

# **SUPERMAN TRAPPED IN THE PHONE BOOTH - GEORGE BERNARD SHAW UNDER FIRE FROM RIGHT AND LEFT - was he defeated by his own sound-bites?**

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– was he defeated by his own sound-bites?

“History, sir, will tell lies as usual” – THE DEVIL’S DISCIPLE

Any person interested in why literary figures come and go will sometimes attribute it to the rise and fall of aesthetic movements, changes in public perception and taste, and in today’s climate, the sheer competition from sources with unlimited power in the marketplace. All these opinions are worthy of consideration, and bear some relation to the scope of human passions, tastes, and events, and seem to follow naturally with the rise and fall of different belief and values systems in society.

We believe we are living in a culture, however, where the liberal arts, such as drama, are always open and accessible, where the only criterion as to whether a play will be put on or not is often and most usually to do with ticket sales.

In Dublin, where Shaw, once considered the greatest living playwright in his day, and over-all, in the English speaking world, second only to Shakespeare, we are fortunate if from one year to another, not to say five or ten years, we have the opportunity to see a Shaw play being performed at all – in 2003, an American company brought MAJOR BARBARA to the Pavilion Theatre in Dun Laoghaire.

Since the death of Shaw in 1950, only a handful of his plays have been put on in Dublin in comparison to dramatists like O’Casey, Beckett, even the esoteric but wonderful Yeats. During the 1980s and 1990s there was one opportunity to see his “John Bull’s Other Island” – along with my contemporaries, I had been told that Shaw was boring, didactic, and even pretentious.

This was not my experience when I saw any of Shaw’s plays. True, they said things which sounded didactic, dealt with political issues, but in no sense were they dated, or

without human passion or feeling, or psychological subtlety. They even had humour, which may explain, why in the United States, Shaw Chicago, a group dedicated to Shaw, has put on more than fifty Shaw plays in the last few decades. There are now three major Shaw festivals in the United States annually, proving that as a live dramatist, and as a thinker he is a huge force in contemporary cultural life in America.

So what has happened to Shaw's reputation that we, in our own country, treat him so badly. When we go to England, the situation is not very different. There is a deep dislike and suspicion of Shaw there, even in his adopted country – however, he has one advocate in Michael Holroyd, his tireless biographer.

So is it a question of public taste, or changing mores and audiences, and if so, why are we not in tune with the United States here, when we are in tune with it in every other respect? Is the decline in Shaw's reputation a mere accident, that he was overlooked, or has it been engineered by some of the enemies of this political thought. How much is he himself responsible for his own exclusion?

Ever since I saw JOHN BULL'S OTHER ISLAND at the Gaiety some years ago, I have been wondering on this question

### **THE ATTACK FROM THE RIGHT**

None of us may be surprised that Shaw has continually been attacked from the right side of the political spectrum – after all, those with a modicum of knowledge about him know he was a life long socialist from the time he first read Marx in the Reading Room of the British Museum while a young man in London. He followed on by forming friendships and societies which would promote his ideas, he wrote extensively, as well as plays and prefaces, tracts, tomes, and a huge correspondence outlining his views – so we are not surprised that the Right are uncomfortable about his plays, and do not want to see him considered an important dramatist, rather preferring to think of him as a mere polemicist.

From time to time, Shaw, in some of his plays, had given the Political Right important things to say, which gave them hope he could see things their way - for example, Andrew Undershaft the capitalist weapons manufacturer in MAJOR BARBARA, of Cauchon speaking for the Church in SAINT JOAN, and King Magnus in THE APPLE CART, yet, after his visit to Russia in 1931, no one can be surprised that he was a hate figure from the right side of the political spectrum, he was persona non grata for ever, even though he had won the Nobel Prize in 1925.

The Right may be right after all, in dismissing Shaw, especially after Glasnost, when the extent of Stalin's atrocities became widely known. When his plays are produced now, Shaw has come in for even more criticism from the Right: in "The Times" (London) on August 29, 2000 the theatre critic Benedict Nightingale describes Shaw's visit to Stalin as "a lesson in evil, ..doling out poison and death" to the world, with his positive remarks towards the new communist state, even stating that Jesus Christ would have been happy with developments. This remark was widely reported in the press at the time of the visit. And caused uproar, then, and even now.

