

'good building'

Bertolt Brecht's *Utopian Historical Optimism*
at the End of World War II

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— I

On 10 May 1945, a short prose text by Bertolt Brecht appeared in New York in the *Austro-American Tribune*, one of the numerous literary journals run by writers exiled from Nazi Germany to the far corners of the world. The text, entitled *Der Städtebauer* ('The City Builder'), is set in a timeless and nameless no-man's land, a stark, un-historical and un-geographical, fairy-tale like setting.¹ To be sure, the date of publication leaves no doubt about the contemporary relevance of Brecht's parable, and its readers would have had no difficulty locating and identifying the precise historical-social background before which Brecht's text unfolds: Germany at the end of World War II, her cities in ruins, disgraced after her fatal submission to fascism; a country defeated and devastated materially as much as emotionally and intellectually; a disintegrating society facing the overwhelming task of providing for the elementary survival (food and shelter) of its population as well as the rebuilding of the socio-cultural infrastructure of a democratic, civil society. At this crucial point in time, in German historical mythology often referred to as *Stunde Null* (Zero Hour), Brecht offers his suggestion concerning the rebuilding of Germany according to the principles of what he describes as 'good building'. I quote the parable in full:

The City Builder

After they had built the city, they came together and presented to each other their houses and showed one another the work of their hands. And the Friendly One went with them, from house to house, the whole day long, and praised them all.

But he himself did not speak of the work of his hands and did not show them a house. When evening came, they all met again in the market place, and everyone, one after another, stepped forward onto a raised platform and gave a report about the type and size of their houses and the time it had taken to build them, so that it could be determined who among them had built the biggest house or the most beautiful one and in what time. And so, too, the Friendly One was called upon, according to his place in the alphabet. He appeared in front of the platform, down below, carrying a large doorframe. He gave his report. This here, the doorframe, was what he had built of his house. There was a silence. Then the chairperson of the meeting rose to his feet. 'I am astonished,' he said, and laughter was about to arise. But the chairperson continued: 'I am astonished that this matter comes up only now. This man was everywhere during the time of building, all over the site, and he helped everywhere. For this house over here he built the gable, over there he put in a window, I don't remember which one, for the house opposite he drew up the floor plan. No wonder then that he is coming here with a doorframe, which is beautiful by the way, but does not own a house himself. In view of all the time he has spent building our houses, the building of this beautiful doorframe is truly a marvellous piece of work, and I thus propose to award the prize for good building to him.' (WA 11, 251; my translation)

'The City Builder' is a relatively unknown story by Brecht that, unlike the very similar *Geschichten von Herrn Keuner*, has received little critical attention.² Brecht's strategy of *Verfremdung* (alienation, distanciation, defamiliarisation) is clearly at work in this parable. The imminent task of rebuilding the German cities after the unconditional surrender of the German armies on 9 May 1945 (VE Day) is an obvious point of reference for an interpretation, but the abstract setting makes the familiar topic appear unfamiliar, strange and distant. We are looking at the present through the perspective of a past that seems very remote indeed. Who are these people who have just completed building a city, seemingly from scratch? And what is this unusual competition everybody seems to be involved in, with clearly defined conditions and a prize to be won at the end? About the prize for 'good building' we know nothing except the three criteria that need to be addressed to win: size, time and beauty ('the biggest house', 'the most beautiful one', 'in what time').

Like many of the *Keuner*-stories, 'The City Builder' has a surprising, unexpected ending, and it exhibits the same philosophical *gestus* that points to a new kind of thinking. At the centre of the text there is a moment of silence, followed by an exclamation of astonishment which in turn is underscored by the laughter that is about to rise, but then does not. This, too, is Brecht's famous *Verfremdungseffekt* in action: to be astonished at the way things are makes the familiar appear strange, it begs the question of why things are the way they are. Surprise and astonishment may open up a process of critical thinking, of philosophical

enquiry. Thus, when we begin to ask why the Friendly One has not built a house for himself and yet is supposed to receive the prize for good building, we begin to understand that there is something else at stake here, that good building is not only about bricks and mortar. The work of the Friendly One is both distinctive and unique (the beautiful doorframe), but also invisible as it disappears within the collective effort (the chairperson can no longer remember which window he had built for a particular house). Most significantly, of course, the work of the Friendly One transcends the individual aspirations of his fellow citizens. It is the Friendly One who is the sole city builder of the story's title, who has lent a hand in building all the houses of the city. We might begin to ask, then, what it means to build a city, a society.

