

Analysis of the Responsibilities of Intellectuals in Brecht's Life of Galileo under Technological Determinism

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Abstract

The present paper is an analysis of Brecht's *Life of Galileo* under the guidance of technological determinism. After introducing general theories about science, ideology and Marxism, the paper continues to analyze the responsibilities of an intellectual from two perspectives: a scientific revolution for social improvements and the recantation on "autarchic land".

Keywords

Responsibilities, Intellectuals, Brecht, Life of Galileo, Technological determinism.

1. Introduction

Based on Marxist Aesthetics, Brecht's works are characterized by a hopeful faith in the possibilities of science and technology. There is no doubt that this faith is most notably emphasized in Brecht's characterization of Galileo in *Life of Galileo*, which redefines the term culture from a slightly different perspective--- technological determinism. As one of Brecht's most immensely vivid, human and complex creations, the great Renaissance scientist Galileo, with his strong appetite for scientific investigation and the continuity with his work on revolutionary ideas, can be regarded as Brecht's spokesman to disseminate his persistent struggles for freedom from authoritarian dogma and his tendencies on the relations between science and society, namely technological determinism.

2. Body

2.1 Science, Ideology and Marxism

Describing science as "a kind of popular mechanic paradigm of tinkering and manual experimentation, Brecht regards technological development as an important aspect of capital's domination rather than focus on the commodity form, that is, on problems of consciousness that arise in the exchange or in cultural relations" (Carney 36). He has discovered that scientific management and the introduction of new machinery are in the form of domination of capitalists over proletarians. He thinks that technology is a social relation and that in the context of capitalist accumulation, knowledge has political consequences to the extent that is subsumed under capitalism. Therefore, science is the product of the Enlightenment's attempt to elevate reason to an intervention in the social and natural world. But it is divided within itself between its valid and necessary critique of religion and all forms of mysticism, particularly Catholicism. And its attempt is to solve humanity's problems by subordinating nature to human ends. This preoccupation with the domination of nature arises from our collective human fear of human emancipation, masked as the fear of terrors upon us by natural disasters. The fear of nature is really as much as the fear of unleashing the possibilities inherent in human reason. Besides, science and its subordinate technology achieve human emancipation through the progressive domination of nature. From its very inception, science is thus an enterprise with an interest, and that interest is the prediction and control of what is considered to be an external nature. In its attempt to represent the general emancipatory interest through the domination of nature, science also entails the domination of humans.

Most often, the word ideology is known as a kind of progress that fundamentally determines the subjectivity of agents in particular class positions. There is an extensive Marxist literature that deals with the problems of using the concept of ideology to designate particular cultural progresses, especially in Brecht's *Life of Galileo*. One frequently mentioned problem is that culture is reduced to

its function as ideology, and ideology—the realm of ideas—always refers to a reality outside itself. Moreover, ideology reflects that reality in either a true or a mythical way. Culture, like ideology, becomes the field of mystified discourse, falsely reflecting the real base. The reduction of culture to its ideological function has two discursive functions: first, it establishes a hierarchy of social progresses; secondly, it distinguishes between ideology and science, where science is a true appropriation of the primary reality. As for the two functions, Brecht has expressed his support between the lines in his work *Life of Galileo*. When agents misperceive their real relations to each other and to their individual experiences, they are under the sway of ideology, which becomes synonymous with false consciousness. In this situation, they are inserted into material relations that are objectively harmful to a majority of these agents. In the cultural realm, only science, understood as revolutionary theoretical practice, is ever completely liberating, although ideology may be historically necessary to achieve partial, strategic gains in actual struggle. The field of culture is limited to the unstable interplay of science and ideology.

As for technological determinism, “it has been defined as an approach that identifies technology, or technological advances, as the central causal element in processes of social change” (Stachel 76). This theory is a reductionist approach to the relationship between social and technological development aspects, which presumes that a society’s technology drives the development of its social structure and cultural values. As a kind of tendency of Marxist’s ideas on science and capitalism, the theory is not only to utilize all the skills of labor in its own interests, but to present these skills of labor as if they were powers of capital not as a social relation but with its material embodiment in technologies such as machines.

2.2 The Responsibilities of Intellectuals in Galileo

2.2.1 A Scientific Revolution for Social Improvements

In *Galileo*, “the playwright rearranges church history, the initial thrust of Protestantism, and the devastating consequences of counterreformation in the seventeenth century to parallel the history of the old Social Democratic Workers’ party in Russia through waves of revolution and reaction in the twentieth century” (Weber 62), so it has been planned as a play for workers. As a Marxist, Brecht was always aware of the importance of science and scientific discoveries for the fate of the working class. Thus, in the early 1930s, he attended a meeting of workers which was addressed by Albert Einstein who was explaining the new physics. As Brecht recognized, a scientific revolution has significance only in so far as it is fruitful of social improvements.