Michael Holroyd addressing some of Shaw's critics in "The Guardian" of December 16, 2000, defends the dramatist by pointing out that Shaw did not carry out any of Stalin's actions, however sympathetic Shaw may have been to some the theories of the new communist state, and to how they had been applied in Russia.

To more fully explain to readers why Shaw endorsed developments in Russia, Holroyd, in the same piece in "The Guardian", indicates that it was Shaw's ambition to be a huge influence in the world that led to this impasse:

"So, to the confusion of his critics, Shaw in his 60s became the most famous and successful playwright in the world. ... But this was not the success Shaw wanted. He wanted influence, positive and subversive political influence, rather than a smothering of prizes."

Holroyd goes on to make the telling observation: "Indeed, his prize success coincided with the shrinking of his political influence." A very interesting remark, as we shall see.

In 1931, when he visited Russia with Nancy Astor, Shaw was in his seventies, and an old man in a hurry. Parliamentary democracy in England had proven quite ineffective as a way of bringing about the social reforms he wanted. There was an urgency to the question, since there had been one World War, and another was threatened. Shaw was not the only person critical of parliamentary democracy. The age was throwing up dictators and Shaw realised that in the words of Margaret Thatcher in dealing with Gorbachev much later on, he would have to "do business " with the USSR.

So being a realist, that one per cent of people who can actually change things, as distinct from the mere idealists, Shaw took the bull by the horns, visited Russia and prepared to take on the reality of what the socialist state had accomplished at the time.

But Shaw was a celebrity, and it is no surprise to us in our age of celebrity, that it can be a handicap in a fact-finding mission. Shaw had an audience with Stalin, which lasted two

hours and ten minutes, he was taken on a brisk tour, where no doubt he was shown exactly what they wanted him, and the world to see, and then he was ushered away in a blaze of publicity, the press quoting his off-the-cuff remarks, and tossing them off to a sceptical world.

His oft-quoted remark that he did not see anyone starving, no doubt caused many a tremor in the hearts of people right and left – the Right were fearful Stalin's state was a success, the Left were fearful because they knew what was really going on, and could not speak out.

However, what is without doubt is that Shaw took a very affirmative view of Stalin's state, whatever his true motivations, or whether he chose to ignore the signs, if he had seen any, that millions of Kulaks had been killed, or whether he was truly ignorant. He supported Stalin's state despite some indications that all was not well in the new Utopia, there were rumours, which he could not verify, that the Kulaks were being exterminated in the Ukraine, and that some dissidents were being executed. He chose to ignore the rumours about the Ukraine, and in a poor judgment, decided to accept at a realistic level what had happened to some of the Russians who opposed Stalin.

The irony is, that despite his support for Russia, and the opposition of the Right, Shaw was, despite this support, anathema to the Left also. This essay is an attempt to explain how he seemed to be in the crossfire between right and left, and unlike Superman, who could change in the phone booth, he became trapped by the way the media dealt with his remarks, and his plays.

Shaw was the first celebrity to suffer from the sound-bite effect, and also to be damned by his own quotes and others misunderstanding of them.

Leonard Woolf had an interesting, somewhat different take on what happened to Shaw at this time. He saw the difficulties of a profound, complex thinker like Shaw being caught up in the simplified, because polarised, debates of their time. When Right and Left become extreme and declare that "you're either with us or against us," then the subtler thinkers find themselves pushed into one camp or another. In the *New Statesman* shortly after Shaw's visit to Russia, Leonard Woolf explained it this way:

*Before the (First World) War, Shaw had been one of the leaders of the revolutionary movements of our youth. There is no living man to whom the generations which come to maturity between 1900 and 1914 owe so much as to Bernard Shaw. Nothing less than a*

*world war could have prevented him from winning the minds of succeeding generations; however, ever since that war, the barbarians have been on top.*

There is no doubt Shaw thought the barbarians were on top. How to win in this no-win situation? After the loss of his reputation following pacifist declarations in World War One, and a recovery in the 'twenties, he did not want to lose his reputation again, so he gave considerable thought about how to get his ideas across.

On his return from Russia, Shaw wrote the Preface and play ON THE ROCKS which shows his disenchantment with parliamentary democracy.

He chose a Swiftian response to events in Russia, and the failure of democracies to achieve results.