We also might ask why exactly the Friendly One has only built a doorframe, which he carries to the market place, and not perhaps the foundations of his house as one might expect. Doors, of course, are time-honoured literary symbols: it could be said that they open the way to something beyond, to seeing new things, maybe even to a new way of seeing or thinking. This door could show the way towards building a new kind of society that might reflect its owner's name: a friendly one, democratic, socialist in the sense of communitarian, a cooperative society in which neighbours help each other and in which the common good is favoured over individual achievement (which, in turn, is not at all denigrated). The story also emphasises that the doorframe is 'beautiful', a 'marvellous piece of work'. Clearly, the chairperson (*Versammlungsleiter* in the original) will not arbitrarily change the rules of the competition, just so that the Friendly One—perhaps a sentimental favourite—can be the winner, to be rewarded solely for his unselfishness. The rules of the competition, or the rule of law, as it were, need to be adhered to, and the democratically elected chairperson, who is not a *Führer*, takes great pains to point out that the conditions for awarding the prize are met. Finally, Brecht insists on beauty as a necessary condition of building. It is not enough to build houses that are practical or utilitarian, efficiently constructed or grand; they need to be made according to aesthetic principles in order to meet human needs. Building beautiful cities out of the rubble that is contemporary Germany is an integral part of Brecht's utopian vision in May 1945.

The open ending of the story is also a characteristic feature of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. Who, at the end, wins the prize, and who decides? The chairperson makes a suggestion, but then the text comes to a surprising halt. There is no conclusion. What happens next? Is there a vote taken? If yes, what could be the outcome? But Brecht does not tell. Instead, we, the readers, are actively drawn into the story: we have to supply the missing vote. It is myself as individual reader, as part of an imaginary society, who is asked whether to support the *Versammlungsleiter*. The text thus creates a gap in the communicative process between author and reader. It activates the readers, makes them participants in an open social process.

I/We need to take a vote. The readership, of course, belongs to and operates within a different historical sphere compared to the abstract and timeless setting of the community depicted in Brecht's text: the readers have to fill the gap in their own historical time frame, with reference to the challenges facing them in their own concrete situation.

— II

A much better known text by Brecht, which deals very prominently with the same historical question—the task of reconstructing society after the devastation wrought by fascist occupation and war—is his *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, generally considered one of the German dramatist's masterpieces.³ There are obvious parallels with 'The City Builder', notably the work of communal reconstruction and the question as to what 'good building', or here more precisely the 'good use' of the valley, might entail. In his *Chalk Circle* Brecht deals with the historical material in a very different way, yet uses the same technique of distanciation. The play is often seen as a kind of timeless fairy tale, set in an exotic, quasi-medieval Georgia, which tells a universal tale of 'true motherhood'. This reading, supposedly supported by the view that Brecht wrote his *Chalk Circle* to be first performed on Broadway (he had, in fact, a contract for a production which never materialised), holds that the play's prologue—set on a collective farm in a remote region of the Soviet Union at the close of World War II and telling the story of two neighbouring villages and their dispute over the rebuilding of their valley, its use and ownership after the withdrawal of the Nazi troops—is merely an ideological, propagandistic addition that is essentially unrelated to the core drama. As a consequence of such an interpretation, the prologue, in German *Vorspiel*, is very often omitted in productions. The genesis of the text makes it very clear, however, that Brecht considered the prologue to be an integral part of a history play about war and revolution, indeed about the nature and course of history itself. Darko Suvin has rightly pointed out that at the heart of the play lies a concern with what he calls Brecht's 'historiosophy'.⁴

Already in the first notes that outline his plan for a new work that would be based on a thirteenth century song-play by Li Hsing-tao, Brecht employs a second timeframe as a theatrical-historical point of reference for the composition of a drama that reworks the old Chinese text. In the original drafts dating from 1938/39, during Brecht's years of exile in Scandinavia, he uses an eleventh-century episode in the history of Denmark (the murder of a Danish king, Knut the Holy, in Odense in 1086) as a setting for his *Chalk Circle*. In a second phase (Sweden, January 1940), the central historical conflict of the early modern period (the struggle between feudalism and an emerging bourgeoisie) becomes the focal point of the setting for 'The Augsburg Chalk Circle', a short story set in the author's native Bavaria in which the Thirty Years War provides a historical counterpoint to the unfolding World War II of the time of Brecht's writing.⁵

