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Brecht’s hail Caesar: Roman history and its players reconsidered

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ABSTRACT
Brecht’s approaches to Roman history and modern historiography, and his affinity with Walter Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, are linked to his novel about Julius Caesar. Cinematic and stage adaptations of the novel are also briefly discussed, as well as the continuing timeliness of Brecht’s politically engaged art.

Forced into exile by Hitler and deprived of his German theatre audiences after 1933, playwright Bertolt Brecht became a novelist. He also drafted some of his best plays while living abroad; but once unwillingly freed from a frantic schedule of rehearsals in Berlin, without an audience awaiting his newest stage production, Brecht had time to start a few novels. In one of those novels, The Business Affairs of Mr Julius Caesar, the German author not only rewrote ancient Roman history; he also developed a new literary approach to historiography, which he shared with Walter Benjamin when the critic was developing his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’.

First came The Threepenny Novel, published in Amsterdam in 1934 and New York in 1938. Brecht’s satiric fiction based on his play, The Threepenny Opera, went into far more comic detail than its stage source, as the criminal Macheath became a banker and fulfilled a dream of legalized theft that he only briefly voiced in Brecht and Weill’s 1928 musical play. The beggar king Jeremiah Peachum also became a more legitimate businessman; besides cornering the market on street solicitations, he sold the navy a substandard transport ship (‘The Optimist’) that sank 11 hours after it was launched.

In this period, Brecht also began to write a novel inspired by Frankfurt School intellectuals; the Tui project was not completed, nor was the novel about Caesar. Conceived in 1938, The Business Affairs of Mr Julius Caesar deserves more attention than it has received from English language critics, now that it has finally appeared in Charles Osborne’s felicitous translation. The novel’s incompleteness may account for its prior neglect by translators. German readers could have previewed this historical fiction as early as 1949, when a fragment appeared in the journal Sinn und Form. A longer though still incomplete text was printed posthumously. According to Hans Mayer, the playwright indicated in his last years (ending in 1956) that he was too busy with theatre at the Berliner Ensemble to return to the Caesar project and complete it.

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Flaubert didn't finish *Bouvard and Pechuchet* either; but enough pages are there, in Brecht's case as in Flaubert's, to convey the wonderful conceit behind the novel. The text shows Brecht in exceptional form as he develops a new approach to ancient Roman history. His four-part story of Caesar's business affairs, followed by an outline for further chapters, revolves around a Roman historian's efforts to write a life of Julius Caesar. The nameless biographer begins his research 20 years after his 'idol's' assassination, and interviews a number of aged Caesar associates whose recollections do not flatter the man. Testimony comes from a bailiff turned banker, a leather merchant, a lawyer, and a poet. Spicer the banker also gives the historian a diary written by a slave who was Caesar's secretary. Besides describing a homoerotic affair with another slave, Rarus' diary recounts some of his master's financial and sexual scandals. The slave's observations provide an underclass perspective on Caesar that will not be found in other Roman histories, although Brecht consulted a number of them (Plutarch, Suetonius, Sallust, Eduard Meyer, Theodor Mommsen) before composing his fiction.

Offering 'history from below' as Rarus sees it, and describing the activity of the historian within the novel, Brecht's book functions as a metahistory, a novel about the making of history, and gives voice to the oppressed as well as the oppressor. Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin took comparable approaches to history, but the Caesar project discloses Brecht's own special way of reconstructing the past through fiction and dialectics.

Marx briefly referred to Caesar in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. After he introduced the concept of history repeating itself as tragedy and farce, he contended that French politicians had 'performed the task of their time in Roman costume and Roman phrases,' and then lost their 'resurrected Romanity – the Brutuses, Gracchi, Publicolas, the tribunes, the senators, and Caesar himself' all yielding to new forms of bourgeois government (Marx 1963, 16). Brecht's resurrection of 'Romanity' is set in ancient Rome, not eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. The central characters are Julius Caesar, his banker, his secretary (the slave Rarus), and the researcher. When he began to write *The Business Affairs of Mr Julius Caesar*, Brecht also was responding to Nazi Germany's business affairs. As Anthony Phelan notes in his introduction to the book:

In an often quite nuanced way, the novel is designed to allow the parallel history of the Weimar Republic and its decline into dictatorship to come into view through the prism of the late Republic in Rome and its similar movement towards dictatorship.

