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## NOTES & TOPICS

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### New Light on Brecht

BY NO means the least horrifying aspect of the totalitarianism of our time is “the captive mind” and the erosion of the capacity to apprehend complex situations and facts. This is observable among even the most intelligent of followers and fellow-travellers (be it of Nazism, Fascism, McCarthyism, or Communism). The world, in their eyes, becomes reduced to a set of predictable clichés: “Four legs good—two legs bad!” And whatever cannot be fitted into the formula produces the symptoms of breakdown that Pavlov noted in his dogs when they were subjected to contradictory impulses. Having written a book about a Communist poet, who was also a cynic and had retained his sense of individuality and his sense of humour, I have been greatly amused to watch the conditioned reflexes of the pious and the orthodox. The picture of Brecht that I had drawn could *not* be true: either because he had spent the last years of his life in East Berlin (and must therefore have totally agreed with everything that went on there); or, alternatively, as I had quoted some of his privately expressed criticisms of abuses or cautiously disguised published attacks on the régime, this was proof that there *was* in fact “freedom of expression” in Communist East Germany (and, of course, the régime could not be called totalitarian). If Brecht was a good dramatist and the East German Communists had subsidised his theatre, this proved conclusively that the East German Communist régime *was* indeed good—why then should I want to argue that hundreds of thousands of its subjects had fled to the West? How could I claim that on June 17th, 1953, the workers had actually risen against the régime? Had I not *admitted* that it had subsidised a fine artist and was therefore a progressive social order? Why should people rise against a good government? Had I not conceded that Brecht was a convinced Marxist? How then could I

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\* Alfred Kantorowicz: *Deutsches Tagebuch* (Munich, 1959).

† Bertolt Brecht in *Selbstzeugnissen und Bild-dokumenten* (Hamburg, 1959).

suggest that he had been deeply disturbed by the rising of June 17th?

This is the Alice-in-Wonderland logic of the faithful which is again and again confronted by the infinitely less logical, far more complicated facts. Alfred Kantorowicz, like Brecht a Communist intellectual who had spent the years of World War II in America and had gone back to East Germany at about the same time that Brecht decided to settle there, has recently published his reminiscences. Kantorowicz fled from East Berlin to West Germany, after the Hungarian revolution had made him despair of Communism. His book\* gives a moving first-hand account of the plight of the intellectuals (many were talented and well known) who had gone back to East Germany and found themselves living in a replica of the hated Nazi state of police controls, cultural censorship, and mass repression.

While we had faithfully fought for freedom and justice against the Fascist barbarians, Fascism and Barbarism had risen behind us in words and deeds and obscurantism in the offices of the bureaucrats and apparatchiks.

Kantorowicz speaks of the terrible dilemma of the members of his own circle who

are trying as best they can to oppose the evil régime, even if not every one of them may have the determination, after all he has been through, to face once more the penitentiaries and torture-chambers of a dictatorial state, or to cut himself off from all his ties and set out once more on the road into an uncertain exile. . . .

Kantorowicz was a close friend of Brecht, and Brecht appears repeatedly in his narrative of the post-war years in East Berlin. After the Twentieth Party Congress and Khrushchev's anti-Stalin speech, “Bert Brecht . . . spoke among his friends of Stalin only as the ‘meritorious murderer of the people’” (on the analogy of the Soviet title “Meritorious Artist of the People” which is awarded to successful actors and ballerinas). Kantorowicz speaks of the many intellectuals who died of “disillusion” and “a broken heart” as a consequence of their disappointment with the reality they found in the East after their return from exile. Although he does not specifically mention Brecht in this context, it is becoming more and more evident that the rising of June 17th, 1953, and the shock of Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin produced symptoms of profound depression and listlessness in Brecht in the last years of his life.

MARIANNE KESTING's excellent collections of documents on Brecht's life in the Rowohlt series of paperback monographs on famous writers† give one or two items of new

evidence. In the final years of his life, she says, Brecht cut himself off more and more from the outside world.

