

An exchange on Bertolt Brecht's *Arturo Ui*

17 September 2008

Dear WSW,

A friend's daughter is studying Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* next year in school.

As a result, I decided to read the piece myself and have also discussed it with her.

The main feeling I came away with was one of uncertainty. Of course, a play is not the same as a lecture on social theory. And this is exactly where my doubts begin. When reading *Ui*, the great Brecht seemed to me rather small, but is my view correct? I fear that I am seeing the piece exclusively through a "political prism" and thereby doing the dramatist an injustice. However, it is certainly a political piece, which would justify the political prism.

Regarded in this perspective, I feel what Brecht says about the rise of fascism through *Arturo Ui* is rather meagre. The piece was written in 1941 and was probably only first staged in the 1950s. That is probably due to the fact that after the war everyone knew about the link between capitalism and war. A piece that presented fascism as a form of gangster-like capitalist business goings on, albeit quite unspectacular, would have been inappropriate. Immediately after the war, *Ui* was perhaps so unsettling because the ruling class were trying to save capitalism, and this venture was like playing with fire.

But the explanation that Brecht offers his audience while relevant at the time is not completely convincing. In my view, it falsifies the historical connections, making sharp attacks and at the same time playing things down.

My political prism tells me that this is exactly the reason why the piece has become acceptable in today's capitalism and is taught in schools; unfortunately I do not know yet how the piece will be introduced to the students.

Brecht wrote that *Arturo Ui* was an attempt "to explain the rise of Hitler in the capitalist world by shifting the setting to more familiar surroundings."

But who is this "capitalist world"? Dentists, workers, building contractors? And are dentists, workers and building contractors familiar with the gangster milieu? Is it not an inadmissible change of scale if one seeks to

explain the political relations between classes by reference to the gangster methods of the competitive struggle?

I would be interested to know how you see the piece. Is my view untutored and therefore are my doubts about Brecht unfair or too harsh? How do you see Brecht generally in a historical context? He is, after all, a dramatist of world renown.

Yours sincerely,

BK

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Dear BK,

I can well appreciate your feelings of uncertainty on reading Brecht's *Arturo Ui*. I have been working for some time on a series of articles about Brecht, but my current commitments have so far prevented me from completing the project.

One of the main difficulties in dealing with Brecht is undoubtedly trying to be fair to him as an author of works of fiction, on the one hand, while at the same time measuring him against his own political aspirations. He is, without doubt, one of the great literary personalities of the twentieth century. As a writer of drama, he wanted to engage politically in the struggle against the capitalist system and align himself with the working class. Therefore it is legitimate to gauge not only the aesthetic quality of his plays, but also their political objectives.

The parable of *Arturo Ui*, which he wrote in 1941 in Finnish exile, clearly deals with Hitler's seizure of power and the development of his regime. Brecht shifts the action into the gangster world of Chicago, relying on his research about America in the early 1930s, drawing parallels between Hitler's actions and the unscrupulous behaviour of Al Capone during the Prohibition. The different gangster types are drawn malignantly, and characterise various Nazi big wigs. *Arturo Ui* is the gangster boss and represents Hitler, Ernesto Roma is his lieutenant—modelled on the SA leader Ernst Röhm, Dogsborough represents Reich President Paul von Hindenburg, Emanuele Giri is a gangster and represents

Hermann Göring, the florist and gangster Guiseppe Givola embodies Joseph Goebbels and Dullfeet is the Austrian chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß.

All this provides a comic background that is put into verse in a linguistically adept manner. But today's audience is easily left with a sense of the inadequacy of the drama in regard to the dimensions of the historical disaster and the betrayal of the leadership of the working class that first made this possible.

Why is this? Certainly, it is not simply a question of whether it is legitimate to ridicule "great criminals," which Brecht discussed in his remarks about *Arturo Ui* in 1948. "The great political criminals must certainly be exposed, and preferably through ridicule. Because above all, they are not great political criminals, but the perpetrators of great political crimes, which is something utterly different." This is a telling point.

Satire is a legitimate means to expose an illegitimate claim to power. The problem with *Arturo Ui*, however, is that this parable is simply too limited to enable a spectator to gain a real understanding of the background to the rise of the National Socialists. The historical parallels are simply not adequate. To that extent, I agree with your statement that this parable falsifies the historical connections, sharply attacking them and at the same time playing them down.

In his notes, Brecht justifies limiting the fable to the level of the state, the industrialists, the Junkers and petty bourgeois. He is exclusively concerned with "destroying the perilous respect usually shown to the great killers." He does not want to provide a "general and thorough outline of the historical situation of the 1930s. The proletariat is missing, and it cannot be considered in further measure, because anything more in this construction would be too much and would divert from the presentation of this difficult problem." To take the wind from the sails of any left-wing critics, he adds in parentheses: "How to deal in greater detail with the proletariat and not with unemployment; how to deal with it and not the [Nazi] work creation programmes and the parties and their failure? One would necessarily entail dealing with the other; creating a gigantic work that did not fulfil the intended purpose."

In these notes, Brecht answers the objections of a colleague (Lothar Kusche), who had criticized, among other things, that on the one hand, the texts projected on stage suggested a "historical exposition," but on the other hand, the parable only shows that the industrialists are "all equally affected by the crisis," "instead of the weaker

ones being ground down by the stronger ones." Also here, all that Brecht had to say was that this was a point that "went too much into detail and which was not necessary for the story."

What is one to conclude from this? If we take seriously the aim "to explain the rise of Hitler in the capitalist world by shifting the setting to more familiar surroundings," then one has to say that Brecht did not achieve this goal.

He picked out a partial aspect of the capitalist world and Nazi rule, presenting these with skilful satire, but left open significant political questions, or evaded them because their presentation could have undermined confidence in the Stalinist bureaucracy.

National Socialism was not simply a criminal attempt by capitalism to resolve its deadly crisis. The fact that Hitler could triumph was not so much due to the success of his criminal machinations, but to the catastrophic politics of the leadership of the workers' movement and the defeats this brought about, beginning with the 1918-19 revolution strangled by social democracy, up to the Stalinist policy in 1933 that divided the working class and delivered them up to the Nazis.

That Brecht (not only in this piece) weakens his attack on capitalism and does not enable the spectator to really understand this system and the role played by its accomplices is bound up with his own adaptation to the Stalinist bureaucracy, to which he falsely attributed a progressive role in the workers' movement; regarding it as the only force that could do something against fascism, even if he occasionally had doubts about and made criticisms of their actions.

These brief remarks about *Arturo Ui* certainly do not answer your question about how we regard Brecht's role in history, which is something we will try and do more extensively in the future. There is much to discuss on this question and we would be pleased if you would like to participate.

Sybille Fuchs



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