However, the novel is not simply a *roman à clef* (or the German equivalent) about twentieth-century dictatorship. Brecht never planned to portray Caesar's triumph as dictator, according to his outline appended by the book's editors.

The story of Julius Caesar's activity before he became emperor, recounted through lively anecdotes, fictitious interviews, and commentary inspired by Brecht's historical research, reveals a 'great man of history' who was far from secure politically or financially. While the Roman historian whom we meet at the beginning of the book idolizes Caesar, his idol is shattered, or at least tarnished considerably in the course of the nameless historian's investigations. Henry Fielding's description of the criminal Jonathan Wild might also fit the Caesar shown here: his 'greatness consists in bringing all manner of mischief on mankind.' The mischief disclosed in testimony from those who knew the Roman leader involves land speculation, slave trade, blackmail, war profiteering, judicial corruption, philandering, and the purchase of election votes. Perhaps these are the usual prerequisites for dictatorship;
but the historian investigating Caesar’s life initially has difficulty accepting such facts about his hero. Brecht’s investigator heard a legend about pirates holding the future emperor for ransom, for example; but he discovers that Caesar was not kidnapped, he was intercepted by a patrol boat at sea when illegally transporting a cargo of slaves. After paying a fine, slave trader Caesar declared his captors ‘pirates’ and ‘had them nailed to the cross by forged orders, so they wouldn’t be able to testify against him.’ Cruel punishment, but not so unusual for Julius Caesar in this anti-heroic history.

As in some of his plays, here too Brecht distances his audience from the protagonist, and reduces the chances of empathy, by letting us hear about the man from his slave and his creditors. If there is hero worship in the novel, most of it comes from Caesar and for Caesar. Rarus’ diary records the self-congratulation in his master’s voice after the Roman stock market crashes:

Then C. said something which really surprised me. ‘But still, we were on the right track when we saw the whole thing as simply an opportunity to make money. We were looking at things in exactly the same way as the banks. That says a lot for our instinct.’

His slave’s commentaries on ‘C.’ become small comic monologs at times, and Rarus’ droll observations constitute a gentle mockery of ruthless ambition, wealth, and power. Commenting on this work and Brecht’s depictions of Roman history in plays about Coriolanus and Lucullus, Hans Mayer observed:

Brecht the playwright and novelist is not concerned with debasing the stature of heroes but in ordering the action of the hero in the total framework of social and, above all, economic conditions. Caesar, Lucullus, and Coriolanus are to be seen at every moment from the viewpoint of the plebians. (Mayer 1971, 131)

While Rarus the slave looks at economic conditions around him, Brecht allows for opponents of such ‘plebian’ views to speak within the novel too. Spicer, the banker who ends up owning the slave’s diaries, derisively notes that Rarus ‘was concerned with the commercial aspect of [Caesar’s] enterprises, and as you know, our historians are not very interested in that side of things. They haven’t got the faintest idea what short selling means.’ Brecht himself had a strong interest in ‘that side of things,’ and he presents it through a dialectic that sets different classes within the framework of his historical fiction. The novelist (call him B., as Rarus calls Caesar C.) enters into the dialectic of history by recording a slave’s words on Caesar (thesis), letting a banker comment on the slave’s diary (antithesis), and giving a historian these sources (synthesis).