Towards the end of World War II Brecht takes up the material yet again. This time—the first full version of the play, written in California between April and June 1944—Brecht chooses a Caucasian setting and a late-medieval, feudalistic time frame for the chalk-circle story, while the prologue is set in 1934. In this first theatrical version, the decision over the use of the valley is not spelled out in the *Vorspiel*; it is rather left to the audience to decide at the end of the show. In other words, the performance of the inner play, containing the two story lines about Grusha and Azdak, is meant as a—rather obvious—didactic device to help the audience come to a conclusion about the question that is raised, but left open, at the outset. In the second version of the play, written only a few weeks later, the author puts his own contemporary historical reality on stage. Now the date of the prologue is 1944, following the news of a decisive turning point in World War II, namely the defeat of Hitler's armies in the Soviet Union. Here the question of what will become of the valley is already decided at the beginning. Again, as with 'The City Builder', the particular point in time chosen presents an exemplary caesura in history, with a potential for a radically new beginning after the devastation of the war. The liberation of occupied Europe from fascism constitutes 'the most promising moment of modern history', according to Darko Suvin.⁶

The second version of the play was also the first one to be published (in a special edition of the East Berlin journal *Sinn und Form*), perhaps not coincidentally at another important junction in postwar German history—in 1949, after the foundation of the FRG and the GDR, respectively. The timing again underlines the author's intention of submitting his play as a contribution to the debate on how, at a historical crossroads, the development of German society might proceed. This concern with history, and with learning the right lessons from its study, provides the continuing interest for the author in developing his play. Its main theme, as Suvin has convincingly argued, is indeed 'the goal towards which class history is moving'; it is 'the theme of a reasonable and humanized *ultimate goal (telos) of history* envisaged as a system of human actions and interactions'.⁷

The various linguistic connotations of *Vorspiel*, and *vorspielen*, need to be considered to explore the full dimensions of the complex composition employed by Brecht. In a strictly chronological sense, the first act is not a 'foreplay' at all, but rather a *Nachspiel*, or epilogue, in the continuing historical development over a very long time span that is presented in the play. A remark by one of the villagers in the first act, that the valley had 'always' been theirs, is countered by another villager who says that the old man in his youth possessed nothing, not 'even himself': he was not free but 'owned' by the 'Kazbeki princes' (Brecht/Bentley, 117). The appearance soon afterwards of a Kazbeki prince—the 'fat prince' who is a character in the internal play—establishes a historical link that bridges *Vorspiel* and main drama: the present-day Soviet villagers are the descendants and heirs of the protagonists of the characters portrayed in the chalk-circle story.

In the frame play, the farmers of 1944 present their own history; their performance is an attempt to critically appropriate the past as a guide to appropriate the future. Their historical memory, which has been preserved in the art of the singer-storyteller, allows them to establish a legitimacy and a reference to a revolutionary precedent, based on the exemplary models of Grusha and Azdak, models which are deeply rooted in family and local history. Safeguarding this 'wisdom of the people', keeping its memory alive and making it productive in the construction of their own contemporary reality, Brecht suggests, is as much a part of the social production of the villagers as the rebuilding of their farms and the construction of a new dam project that they are about to undertake. It is for this reason that the request of the state's planning and control 'specialist' to shorten the performance is met with a simple, yet decisive, 'no' (Brecht/Bentley, 123).

In a liberated, sophisticated socialist society, Brecht insists, democratic participation and self-organisation rule out bureaucratic control and domination. In such a society, art and production are not separate. Despite the pressing need to rebuild the material basis of society, the human need for a collective, imaginative-aesthetic experience, in which the collective memory and shared historical values of the community are preserved, must not be forgotten or sacrificed. The historical situation demands that the urgent need for reconstruction after the war requires quick decision making and a curtailing of the time allowed for political debate. However, a shortening of the performance that involves the whole village in a creative artistic action of political identity formation is flatly rejected. It is noteworthy that this rejection is in open conflict with the demand by the representative of the central bureaucratic state agency; Brecht insists that it is the villagers who set the agenda, not the 'specialist' from the capital. The first act thus anticipates or foreshadows (or *vorspielt* in German) a new kind of social reality, free from bureaucratic domination, in which internal conflicts are resolved in an exemplary democratic fashion and in which art (here the performing arts), music and theatre play a fundamental role as a force of productive social imagination.

The careful framing of the different levels of play make it clear that the 'dispute over the valley' is not meant by Brecht as a naturalistic portrayal of the actual political conditions of Soviet Russia in 1944; rather, it presents a fairly utopian picture of human relations that is nevertheless based on concrete historical experiences, notably that of the Soviet Union's liberation from the forces of fascism. This *Vorspiel* of a peaceful, free, friendly and just society, in which decisions are made at a grass roots level in an atmosphere of neighbourly solidarity and in friendly competitive spirit for the common good, offers a contrast to the old barbaric times of war and oppression, but equally important it provides a link to the brief moments in the peasants' history where humanity was able to flourish, as in Grusha's

story, and where justice could reign, however fleetingly, as in Azdak's story. Brecht's utopian image is thus not based on a supposedly scientific conclusion, a final stage of history as a classless society, but rather emphasises the contradictory dialectic of past and present as well as the tentative, hesitant, anticipatory and preliminary nature of the political and socio-cultural openness provided by the historical situation.