Friends report his increasing physical lethargy. He more and more disliked leaving his home, made people come to see him whenever possible, and preferred to cover even distances of only fifty yards by car. He felt well only in closed rooms, where, in conversation and discussion he could erect his own world, or in the theatre, where he created his world on the stage. . . . However deeply he may have seen, one cannot help feeling that . . . up to a point, reality eluded him.

Marianne Kesting has also unearthed a further very important piece of evidence which helps to explain the reasons for Brecht's gradual withdrawal from reality. It is by now well known that after June 17th Brecht wrote a long letter to Ulbricht in which he criticised the régime, but of which only the last sentence expressing his loyalty to the party was ever published. Dr. Kesting now quotes a telegram to Ulbricht in which Brecht returned to the charge. It reads:

ON THE MORNING OF THE 17TH JUNE, WHEN IT BECAME CLEAR THAT THE WORKERS' DEMONSTRATIONS WERE BEING MISUSED FOR THE PURPOSES OF THE WARMONGERS, I EXPRESSED MY ATTACHMENT TO THE S.E.D. NOW THAT THE PROVOCATEURS HAVE BEEN ISOLATED AND THEIR COMMUNICATIONS ARE BEING DESTROYED, I HOPE THAT THE WORKERS WHO HAVE DEMONSTRATED IN LEGITIMATE DISSATISFACTION WILL NOT BE PUT ON THE SAME LEVEL WITH THE PROVOCATEURS SO AS NOT TO INTERFERE IN ADVANCE WITH THE VERY NECESSARY DISCUSSION OF THE MISTAKES COMMITTED BY ALL CONCERNED.

This telegram was never published. It shows that in spite of his legendary caution and his resolute refusal ever to strike heroic attitudes, Brecht went very far in pointing out that the workers' rising was not (as the official line maintains to this day) the outcome only of "Western machinations," but an outburst of legitimate grievances of the masses. The disillusionment of a believer in the new epoch of Communism after the shock of a popular rising against the "workers' régime" is clearly visible in the few poems of that period that have been published up to now.\* Marianne Kesting, however, draws her readers' attention to a passage in the "Notes to Galilei" published after his death, which

\* These were referred to and quoted in previous notes on Brecht in ENCOUNTER, June 59 and Dec. 58.

may well be interpreted as a symptom of his disillusionment. "Terrible," Brecht writes,

terrible is the disappointment, when human beings realise, or think they realise, that they have fallen victims to an illusion, that the old is stronger than the new, that the "facts" are against them and not for them, that their time, the new time has not yet come. Then things are not merely as bad as before, but much worse; for they have sacrificed a great deal for their plans, which they must now do without; they have ventured forward and now are being pushed back; the old takes its revenge. The scientist or discoverer, who was unknown but also unassailed before he had published his findings, becomes now that they are disproved or discredited, a swindler and a charlatan, and oh so notorious; the oppressed and exploited become, now that their revolt has been defeated, rebels who will be subjected to special oppression and punishment. The effort is followed by exhaustion, exaggerated hope by exaggerated hopelessness. Those who do not fall into resignation and apathy fall into worse: those who have not lost their idealistic energy now turn it against those same ideals. No reactionary is more cruel than a failed revolutionary, no elephant a more savage enemy of wild elephants than the tamed elephant.

And yet, these disillusioned men may well be still living in a new age, the age of a great revolution. They only have become unaware of new eras. . . .

THESE words, like so much of Brecht's best writings, have a multiplicity of meanings. They may be explained as referring to Galileo and his contemporaries after the recantation; they might be seen as referring to the disillusionment of the Left after Hitler had come to power; but, as Marianne Kesting points out, they may equally well be read as referring to "the problem of a revolution that has become rigidified and its consequences, the overwhelming flood-tide of restoration. . . ."

This interpretation may be correct, or again it may not. What is certain, however, is Brecht's delight in ambiguity and mischievous mystification. That is the quality which led him to express himself through characters like Herr Keuner, the hero of his moral fables, the rascally Judge Azdak in the *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, or the *Good Soldier Schweik*. No wonder that a writer as contradictory, ironical, and multi-dimensional as Brecht will forever exasperate and elude the politically faithful who live in a strictly one-dimensional world of predictable conditioned reflexes.