What seemed to him to be true was that Russia had managed to control land ownership and for the first time in centuries the serfs were able to eat. There were rumours that people who did not fit the Procrustean Socialist analysis were killed, but unsure of the real situation, he however, took on some of the charges made by opponents of the new society.

For example, on the question of extermination of the peasants in the Ukraine, Shaw writes:

*In short, you exterminate the peasant by bringing up his children to be scientifically mechanised farmers and to live a collegiate life in cultivated society.*

Shaw's irony is clear – while to his readers, who have a knee jerk reaction to the sound-bite, he seemingly supports Stalinist extermination programmes. It is ironic because Stalin is doing no more than what has been done throughout history. Shaw is saying that the preferred way to exterminate the peasant is by educating his children out of poverty. He is being rational and civilised.

He says that one kind of extermination is impossible, that is to exterminate the goose that lays the golden egg. But the Kulaks did present a problem to the communist state. They wanted to keep their produce to themselves, not to share with the community. So Shaw's way of dealing with them is in fact, humane, and does not support extermination or what Stalin did to them. There is no evidence that Shaw he knew of the scale of what was actually happening in Russia - he said he had seen no one starving, only plump people. He also said he had heard conflicting reports. As a famous personality who was in the full glare of the press, he was unable to travel where he wanted to, and see the

Ukraine for himself. However, a reporter from Chicago actually did visit the Ukraine, and reported his findings to a shocked public.

Nevertheless, it is clear from the Preface to ON THE ROCKS that Shaw had given serious consideration to some things on his visit to Russia.

He saw the Soviet state as being successful, having achieved state ownership, thus fulfilling the requirements of basic socialism – he himself had been the chief Economics adviser to the Fabians, and knew how difficult this was to accomplish:

He was aware that dissidents and slackers had been executed for not cooperating with the State, and then seriously reflects on the central problem of how a state is to achieve stability in light of dissidents and non cooperating elements:

Shaw feels that he should accommodate the harsh reality of the state's need for stability, even though it may shock his readers.

*Our question is not to kill, or not to kill (sic) but to select the right people to kill. The essential difference between the Russian liquidator with his pistol and the British hangman is that they do not operate on the same sort of person.*

In the West, criminals in jails are usually there because of crimes against property, whereas, in Shaw's view, as a socialist, the real criminals who fulfil the letter of the law in such things as shares and dividends are actually robbing the rest of the community

Or as he put in in his earlier tracts on Economics for the Fabian Society:

*As our English doggerel runs, the courts could punish a man for stealing the goose from off the common, but not the man who stole the common from the goose.*

As a socialist, he is aware of poverty in rich countries, where capitalists control the wealth that land and ownership creates, and thus cause the extermination of children through hunger and deprivation, this is not considered criminal.

Quoting from MAN AND SUPERMAN:

*I am a brigand: I live by robbing the rich/ I am a gentleman: I live by robbing the poor*

He wants to shock people into the realisation of the kind of society capitalism really is, where private proprietors really have the power of life and death.

Looking at history, Shaw finds that there is no state that has not dealt summarily through execution, or extermination, with those that disagree with its programmes – his sweep of history discusses famous cases like Socrates and Jesus Christ, who were intrinsically virtuous and interestingly made no defence.

He therefore gets his point across in the same way as Swift did in his *A MODEST PROPOSAL* – through overstatement and irony which reveals the callous and brutal nature of states and the reality of poverty.

Shaw has given his answer and his own way of dealing with it. An ageing man, he is anxious to get on with things, and achieve his youthful aims of world socialism. His impatience with parliamentary democracy, which seems incapable of dealing with the immense social and political problems of the day, marks the Preface and the play.

Shaw did not help his own reputation by his jokes: however, he believed that humour often achieved communication on difficult subjects, but some of his remarks have caused him to be misunderstood because they were taken literally.

*Democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few-* MAN AND SUPERMAN

The problem with all these misunderstandings is that they were based on a fragmentary reading or hearing of Shaw, rather than on an appreciation of his long effort toward civilizing the species. From *THE QUINTESSENCE OF IBSENISM* on, Shaw thought of himself as among the 1% of realists who, with clear sight into the purposes of existence, had a chance of influencing the evolution of the world towards progress, and thus it was his frustrated sense that he was losing that chance that led him be so incautious in such a dangerous time.