The singer's role and function within the composition of the multi-levelled plot is most significant in this reading of the Brecht's play. He provides the linkages both between the frame play and the chalk-circle play, and between the two discrete stories or plots that make up the inner play. Only in the very last scene are the two *fabula*, that of Grusha and that of Azdak, joined together. It is Arkadi Cheidze, the singer and storyteller, in his role of commentator and director of the play who skillfully holds the entire complicated structure together. His name already attests to the importance of the mixing of 'old' and 'new wisdom' of which he speaks at the outset of the play (Brecht/Bentley, 15). While his first name refers to the *Arcadia* of old, the time-honoured notion of utopian freedom (as in Virgil's *Et in arcadia ego*), his last name recalls the role of the Georgian social democratic leader Cheidze, 'an early opponent of Stalin who was convinced that the development towards socialism was a long and laborious road'.⁸¹ The singer's role in the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* is to keep alive the 'wisdom of the people', one could also say the memory of the dialectic of history. Arkadi Cheidze's story of 'old' and 'bloody times' (Brecht/Bentley, 16), is set in the past and told in the past; yet the actors, supported by the epic commentary, play out the action in the immediate here and now of the performance, thus emphasising to the audience the distance that exists between the 'now' and 'then', but also suggesting and provoking an idea that the critical and productive memory of the past and its communitarian celebration could inform an idea about a possible better 'tomorrow'.

— III

With historical hindsight, it is easy to dismiss Brecht's optimism of 1944/45 as a complete misjudgement of the actual historical situation. Not surprisingly, the utopian elements in Brecht's play have been met with a great deal of criticism on all sorts of grounds, and it is perhaps not surprising that contemporary critics, both in the West and in the Soviet Union and the GDR, found little in the play that they were willing to regard as 'realistic'.⁹ Today there seems to be a consensus among historical observers that, rather than a cipher for the potential of a democratic renewal and a socialist alternative to the barbarity of fascism, the metaphor of 'Zero Hour' is better understood as the expression of a kind of contemporary malaise. It refers to a historical experience of the German population characterised by the paralysing admission of moral and intellectual bankruptcy. It suggests a refusal to confront

the lessons of the past through a strategy of suppression and 'derealisation', of melancholic lamentation and lethargy, of cringing self-pity and self-justification accompanied by an opportunistic accommodation to the new status quo (that is, the occupying forces of the Allies).¹⁰ Furthermore, the postwar situation in Germany, rather than being open for alternative historical developments, was in fact very much constrained by the allied forces who set about rebuilding Germany according to their own economic, social and political systems: a liberal, capitalist democracy in the West and a socialist (Stalinist) system controlled by a one-party regime in the East. In both parts of Germany, the few actual instances of popular democratic reorganisation (on which Brecht had counted), such as the local anti-fascist committees that had come into existence once the NS-state had begun to break down, were quickly suppressed by the military authorities.

When Brecht finally arrived back in Germany in October 1948, he very quickly realised that the open situation that would have allowed a revolutionary transformation to happen had long passed—if indeed it ever existed. Nevertheless, he eventually settled in East Berlin and, despite all his reservations about the Stalinist nature of the Soviet regime, he began to become involved in the ongoing debate concerning the construction of a new and better Germany. Unperturbed, he wrote yet another utopian historical drama. In *The Days of the Commune*, written in the spring of 1949, he returned to the topic of 'good building' by recalling the example of the people of Paris in the spring of 1871, who had not only to materially rebuild their city after the destruction wrought by the furious bombardment by the Prussian troops during the Franco-German war, but also to construct a new society after the breakdown of the old order and the corrupt bourgeois state (that is, after the flight of the Thiers government to Versailles which had left the people of Paris in control of their city).