B’s own role in the dialectic is underemphasized in an otherwise astute reading of the novel by Hans Mayer, who refers to the historian within the novel, but not to B. as historian behind the scenes when he notes:

The dialectics of the Caesar novel come into play in the situation of the latter-day historian whose endeavors to clarify the past are impaired during his research by the unpleasant reports of Caesar’s banker and by the notebooks of his administrator Rarus. The apologetics is contrasted with the economics. (Mayer 1971, 130–31)

The administrative secretary and the banker ‘impair’ the vision of the historian who wants to see Caesar as a hero. But B. also influences the historian, by changing his attitude toward history. Eventually, the Roman accepts a new view of historiography which may be Brecht’s too. Looking back at the time he interviewed the banker who knew Caesar, the historian recognizes that:
I didn't share his innate interest in convoluted business deals, or in business deals of any sort. At that time I didn't realize that a purely economic analysis of a great political event – an occurrence of significance to the history of the world – could offer genuine insights. (Brecht 2016, 155)

So the man writing history learns a new way to see it. Of course Brecht's own view is not 'purely economic,' if only because he also considers Caesar's many dalliances with women. Like Brecht's Macheath, Julius Caesar does not allow business affairs to deter him from love affairs.

Around the same time B. started his Caesar project, the exiled playwright worked on a poetic version of The Communist Manifesto, some lines of which articulated his preference for dialectical and working class history:

The great subversive teachers of the people, participating in its struggle, Add the history of the ruled class to that of the ruling classes. (Arendt 1968, 238)

The slave's diary entries constitute one voice of 'the ruled class' channeled through B. (a 'subversive teacher' himself) with ironic humor. Describing the position of Caesar on accumulating debts, the diarist sounds a lot like Brecht offering asides in The Threepenny Novel when he (the slave) observes:

It's the same in politics as in real commercial life. Small debts are no credentials, but large debts place things in a different light. A man who owes a really considerable amount enjoys respect. He is no longer the only one who worries about the money he owes; his creditors do, too.

Caesar was certainly a great man insofar as his debts were great. By 92 BC, we are told, Caesar owed his banker 30 million sesterces. You could buy a good cook, according to the banker, for 100,000 sesterces. But Caesar had trouble keeping his kitchen staff, judging from the novel's account of his finances. To the worker who reads history in a Brecht poem and asks: 'Caesar defeated the Gauls./Did he not have so much as a good cook with him?' (Brecht 2016, 3–4), this novel might reply: the general could only afford a cook because the treasury of the Gauls and other conquests paid for it.

Walter Benjamin's lucid 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' written with a knowledge of the Caesar novel in progress, might be read as a companion text to Brecht's Business Affairs. B. and W. B. share an interest in new forms of Marxist history and historiography: Benjamin through his theses and Brecht through his fictive construction of a Roman historian's research. In an introduction to the novel, Anthony Phelan notes that at the time the playwright first heard of Benjamin's death in August 1941, Brecht wrote he had been reading his friend's 'little treatise [that] deals with historical research, and could have been written after reading my CAESAR…. [Benjamin] rejects the notion of history as a continuum, the notion of progress as a mighty enterprise undertaken by cool, clear heads' (Brecht 2016, 17). Their two approaches to history shared the premise Benjamin formulated in his theses that 'the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge. In Marx it appears as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden,' (Benjamin 1968, 260) In Brecht's novel, the slave's diary constitutes the main 'depository of historical knowledge.' Perhaps this helps explain why the historian within the novel recedes into the background after he begins to read Rarus' diary. During the historian's last appearance, he holds 'the roll comprising Rarus’ diaries for the years 94 and 95’ while ‘lost in thought.’ From Rarus, we learn the inside story of the rising politician's campaigns, his investments in property he can't afford,
his alignment with both sides of a political conspiracy (‘he’s so adaptable!’), and hear about the future emperor borrowing money from his slave.

If the Coen brothers wanted to make a film about Julius Caesar (which their recent film, Hail, Caesar! is not), the farcical sequences in Brecht’s novel might be a place to begin. The German satirist’s portrait is far richer in financial ironies and leftist perspective than the recent Coen comedy about Hollywood and its Roman history films. Brecht and Benjamin both saw promise in cinema as a new form through which to reach audiences, and in 1942, the playwright outlined a scenario for a film, Caesar’s Last Days, that would have drawn on his own prose; but no one in Hollywood (where he lived at the time) bought it.