In 1938 he is quite clear that he is not a supporter of dictators, by now, perhaps, the big picture was becoming clearer:

*I am tired of the way in which the newspapers.. continue to make it appear that I am an admirer of dictatorship. All my work shows the truth to be otherwise.*  
(The Star, 4 August, 1938)

In other words, he was often judged by his off the cuff remarks, and like any celebrity had to live with them, even if they were made years ago, and in different circumstances. Shaw, one of the first celebrities of the mass media, was also one of the first casualties of the sound-bite.

The public in a democracy can be badly served by sensationalism, inaccuracy, and generalities, and while some reputations have been rehabilitated, such as that of Oscar Wilde, some are never forgiven because the questions they deal with reflect on the whole nature of society and not just on questions of personal morality and taste.

Shaw was a life-long socialist, and still represents socialism to many – even today, however, because the public has only a sketchy knowledge of his ideas, the Rightist newspapers draw on generalities and sensation to continue their war against the Left, so the attack from the Right is no surprise, and in a strange way, keeps Shaw alive, if only as a boogie man.

### **THE ATTACK FROM THE LEFT**

However, the irony is that it is from the Left that Shaw is most likely to be written out of history.

A crushing example is that in a history of the Left Book Club, (“The Left’s Ace of Clubs”) published in a synopsis in “The Guardian” on Saturday, July 7, 2001, Shaw is given only a cursory mention. The club, according to this article, became a key part of the Communist Party’s recruitment drive. All the leading intellectuals of the day who espoused left-wing causes – even those who later defected, like Orwell, and the critic Philip Toynbee, are given their place, while Shaw’s name is obscured in the annals, mentioned only in passing in a reference to: “People like GBS and Nancy Astor, who visited Russia.”

This slight suggests that Shaw was already out of favour with the Left when the book club was formed in 1937 under the leadership of dedicated communist Victor Gollancz, who had enormous influence both before and after the war in England.

The article in “The Guardian” on the 1937 Left Book Club makes no mention of Shaw’s contribution to socialism in Britain, therefore continuing the omission. This would point to a serious problem of perception even in those writing left-wing history today.

We have to look at the way political ideas developed in the unfolding decade after Shaw’s visit to Russia, for the source of this occlusion. When Left and Right ideologies began to divide, propagandists wanted to make an impact on readers. The aim was to gather supporters rather than have a disinterested debate, so views were simplified and polarised.



This has seriously impoverished our view of the world, and given ground for rampant greed and capitalism, just because some left wing societies have failed, in what is a relatively new experiment.

*Political necessities sometimes turn out to be political mistakes* as Shaw wrote in SAINT JOAN.

The attack on Shaw from the Marxist Left must be put in the context of the historical events that brought this polarisation to pass, and perhaps now, after the fall of the Berlin wall, and the ending of the Cold War, we are now in a position to evaluate properly.

Everything in life depends on timing, and context. Shaw lived out his most influential years in the 1930s, when the ground was being prepared for a giant conflict between Right and Left.

On the left side, all the young socialist idealists flocked to Spain under the common banner of the Popular Front which began to organise against Franco in 1937.

Most progressive people in England were interested in the Left, and as they united, were sucked into the propaganda machine of hard line Marxists. Hard-line Marxists won over poets and writers, caught up in the revolutionary fervour to defeat the ideas of fascism.

The debate was controlled by committed hard-line intellectuals and the confrontation between Fascism and Communism occluded the middle ground.

Shaw's because his view of the world was too nuanced, and balanced because he understood the larger questions underlying the political philosophies of the day. These awkward questions were jettisoned in the rush to war and supremacy.

It is in an essay published by a young radical that we find the main objections to Shaw delineated clearly. Christopher Caudwell, a pseudonym for Christopher St. John Sprigge, a Cambridge University graduate in literature, had published a number of books and was a promising poet. He died in Spain age 30, in 1937, at the beginning of the conflict.

Does a reading of this 1938 essay -

### **“George Bernard Shaw – The Bourgeois Superman”**

by this young Marxist revolutionary, Christopher St. John Sprigge, writing as Christopher Caudwell, furnish us with a connection to the decline of Shaw's reputation in our time? His *Studies in a Dying Culture* was published posthumously in London by

Lane, in 1938, and had the sub-title: *Illusion and Reality*. The illusion referred to is the liberty and freedom enjoyed by the “bourgeois” or middle classes, in Western capitalist society. The “reality” is the brand of Marxist scientific determinism propounded by the author, who is an adherent.

