does not find Macheath and arrest him immediately. On the day the coronation procession is set for, Macheath is locked into a public cell and is going to be hanged at six in the morning. In the form of a mounted messenger, Brown enters and brings a special order from the Queen who has decided to pardon Macheath and to also elevate him to a hereditary knighthood. Mac rejoices his good luck while Peachum remarks that such a thing will never happen in real life.

Since its first performance in Berlin in 1928, *The Threepenny Opera* has enjoyed a popularity matched only by the best-known Broadway musicals or the most established operas, implying that Bertolt Brecht has lifted his view on capitalist society to a new high degree by posing eyes on the economic elements of capitalism. With the play adapted from John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, the play offered a Marxist critique of the capitalist world of the Weimar Republic despite its setting in a mock-Victorian Soho. With Weill's music, which was one of the earliest and most successful attempts to introduce the jazz idiom into the theatre, it became a popular hit throughout the West.

2.2. A Chorale of the Poorest of the Poor

"First comes the belly, then morality" (Brecht *The Threepenny Opera* 55). *The Threepenny Opera* is indeed a chorale of the poorest of the poor which has been expressed both cynically and bitterly, exhibiting the abnormal ways to make a living under capitalist economy. Mackie the Knife has sung that:

You gentlemen who teach us to live uprightly,
And eschew deeds of vice and of sin,
First give us something to fill our bellies,
Then you can talk—then you can pitch in.
Show us first how a wretch oaf,
Can get his share of the world's great loaf. (55)

What does a man live on in that unfair society? The poor makes cheating, robbing and flaying his fellows only for forgetting that he is a man. From this soliloquy, people can comprehend easily that "the living conditions of the poor in the capitalist society turn out to so low that their relationships become materialistic" (Carney 63). Then Mackie the Knife continues to say:

So gentlemen, enough of all this fooling,
Man only lives from evil-doing. (Brecht *The Threepenny Opera* 56)

Only the evil-maker can get a fortune under that corrupted social conditions. Another equally bitter song of the play is the "Pirate Jenny", voicing the savage resentment of the downtrodden barroom slavery and her dream of the coming of a ship with eight sails and fifty cannons, whose crew will put all her persecutors to the knife, and take her on board and away. Although the play seems to be a vicarious and daring excursion into the lower depths of crime and prostitution, it can really serve as a radical play with a class consciousness by offering the delights of cynicism and scurrility brilliantly set in words and music.

Remarkably, Peachum's invocations to mercy and pity can be accepted with little discomfort. And nobody can refrain from nodding agreement, when he proclaims the inadequacy of human exertions:

Man lives by his head,

But this head won't suffice.
 Try it and see, how with your head,
 You'll barely nourish lice.
 Yes, just to live this life,
 Man isn't sharp enough,
 He never seems to see
 That it's all deceit and bluff. (62)

Possibly, audiences can draw a parallel between their own lives outside the theatre and what they have witnessed from the stage. Peachum's business dealings are making use of piety and human pity as sources of income. He and Mackie have collaborated and cheated the poor with the police separately. All of these can convey to the audiences an indictment of the bourgeois economy and its morality.

2.3. The Close Analogy Between Macheath and Modern Bourgeoisie

As London's greatest criminal, Macheath has command on a gang of thieves. He marries Polly Peachum in a stable and is later arrested when her father finds out. After being hunted down, he is going to be hanged in the end. However, he is finally saved by the queen and knighted. Though a criminal, Macheath has behaved like a bourgeois gentleman. "Brecht himself became insisting on the close analogy between the character of Macheath and modern bourgeoisie" (Ewen 176). He has instructed the actor to represent the highwayman as "a bourgeois phenomenon", with the bourgeoisie's regular, and almost pedantically meticulous social habits, such as visiting certain Turnbridge coffee-houses.

Despite the role of Macheath as a bandit, he should be still taken as a representative of a bourgeoisie phenomenon. The bourgeoisie's fascination with bandits rests on a misconception: that a bandit is not a bourgeoisie. This misconception is the child of another misconception: that a bourgeoisie is not a bandit. However, neither of them can mislead a Marxist learner like Brecht. What are the bourgeoisie's living rules of Macheath in *The Threepenny Opera*, connected with the capitalist economy? The qualification 'peaceable' normally attributed to the bourgeoisie by the theatre is achieved by Macheath's dislike, as a good businessman, of the shedding of blood except where strictly necessary—for the sake of business. This reduction of bloodshed to a minimum, this economising, is a business principle. As Frederic Ewen pointed: He is aware that what is due to his legend: a certain romantic aura can further the economies in question if enough care is taken to spread it around. He is punctilious in ensuring that all hazardous, or at any rate bloodcurdling actions by his subordinates get ascribed to himself, and is just as reluctant as any professor to see his assistants put their name to a job. (177)

Emphatically staid, Macheath lacks the least sense of humor, while his solid qualities can be gauged from the fact that he thinks more of exploiting his employees than of robbing strangers, which occurs just as one of bourgeoisie's essences. With the forces of law and order, he is on good terms with his common sense that tells him that his own security is closely bound up with that of society. To Mr. Macheath, the kind of affront to public order with which Peachum menaces the police will be profoundly disturbing. Certainly his relations with the ladies of Turnbridge strike him as demanding justification, but this justification is adequately provided by the special nature of his business. Occasionally he has made use of their purely business relationship to cheer himself up, as any bachelor is entitled to do in moderation, but what he appreciates about this more private aspect is the fact that his regular and pedantically punctual visits to a certain Turnbridge coffee-house are habits, whose cultivation and proliferation are perhaps the main objective of his correspondingly bourgeois life.

As for Macheath's true sexual needs, naturally he will rather satisfy them where he can get certain domestic comforts thrown in, in other words, with women who are not entirely without

means. He sees his marriage as insurance for his business. However, slight his regard for it, his profession necessitates a temporary absence from the capital, and his subordinates are highly unreliable. When he pictures his future he never for one moment sees himself on the gallows, just quietly fishing the stream on a property of his own. Therefore, the image of Macheath as a bourgeois phenomenon has been depicted to the audiences explicitly and figuratively, colored with his attitudes towards life style on capitalist businesses. The play does attack the middle-class ethic, and it seeks to expose bourgeois society by viewing the world of Peachum and Brown in the same light as it does on the underworld of Macheath and his men.

3. Conclusion

Based on the social background of *The Threepenny Opera* by Brecht, we can see the abnormal ways for people to make a living under capitalist economy. That is, only the evil-maker can get a fortune under that corrupted social conditions. Thus the human relationship and morality has been severely distorted and economized. From the close analogy between Macheath and modern bourgeoisie, we get that bourgeoisie is a bandit, and vice versa. The image of Macheath as a bourgeois phenomenon has been depicted to the audiences explicitly and figuratively, colored with Brecht's attitudes towards life style on capitalist businesses. By analyzing Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* from these two above aspects, we enhance our understanding of his Marxist economic materialism approach to his literature creation.

References

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