Martin Esslin

## To an Aldermaston Marcher

DEAR X,  
I am delighted to hear that you have arrived safely in London from Aldermaston, and, oddly enough, I find myself in agreement with much of what you had to say about the march. Certainly, it provided impressive evidence for the existence of "progressive and idealistic youth," as Mr. Sidney Silverman put it. Certainly it might be said to prove that no sane man is in favour of nuclear weapons (personally, I had never thought that any sane man had much liking for them). No doubt, it will give Messrs. Macmillan and Gaitskell to think. Whether it will similarly affect Mr. Khrushchev and President Eisenhower is another matter; in Britain we have a tendency to think that our moral gestures are of importance to the outside world, but there is little evidence to support this belief. However this may be, the fact remains that you and your fellows of the rank and file have tried to do something about a catastrophe that threatens us all. You have protested against a coming Armageddon. I applaud your zeal, and I admire your motives.

I hope therefore (but it is probably too much to hope) that I shall not be denounced as a cynical supporter of reaction, if I say that the results of your action may not be quite what you expect. There are certain questions you have not considered, certain problems your leaders have not posed. To begin with, let me say frankly that I think you would be better off without some of those leaders. As I have said before, the devotion of such excellent men as Canon Collins, Dr. Donald Soper, and Mr. Sidney Silverman to any progressive struggle that happens to be going seems to me positively harmful to the individual causes they espouse. There may be a certain logic in being simultaneously in the forefront of the battle against Apartheid, Capital Punishment, and the Bomb, but, after all, good causes are not vitamin tablets to be joined in the same capsule and swallowed in the same gulp. Moral indignation is not to be bought in large economy packets, and those who try to dispense it in this way open themselves to the suspicion of being more concerned with the profits of the operation than with the therapeutic qualities of the preparation they are recommending. I hope your leaders are equally interested in all the campaigns they organise, but I fancy they have forfeited their amateur status.

However, all this is of minor importance, though not without significance. What is more serious (and, indeed, crucial) is a failure to clarify the aims of the campaign in which you

have been taking part. You will reply that its immediate object is to get Britain to give up its nuclear weapons, thereby saving money which might be put to better use, and also giving the world a moral example, which might lead to universal nuclear disarmament. And I should agree that there seems little point in our country possessing its own H-bomb and in pouring out money like water on missiles which are no sooner in production than obsolete. But can you stop there? We have heard a great deal about how, in the event of a nuclear war, Britain will be devastated and its population killed or sterilised, and, given its geographical position and its size, that is probably an accurate picture of what will happen. But simply giving up the bomb will not alter things one jot. If Britain is devastated, it will not be because it possesses its own nuclear deterrent, but because it is an ally of America in a war with Russia and because there are American bases here. And the question which I should like to put to the founders of the anti-nuclear campaign is: "Do they regard as one of their objectives a break with NATO and the American alliance?" For I take it that any hope that the Pentagon or the Kremlin will be suitably affected by a British renunciation of the bomb is chimerical.

Perhaps I am doing an injustice to your leaders: if Canon Collins' fiery oratory in Trafalgar Square has any meaning, it provides an answer to my question. "We in Britain are not going to have any more nuclear weapons or bases, or allies with nuclear weapons and bases." That is clear enough, and, though I shall quite understand if the Canon is disowned subsequently, I think I may take his words as some indication of what is behind the anti-nuclear campaign. What we are faced with is a campaign for the abandonment of NATO and the American alliance and for British neutrality in a possible conflict between America and Russia. That, as I have said, is clear, though it would be better were it to be stated openly. This policy means the end of present British alignments: the end of NATO, the end of close connections with the U.S.A., the end of the Western alliance in its present form.

Now it may be that these consequences of the anti-nuclear campaign are highly desirable, but I feel rather strongly that it would be as well if someone were to do a little thinking about them. For what is far from clear is where we go from there. What is to succeed the American alliance as the basis of British foreign policy? The logical thing would be a closer relationship to a Europe, which in time might become a neutral third force, but, since France has nuclear weapons, this presumably falls under the Canon's ban as well. What remains? A London-