To summarise: The real provenance of the attack lay in:  
- the fact that the extreme left was organising for war, and wanted to “speak with one voice”

- the type of socialism advocated by the Fabians was peaceful and gradual, and did not support violent revolution

Caudwell begins the essay with a quotation from Lenin – Shaw is described as “A good man fallen among Fabians” – in fact Lenin had a well annotated copy of Shaw’s works in his possession for many years. Alick West wrote a book of this title later on.

According to Caudwell, Shaw’s failure as a playwright, man of ideas, and artist, lies in his association with the Fabians, and his identification with the “bourgeoisie” or middle classes, therefore, by association, subscribing to the illusion of the middle classes – that they are free – because they are unrestrained as regards activities, education, wealth, and mobility.

The “Superman” of the title is obviously intended as irony, in view of the contents which follow.

Shaw drew Caudwell’s ire because, with the Fabians, and their circle of middle class associates, he believed that education, and not violent revolution, was the way forward to socialism. Caudwell reproaches Shaw for not being willing to act, a euphemism for kill, and wanting to educate people instead.

Caudwell writes: *Shaw is still obsessed with the idea of liberty as a kind of medicine which a man of good will can impose on the ‘ignorant’ worker from without. He does not see that neither intellectual or worker possesses as yet this priceless freedom to give, both are confined within the categories of their time, and communism is the active creation of true liberty which cannot yet be given by anybody to anybody...*

Note that above how completely the idea of dictatorship was accepted.

However, Shaw’s belief in education, - for example, his idea that the peasant or kulak can be exterminated through education is in fact the famous gradualism of the Fabians, who believed in the possibility of influencing events through the spread of ideas. In this

he was right, since the development of the Welfare State after the Second World War in England has given us the only successful model, so far, of socialism, and Shaw's ideas are very much responsible for this.

However, before the war, in 1938, Shaw's belief in education and gradualism, is a sign, to Caudwell, of Shaw's innate unsuitability as a left-wing protagonist, and as a leader of opinion in the hoped for victory of the Left.

Caudwell believed that action was the true creator of liberty, even if that action involved killing others, and from that action, scientific knowledge developed and created a reality which brought about the possibility of freedom.

Middle class leisure, with its opportunities for social contacts and education, was, for Caudwell, the outcome of the abuse of capital and land, and position in society. Shaw enjoyed those social contacts, flitting from drawing room, to lecture hall, to library, (what Sally Peters described as "The Jaegerised Butterfly" in her study of Shaw "The Ascent of Superman"). Shaw had opportunities which were not available to those workers the left wing were trying to attract.

Drawing on this resentment, on behalf of those enslaved in factories and proletarian circumstances, Caudwell postulates this kind of actual freedom as being entirely illusory. It is not possible for anyone to be free, he believes, until the entire community is free from this kind of bondage, all else is posture and talk.

Therefore, Shaw had to be rubbished as a thinker, in order to diminish his influence.

According to Caudwell, Shaw's thinking was essentially flawed in three respects:

- (a) His belief in the category of "thought-in-itself", or a world beyond materialism,
- (b) His "Butlerian Neo-Lamarckism", with its supposition of a will independent of matter;
- (c) His identification with the educated middle-classes and their false idea of liberty.

(a) Caudwell is immediately scornful of the possibility of "thought in itself" – thought for him must have an end, and be linked to science and therefore knowledge of "reality". Science had discovered according to Darwin, that immutable laws, working objectively created species, what the Marxists had done was to extrapolate from this biological determinism and apply it to the way society is constructed,> However, we in democracies have the experience of laws operating independently on individuals who react or not to them, so that contrary to Caudwell, who believed that society determined

thought and consciousness of individuals, we believe that individuals influence and make society.

According to Caudwell, “thought in itself” is flawed because man is alone, exempt from society and from cooperation, while

*since science tests all its cogitations at the bar of reality, it is thought as thought ought to be, passing always in dialectical movement between knowing and being, between dream and outer reality.*

– all else is fantasy (“thought in itself”) and belongs to the childhood of the race. Caudwell thinks that Shaw is akin to the early shaman, the mystic or prophet, who dwell in illusion, and close to the neurotic who denies reality.