Like *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The Days of the Commune* focuses on a group of 'little' people affected by the great events of the time. In this instance, it is a small neighbourhood in Montmartre, where the residents meet to organise the resistance against the German troops and to celebrate their victory after the successful elections to a new, revolutionary city council, *La Commune*. Although the historical Commune of 1871 was defeated after a few months, the play presents an optimistic message: lessons can be learnt from the past, previous mistakes avoided. However, despite a strong Leninist message in the play, emphasising the need for unity and decisive action to defend the revolution, the play did not find favour with the cultural bureaucrats of the newly founded GDR and their liaison officers of the Red Army. Brecht's alternative vision of a 'French socialism', with its emphasis on self-rule and self-organisation, with a distinctive feeling of *joie de vivre* in a communitarian celebration of neighbourhood values, friendship, love and companionship, good food and wine, did not go down well in a political climate in which the Soviet model was put forward as the only legitimate one and at a time when basic supplies were still scarce. The production of the play,

originally planned for the fall of 1949, was cancelled; it was not premiered until after Brecht's death and has remained, to this day, the least well known and understood of his full-scale theatrical works.¹¹

Thus, it comes as no surprise that Brecht's utopian optimism was not to last. His final works before his early death in 1956, particularly the poems known as *Buckower Elegien*, written mostly in 1953, show a distanced observer who retained a keen interest in contemporary developments, notably the workers' revolt of 17 June 1953, yet whose comments were mainly sceptical, sometimes satirical, often showing a degree of detached and ironic resignation, and certainly always cautiously worded and devoid of what one might call revolutionary enthusiasm. As ever, Brecht's critique was directed against the persistence of old, capitalist-bourgeois and fascist structures and ways of thinking (in both Germanies). At the same time, he noted the bureaucratic, undemocratic tendencies of the party apparatus of the SED that was held responsible for the lack of a truly socialist development in the GDR. In one of the early poems of the Buckow collection, Brecht returned to the idea of 'good building', a topic which he had recently taken up again in the context of a critique of the new, 'socialist' architecture in the GDR. In the poem, the author looked back to a 'grand time' of opportunity that had come to nothing. The title of the poem must be seen as a drastic revocation of his earlier optimism, yet Brecht's faith in the historical role and the 'wisdom' of the people had remained undiminished.

Great Time, Wasted

I knew that cities were being built
I did not go.
This is about statistics, I thought
Not about history.

What are cities after all, built
Without the wisdom of the people. (WA 10, 1010; my translation)

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1. See Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke. Werkausgabe*, 20 vols, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/Main, 1967, here vol. 11, p. 251. References to this edition are identified in the text by WA, followed by volume and page number.
2. In Jan Knopf's authoritative *Brecht-Handbuch. Lyrik, Prosa, Schriften*, Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart, 1984, 'The City Builder' does not rate a mention.
3. Bertolt Brecht, *Parables for the Theatre: The Good Woman of Setzuan, The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, trans. Eric Bentley, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1966, p. 117. Quotations from this edition are given in the text as Brecht/Bentley, followed by page number.
4. Darko Suvin, 'Brecht's Caucasian Chalk Circle and Marxist Figuralism: Open Dramaturgy as Open History', in Siegfried Mews (ed.), *Critical Essays on Bertolt Brecht*, G.K. Hall & Co., Boston, 1989, pp. 162–75, p. 163.
5. On the genesis of the play see Jan Knopf, *Brecht-Handbuch. Theater. Eine Ästhetik der Widersprüche*, Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart, 1980, p. 254.
6. Suvin, p. 172.
7. Suvin, p. 165, italics in original.
8. Barbara Buhl, *Bilder der Zukunft: Traum und Plan. Utopie im Werk Bertolt Brechts*, Aisthesis Verlag, Bielefeld, 1988, p. 231. According to Betty Nance Weber, Brecht included veiled references to various stages of the history of the Russian revolution in his play, from 1905 to 1917 and 1934; that is, up to the situation depicted in the *Vorspiel*. With regard to Brecht's historical intentions, Weber speaks of his play as a critique of an 'unhistorical' *Vorbildfetischismus* in orthodox Soviet historiography, namely a fetishism of positive models which Brecht cautiously tried to correct. The veiled references serve as a challenge to readers and audiences to reflect anew upon the history of the revolution, to think through the 'possible constellations and sequences of history' as an alternative to the Stalinist way of development. See Betty Nance Weber, *Brechts 'Kreidekreis', ein Revolutionsstück. Eine Interpretation von B.N. Weber. Mit Texten aus dem Nachlaß*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/Main, 1976, pp. 108, 109.
9. Jan Knopf, *Brecht-Handbuch. Theater*, pp. 267–8.
10. Cf. Bernd Hüppauf, 'Krise ohne Wandel. Die kulturelle Situation 1945–1949', in B. Hüppauf (ed.), *Die Mühen der Ebenen. Kontinuität und Wandel in der deutschen Literatur und Gesellschaft 1945–1949*, Winter Verlag, Heidelberg, 1981, pp. 47–112, here pp. 104–9.
11. For more details see Gerhard Fischer, 'Brechts Dramen 1948–50', in Hüppauf, pp. 271–306.