A German film based on Brecht’s Caesar novel was directed by Danielle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub in 1972. History Lessons opens with a modern day interviewer driving his car through Rome. Then actors dressed as ancient Italians speak at length about Caesar, their text taken from Brecht’s novel. I had the privilege of seeing this film in Berlin in the mid-1970s, when its minimalist esthetic and long sequences of an automobile crossing the hills of Rome were not appreciated by spectators. A good percentage of the audience walked out before the end.

Brecht also thought about writing a Caesar play before working on his novel. While one can only speculate how his play would have differed from Shakespeare’s, it would be interesting to see a contemporary playwright adapt Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar with excerpts from B.’s novel (Rarus’ diary, for example) incorporated in scenes titled ‘Caesar, the Early Years.’ Brecht’s iconoclastic view of Julius Caesar actually started taking shape on stage in 1928, when The Threepenny Opera’s ‘Solomon Song’ warned listeners:

You saw the gallant Caesar next
You know what he became
They deified him in his life
Then had him murdered just the same…. (Brecht 1979, 65)

The newly translated novel hardly deifies Julius Caesar – quite the contrary. His standing in history and drama may never be the same for those who read this account of the Roman leader’s business affairs. When Shakespeare’s Caesar asks to ‘have men about me that are fat,’ because lean and hungry-looking men like Cassius think too much and are dangerous, he now sounds like Brecht’s man to me. There are major differences; unlike Shakespeare’s Caesar, Brecht’s C. is not shown at the height of his power, he never gets there. Nor is he assassinated.

Throughout the novel C. survives by outmaneuvering his rivals with lies, bribes, backroom negotiations, and high finance. While Pompey at war conquers Asia, Brecht’s Caesar conquers Pompey’s wife. Caesar pursues a military campaign in Spain because he cannot afford to face his debtors in Rome, and he can profit from Spanish silver mines. He finds it opportune to favor peace after ‘revelations that Pompey (and, not far behind him, Lucceius and some others) had exploited the last war for financial gain.’ But in Brecht’s outline for the remainder of his novel, the businessman subsequently ‘conducts his [Gallic war] campaigns in accordance with the advice of his banker Spicer, [and] he makes a considerable amount of money.’ Caesar’s ‘banker informs the general that his main profit will flow not from the pockets of the Gauls but from those of the Romans. He will earn money from every supply contract and every soldier.’
While Brecht may have had Hitler’s Germany in mind when thinking about Caesar, his wry view of Roman economic and political history also anticipated current transactions. The novelist’s vocabulary evokes the contemporary world of monopoly capital and devastating foreign wars in its references to capital flight (’Kapitalflucht’ in B.’s German), Roman stock market crashes (’Börsenkrash’), war casualties in Asia, unemployed war veterans, and wealthy men ruling a country full of poverty and underpaid (in this case slave) labor (Brecht 1957, 70, 183). Today with Wall Street and global corporate practices under fire, this acerbic account of Julius Caesar’s dark money and Rome’s income inequality deserves a new audience. Brecht provocatively imagines an ancient banker-dependent autocracy with business practices that do not entirely differ from our own. And while the book may be fiction, it calls into question the historical accuracy of other studies that neglect the Roman general’s financial maneuvers.

Economic, not military triumphs are seen as the general’s primary achievement. The outline for final chapters of this historical fiction concludes when Romans fearful of Pompey urge Caesar to cross the Rubicon River so he can protect their moneychangers’ stalls. After weeks of hesitation, negotiation with bankers, and a nervous breakdown, Caesar is carried across the Rubicon in a ‘state of semi-consciousness.’ The great man ‘isn’t always himself,’ we are told, especially when he is at the mercy of others. If anyone besides desperate Roman financiers hails Caesar at the conclusion of Brecht’s novel, it should be readers who welcome a radical, often comic alternative to the triumphalist fiction of prior histories.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Joel Schechter teaches theatre history at San Francisco State University. His most recent book is Eighteenth-Century Brechtians: Theatrical Satire in the Age of Walpole (University of Exeter Press).

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