(b) Shaw’s ”Butlerian Neo Lamarckism”

According to Butler, change in living organisms by which they adapt themselves to changes in their environment is not the automatic effect of the environment upon them, but is deliberate and purposive. He believed, therefore, that there must be some mind or force operating independently upon them – as its expression, inspiring them to change themselves, in furtherance of its purposes.

Shaw’s adaptation of Butler’s Neo-Lamarckian ideas in forming what he called the religion of “Creative Evolution”, or “Vitalism”, begins explicitly in *MAN AND SUPERMAN* and in *MAJOR BARBARA* and in his plays he shows how this kind of evolution can work in the modern world. (The Lamark-versus-Darwin debates still goes on)

For example, in *MAJOR BARBARA*, Barbara is torn between ideals of serving the poor, and the impossibility of bringing them to fruition – she must cooperate with matter in order to do that. Undershaft, who has wealth, and capital, has the power to change events, through manufacturing arms and to end corrupt regimes by force. Therefore their marriage symbolises a kind of “evolution” – Barbara, who may appear compromised, has brought about change for the better, and the possibility that her ideals will be brought to some kind of fruition through the use of money. Thus she is on the side of life, in which matter is informed and developed by spirit, and constantly evolving.

Caudwell hits out at this “Butlerian neo-Lamarcksism “ with detestation. Nothing less than the complete overthrow of society is acceptable to him – on no account are capitalists to be given any sort of role.

However there remains, I believe, the question of “tainted money” which has not been resolved. Also, is Barbara’s marriage in fact a “Faustian pact”? These are very live questions today, and at the Shaw Conference in Florida in 2004 there was a huge amount of debate on MAJOR BARBARA, which is not surprising considering many Americans are thinking of themselves as war, and whether taking up arms to defeat the enemy, in the name of a greater good, is perhaps a wise course of action ultimately.

Machiavelli is alive and well in the world today, and Shaw was well aware his arguments for political action have been studied by world leaders as an effectual armoury.

However, what is truly irksome to the Left at this time, and always, is that Shaw’s characters represent a possibility for development, an opportunity for a different path. This is in keeping with his Lamarckian view of evolution that gives a window of opportunity where the evolving member of a species has some input into his biological evolution by a choice or a behaviour, such as giraffes willing to reach leaves on higher branches, and thus creating possibilities of passing on altered physiological characteristics to their offspring.

To extrapolate from this example into literature, as Caudwell did, was the basis of his attack. Through drama, Shaw’s ideas could have a lot of influence.

Caudwell contends that a particular fallacy of Shaw is his belief that a freedom of the will exists.

In BACK TO METHUSALAH Shaw writes:

*What hope is there then of human improvement? According to the Neo-Darwinists, to the Mechanists, no hope whatever, because improvement can come only through some senseless accident which must, on the statistical average of accidents be presently wiped out by some other equally senseless accident. But this dismal creed does not discourage those who believe that the impulse that produces evolution is creative. They have observed the simple fact that the will to do anything can and does, at a certain pitch of intensity set up by conviction of its necessity, create and organize new tissue to do it with*

Shaw gives the example of the weight lifter developing muscles because he wants to and exerts his will to that end.

(c) Caudwell’s Third Objection to Shaw is his lack of Class-identification.

Class identification was a hallmark of the extreme left, and a major strategy. It had as a basis the philosophy of scientific determinism, with its iron laws, advanced by Darwin in relation to biological evolution. According to Caudwell, people are marked irrevocably through their class identification, in the sense that they can only be appealed to, work on, and work through that identity: that “consciousness was the product of social reality.” For example, peasants could only think like peasants, and so on – while Shaw believed in the idea of education as an appeal to reason and to better models, to learn from different societies in light of their experience, that the human mind was not a product of social forces, but was supreme over them and through them. That there were superior brains, and differing abilities, regardless of class back-ground – for example, himself!

But, Caudwell argues, by socialising and educating with the middle classes, Shaw has become “bourgeois”. Shaw was suffering from “false consciousness.” He belonged to the childhood of the race, like magicians, lunatics, and neurotics. He had no place in the future development of “reality.”

