

## Extracts from 'Unpolitical Letters'

After a series of disappointments, caused by enemies within and without, the lower-middle classes of my home country, the numerous cast of small businessmen, shopkeepers, subaltern officers, painters and decorators, students, etc., decided it was time for great deeds. Some of their own people had explained to them that their miserable situation – they were all more or less bankrupt – was the product of an all too materialistic attitude to life; and so they now hoped to construct an existence worthy of a human life by means of a powerful effort of idealism, that is to say, by an unlimited eagerness for self-sacrifice. They did not doubt that something was to be gained from this, for each individual. They recognised that, without leadership, they were just a flock of sheep. 'If we're not firmly bullied, yelled at, slapped across the face, we'll stay as we are, miserable snivellers,' they said, 'it just won't do.' Luckily, a Führer was to hand and they handed power over to him. Every expectation was now directed towards the question, what did he have in store for them? The Führer had so far only mentioned his programme in passing, in part because otherwise unworthy rogues might have pilfered it, in part for other reasons. His followers had not asked him, on the one hand because that might have damaged the Führer principle, on the other because they reckoned: what use is the finest programme if you don't have the power to put it into practice! As soon as the Führer had the power he announced the programme: it turned out to be a very festive programme. To a large, very large, extent it consisted of ceremonies and celebrations, but there were other events as well, of two sorts: above all the unity of the people was to be manufactured. This unity had left something to be desired for a few decades, more precisely a few centuries, since things had not been going equally well for all parts of the nation: some earned

too much, others a little and the rest hardly anything. That had caused disunity. It was to be stopped. According to the Führer's grand idea, it was *no longer* to cause disunity. The other, substantial, part of the Führer's programme consisted in draining a few marshes. (Since, unfortunately, there were no marshes in the country, they had to be created first before this great cultural deed could be undertaken.) In addition, in order to give the finances a boost, the houses were to be repaired. The Führer had originally been a house painter, so this idea occurred to him almost naturally; every painter knows that there's nothing so profitable as house repairs. The execution of this vast programme in its three parts demanded, of course, huge efforts on the part of the entire populace, as well as that idealism I mentioned. Without that kind of idealism you cannot embark on programmes like this.

These developments, accompanied by a few little incidents, rendered my own presence in the country problematic. In my nature I am incapable of surrendering myself confidently to great and inspiring feelings, I am not up to energetic leadership, so I began to feel quite superfluous. Asking around in my immediate circle, and on a couple of visits, I became aware that now, as happens from time to time in the life of a nation, a truly great epoch was dawning, where people like me would just mess up the bigger picture. They promised, it is true, to protect me against the rage of the people in a camp specially constructed for the purpose, and even to give me a *völkisch* re-education, but I felt, nonetheless, that such offers were no evidence of a real love for me or for my sort. Besides, I wanted to pursue my studies on human progress and culture, and so I left the country and took to the road.

On my travels I came first to Vienna. [...]

At the time everyone was talking about the events in my home country. People reacted with horror to the persecution of the Jews and the book burnings. There was a consensus that a new age of barbarism was approaching. The horrors were the consequences of a despicable warlike spirit which had, in some mysterious way, achieved the upper hand. It was a natural catastrophe, comparable with an earthquake. Some nineteen years previously something

similar had occurred, another natural catastrophe; the whole world, at least insofar as it was civilised, had attempted for four long years, not without some success, to butcher one another, following yet again some dark, barbaric urge. Today, as then, the voice of reason, common sense and humanity was drowned out by a terrible, bestial voice, the voice of barbarism. In one part of humanity, perhaps the young, or the uneducated, a quite particularly warlike spirit seemed to slumber, which, awakened, was fit to turn the continent into a slaughterhouse. There were, however, guilty ones. Certain wealthy types and parties had not undertaken enough to banish this spirit and to maintain the rule of the nobler spirit. Their weakness and corruption was generally recognised and deplored. However, even if the consequences of the petty bourgeois revolt were painted in the blackest colours, and a long reign of terror prophesied, people were generally still convinced that now, as in the great war nineteen years ago, a few lone voices of reason in the coffee houses would prevail, the mild, the sublime, the incorruptible voices of humanity. These voices, it was said, could never be fully silenced, not by any earthly power. Some of the owners of such voices had already carefully transported them abroad, so that they could continue to be heard. I myself was recognised by some, and congratulated on my departure. [...]

I should not, however, wish that my, possibly unhappy, depiction [of the dealing in opinions in the Viennese coffee houses] should lead people to conclude that I despise these people. I know very well that their inaction proves little against them, and I don't believe they can be reproached with more than this. The society in which they live does not allow a substantially more useful occupation. Should they be judges and sit in judgement over poor devils who steal bread out of hunger, or doctors who write out useless (if cheap) prescriptions, or architects who build houses in which some human hyena can live in sixteen rooms, or those where twelve people huddle in the kitchen in order to finance that luxury? Some of those who sit here collecting opinions may well have the frailties which are required to occupy public office, and may even be prepared to do the deals which are demanded, it may be but trivial reasons which

hold them back; but others here are better people all the same, and even those I've mentioned were prevented by a generous fate from committing real acts of shame. What I objected to in their ideas was, briefly, the lack of prospects. The images these good folk made of reality were perhaps authentic, but they were no help. One might well describe the appearance of these new masters as barbaric, and call that which drove them a dark urge, but what was gained by such explanations? These explanations sufficed perhaps to induce a certain melancholy, but were hardly designed to teach how we should overcome the situation. People may judge me as they will, but in the thought processes of the banished and endangered I increasingly felt the absence of any radical advantage over the thought processes of the banishers and persecutors. Indeed, the one was the raw voice of barbarism, it was raw and stupid, the other was the voice of culture, it was mellifluous but also stupid. The one lot had many weapons and used them, the others had only reason as a weapon, and did not use it. I departed from the land of culture more depressed than I had arrived - from the land of barbarism.

[*Unpolitische Briefe*, BFA 22/11-17.]

This is part of a larger, uncompleted piece (a surviving plan lists eleven parts of which this is a shortened version of just one). Brecht spent some time in Vienna in March 1933 and then moved on to Switzerland and then Denmark. The essay probably dates from the autumn of 1933 and may be one of the first pieces he wrote in Denmark. Many subsequent projects go over similar ground, in terms both of themes and of motifs.

A satirical nickname for Hitler, in reference to his one-time artistic pretensions, was *der Anstreicher*, the house painter. Brecht makes frequent allusions to this and to Hitler's ability to 'paint over the cracks'. A programme of repairs was indeed a part of the early Nazi work creation programme. The 'marshes' are likewise a recurrent Brechtian image for the economic morass into which capitalism and Nazism led the German people (compare *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, etc.).