Seen as a revolutionary scientist, Galileo is in close touch and sympathy with the life of people, particularly with mechanics, craftsman, engineers, no less than the simple people of the streets, market places, and shops. He is not a savant standing above and beyond the common interests of human beings. Not only is he conversant with the workings of the shipyards, kilns, iron foundries, he is surrounded by artisans, glass-grinders, turners, and carpenters. He is happy to stand at the wharfs and shipyards to watch the utilization of a new kind of pulley or some other mechanism to lighten the labor of hands. However, he is above all a scientist aware of the distresses and hardships of ordinary life because all he does is for the working people and social improvements:

Have you ever heard what the House of Nitti says about the Italian people? ... They command the earth to stand still, lest their possessions be endangered, and their peasants begin to think new thoughts...Never before has a single science like ours been entrusted with such a mission, to forge weapons of reason for an entire people against their oppressors. (Brecht *The Life of Galileo* 91)

Being aroused to fury by injustice and oppression, he sees in the Church and in the papal authority only another vested interest of a ruling class, so he becomes a warrior against feudalism with the weapons of science insisting that scientific improvement can change the social situation and cultural values. Meanwhile, similar to the conception that the power of science and technology can reduce their controlling status in people’s ideology and social life, the Inquisitor shows his worry and claims:

A terrible unrest has come into the world. It is this unrest in their own minds which these men would impose on the motionless earth...These men doubt everything. Are we to establish human society on

doubt and no longer on faith? ‘You are my master, but I doubt if that is a good thing.’...Your Holiness’s Spanish policy is not understood by men who, lacking insight, regret our rupture with the Emperor... and these worms or mathematicians turn their telescopes to the skies and tell the world that your Holiness here too, in the one domain where no one has yet contested you, is ill informed...Even as a young man this Galileo wrote about machines. With machines they would perform miracles so that they no longer have any need of God. (101)

Actually, the anxiety of the Inquisitor towards the scientific discovery in this play has disclosed that in the mind of Brecht, a Marxist Aesthetician, the power of science and technology can to some degree decides the development of the society. That is to say, the class which has mastered science and technology will be the master of the world, especially for the working class which has ever been ruled by the exploiting rank, the feudalists in the play and the bourgeoisies at present. Therefore, in Brecht’s *The Life of Galileo*, what Galileo has been studying on science is never a simple scientific research, a mission bestowed of emancipating the working class from exploitation and driving the social improvements, not a simple scientific research.

2.2.2 The Recantation on “Autarchic Land”

In creating the figure of Galileo, Brecht has imposed upon the play and the character a toughly moral issue: How can the problem of survival not involve the question of moral cowardice? The crucial answer to this question in the play is “recantation”. At first, Brecht thinks of making the recantation a subterfuge to permit Galileo to continue his work and his propaganda. The reason why Galileo yields to the Inquisition solely turns out to be that he feels both his life and the survival of his work are being threatened. But on second thoughts, Brecht doesn’t want to give the impression that the recantation is a wily, premeditated act and intends to safeguard Galileo’s discoveries. With the confession to Andrea, Galileo has expressed that it is only the fear of death that prompts the recantation:

After a careful consideration of all the circumstances, the extenuating ones as well as the others, one cannot but conclude that a man would find no other ground for such submission but in the fear of death...No less than a threat of death is generally needed to deflect a man from that to which his intellect has led him—this most dangerous of all the gifts of the Almighty. (116)

From Galileo’s words, readers realize that not only is Galileo a scientist, but he plays firstly the role of a human being who continues searching the truth of life. Yet, he confesses to Andrea that he remains active as a scientist and he has written another book *Discourses Concerning the Two New Science*, running the danger of having the pages of his manuscript fall into the wrong hands. In the horrible social situation, Galileo never gives up his research and still fights stealthily in that autarchic land. With Galileo’s conclusion to power of science and the darkness of the world, people can understand that the responsibility of the intellectual in the face of terror in Brecht’s view is to spread the truth. But how is the truth to be disseminated in such conditions? Through illegal means.

“Brecht is prone to make his fellow émigrés aware of their responsibilities not only to their callings and professions, but also to the millions of people who will ultimately determine both their own and the intellectual’s survival” (Weber 65). Indeed, Brecht has realized how a bourgeois society tends to isolate the scientist by luring him on to an autarchic island where he can carry on his researches unhampered; how it attaches him gradually to its politics, economy and ideology; how it creates for him the comfort of a pure vocation; how it uses flattery, money, offices and in default of these, force, proscription and other forms of compulsion to effect and name the results of science.

3. Conclusion

As a scientist, what Brecht cares about is not only the pure research but also the effect of his discovery or invention on the society. Thus, in Brecht’s eyes, Galileo’s pretended recantation, derived from both Galileo’s fear of death and his strong belief of pursuing and spreading truth, has objectively satirized the true recantation of some playwrights and scientists who have lost the belief that literature and science should work for common people. The technological determinism, combined with the

biased international misinterpretation and utilitarian inclination in the reception process, advances Brecht to establish this high-ranking Marxist work *The Life of Galileo*, presenting his radical ideas about the relationship between culture and society.

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