It may clarify matters here if I give an example, myself, also from literature. Take the case of Chaucer, who worked as a clerk or secretary in the diplomatic service. Chaucer used his diplomatic job experience to educate himself, and thus rise out of his class, to speak to a wider audience, and out of a deeper knowledge both of human nature and of literature. Therefore, Chaucer is an example of how a member belonging to a class of modest social provenance can have a different life than the iron laws of determinism would have afforded him, grounded as they are in probability. However, such individual instances are seen by Marxists as a betrayal of the group, pushing individual ambition above group adherences, when in fact, they believe it is adherence to the group – that will advance the (logically scientific,) inevitable march of progress for mankind – socialism.

Shaw is seen, as benefiting from personal contacts and friendships, and the liberty enjoyed by them, so betraying the cause of socialism because such behaviour does not identify him as a worker – since most workers don’t have that kind of experience.

#### **Why the attack was focussed on Shaw:**

The Left were aware that Shaw was at odds with them on significant issues. Shaw was extremely popular, having won the hearts and minds of American audiences with the film, *Pygmalion*” (he was to win an Oscar the year the book was published) and thus he had the possibility for influencing millions through the new medium of film.

Like James Joyce, Shaw was interested in the cinema both as an art form and as a method of communicating to vast numbers of people – Shaw was engaged in talks with Hollywood producers, and also was exploring the possibility of setting up a film company in Ireland at this time. Cinema was seen as an instrument of social change, and Marxists like Caudwell were well aware of its enormous potential for influence.

There had been great development in cinematic technique – the advent of talkies, in the West, and in Europe and Russia, there were new psychologies being developed of mind, and of crowd control, which had been employed by Hitler to enormous effect.

Marxists were suspicious of popular culture in the West, and afraid that Shaw, who represented Socialism to millions of people would have undue influence. They wanted to remake popular culture in the shape of their revolution. They had already done this in Russia.

Caudwell is well aware of Shaw's popularity, whose plays were being performed very often to great acclaim in England, and now, success in the cinematic world seems very likely for Shaw.

Caudwell in his essay, sniffs disdainfully that Marx was not concerned with popularity in the West End, he is far too noble for that.

There were crucial questions at stake, and political forces were gathering making these questions very urgent indeed.

For example, the Marxist question was centred on class, and the masses, and in *PYGMALION*, a play about class, Shaw found a solution to class conflict in changing an accent

*It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him*

– therefore it could be inferred that class is a mere shibboleth, and can be negotiated through friendship and personal relationships – even through the work of teacher and pupil, with possibilities of personal and social development, rather than the antagonism of groups based on class interests. This was in direct contradiction to left wing fundamentals.

Therefore, Shaw raised awkward questions, and answered problems in a different way than that advocated by the left.

Now that war was approaching, it was imperative he be dispatched to oblivion in the annals of popular culture, which the left were simultaneously writing as a history and as a tool for propaganda in their cause.

Caudwell the supposedly disinterested critic is now unmasked, from being a scientist concerned with the truth of his own ideas, to a overweening critic who dismisses Shaw's plays as being mere debates – between characters who are “not flesh and blood” – which, of course, is not a new charge, but one which he backs up in a way new to those not familiar with Marxist orthodoxy – by reference to the essential flaw he finds in Shaw, that he – and his characters – believe in freedom of the will. In the essay, Caudwell instances the case of St Joan, saying that Joan actually believes she has brought about, through her will the events that unfold, when all she was really doing was providing an example of class conflict at a certain period in history.

Joan's peasant background, and her inordinate will to influence France's political destiny, were irreconcilable to Caudwell – as a Marxist, this was a delusion, and he accused Shaw of propounding delusional ideas, therefore creating unconvincing characters, leading to the ultimate charge that, Shaw is an utter failure as a dramatist.

All because Shaw did not follow the party line!

Notice the manner of the attack – first the philosophy, and Shaw's been likened to a neurotic, a madman, or a “child of the race”, then to the play, where the characters, by this philosophy, are proved to be unconvincing and unreal, ergo, to Shaw, shown though logic to be a bad writer and dramatist. The method shows Shaw to be unsound as a thinker, the aim is to discredit him where he has most influence – as a world famous dramatist.

## **CONCLUSION: WHY CAUDWELL'S ESSAY IS IMPORTANT TODAY**

I'd like to conclude by summing up why Caudwell's essay is important today.

First, Caudwell's and other Marxists' kind of criticism has led to the persecution of artists in such countries as the Soviet Union, and whereas this didn't directly happen in the West, a writer like Shaw – and there are a few like him – has been damaged by the influence of such pseudo scientific theories as applied to literary works as criticism.



The essay is also important because it gives an illustration as to the progression of such patterns of pseudo-scientific discourse in societies, and how these are applied in day to day political situations. Those who believe in the ideas of scientific determinism as applied to human society suffer from a profound psychological deterioration as these ideas inform their lives and culture.

These are serious questions about the value and effect of such pseudo-scientific discourse, and they are serious because they have been very widely believed by millions of people in the recent history of the world, with consequences for all of us, since we live in an age when such conflicts have been resorted to by threat of the atom bomb.

When Marxists like Caudwell believe themselves to be absolutely “determined,” they are conscripted into something else, a larger identity, the class to which they belong. This has all the marks of a Thing-In-Itself, and is espoused as the real originator of action.

Leonard Woolf, in his essay on Shaw, “Fabians and Socialism,” wrote most eloquently about the “Thing-In-Itself” as :

*.. a fixed, holy, God-or-Marx created thing, a law of nature like the law of gravitation or a miracle of the Deity... a function of the universe like original sin, an end in itself like hell or heaven.*

Marx, following Hegel, believed that history worked as a series of scientific laws, in an objective way, outside the influence or sphere of individuals, therefore outside human control – this is the “thing in itself”. The person is reduced to a category, which irrefutably defines him or her, in accordance with the prescription of the ideology.

The result is that, for those who believe in these ideas, a psychological degeneration then sets in, with profound effects. Followers of Marx who see no freedom in the person have thus absolved themselves, through logical necessity, from any sense of responsibility.

Human beings, defined ideologically in this pseudo-scientific way, who fall short of being human by virtue of the definition, can thus mean very little to anyone bent on a political programme, being less than human, or in the words of Joseph Brodsky, “Less Than One” – so, having deprived people of their meaning in this system, depriving them of their lives is a very short step away. People who do not fit this Procrustean bed are killed, and have been killed in vast numbers.

This is why this essay is so important. It shows the thinking and logic behind those systems, and how the adoption of biological scientific determinism as a model for human society, became in our time, the mark of dictators and mass-murderers,.

Caudwell, a young man, is in a hurry to change society. He believes he is merely acting out a script history has written for him, and will soon die because of it, is at some level deeply offended by the possibility his decisions and choice could be grounded in freedom.

Shaw, an old man, does not want to waste any more time.

Shaw too believes in changing society, but wants people to reflect on these questions more profoundly, and to act out of the will, which means freedom and conscience, so that the outcome will be better for society as a whole, and for the future evolution of mankind.

But Shaw still asks the questions: Is Socialism at odds with human nature? Are the self-destructive impulses of human beings ineradicable? Are there ways of disarming oppressive power that do not betray the cause that uses them ?

Most of all, he asks – do things have to be this way? His famous “Why not?”

So questioning everything, he offended most of all those who were in power.

His errors of judgement were usually because he did not make allowances for people’s inability to understand his habitual overstatements, his sense of humour, and his uses of irony, such subtleties were lost on some members of the general public whose imaginations are fed by the over-simplifications and propaganda.

However, Shaw’s gradualist approach and his belief in spreading ideas through education and non-violence were sound. These political ideas of which he was an original and prolific exemplar– have been fundamental in the creation of the only model of a successful socialist welfare state today, in the UK, where he is forgotten. The success of this state was because the methods used, and the philosophies behind it, did not rest on determinism, with its paralysis of the mind and the body politic

Shaw was getting old and impatient for change, and became desperate to influence events at a time when dictators were ruling the world. He was caught between the Scylla of determinist Left politics where no freedom exists at all, and the Charybdis of the Right, where freedom is absolute and rests in the individual, so his works did not

translate well into simplified polemic, either in Marxist tracts, or in the populist press of the West, and therefore, his reputation, for the moment, has suffered a decline, since we have only recently come away from such confrontations which have affected our discourse in all kinds of ways.

Those matters concerning his reputation are fundamental to our understanding of his works, our recent history, and our future. They are live questions and do not in any sense belong only to the past.

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