

The Feudal Bourgeoisie Conflict: An Overview through the Case of Timon of Athens

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The students of British history know that the causes of the Baron's war were factional interests. No considerations of financial gains had entered the war among the feudal Barons. But later the commercial interests began to dominate other factors such as morality, honour or even religion. England's war with France and the subsequent treaty were both caused by the considerations of gains to be made in terms of trade and other commercial activities. The Bastard is railing against that. Likewise in Henry Part II we get these lines spoken by the king :

See, sons, what things
You are:
How quickly nature falls into revolt,
When gold becomes here object:
For this the foolish over – careful fathers,
Have broke their sleep with thoughts,
Their brains with care, their bones with industry;
For this they have engrossed and pil'd up,
The cank' red heaps of strange achieved gold,
For this they have been thoughtful to invest,
Their sons with arts and martial exercises,
When, like the bee, tolling from every flowers.
The virtuous sweets,

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Our things with wax, our mouths with honey
pack'd,
we bring it to the hive, and, like the bees,
Are murd' red for our pains,
This bitter taste,
Yields his engrossments to the ending father.
(King Henry IV, Part II, IV, V).

The pattern which emerges from all such utterances is revealing whenever an opportunity comes his way, Shakespeare makes it a point to indict the culture of gold hunters. And this culture as we have seen was brought about by the middle classes and the new aristocracy with trade lives. Shakespeare's Timon of Athens, brings out the culture of greed and gold hunting most powerfully. No wonder that Marx, while talking of the compelling power of money in the bourgeoisie society, should cite the play as an example. Timon of Athens brings under focus the gravest hurt done to Timon by his 'friends' and associates. It is, however, not a play of false friendship. What is important is that it is blatant greed and self seeking which make the 'friends' profess friendship or betray friendship. One might say that Timon is weak and inefficient. He fails to protect his interests. His 'friends' show all the qualities of efficiency; they never fumble in protecting their interests. It is Timon's generosity that makes him vulnerable to exploitation by his self seeking 'friends'. They easily betray his trust, robe him of his gold, and then forsake him. Thus betrays, Timon

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Runs away from the town civilization Athens, and finds refuge in a cave in the forest. Disgust and disillusionment, privacy and isolation - that in the cross that Timon, the modern day Christ figure has to carry. One of the servants thus describes the rejection of Timon by his self seeking friends:

As we do turn our backs,
From our companion, thrown into his grave,
So his familiars to his buried fortunes,
Slink all away; leave their false yours with him,
Like empty purses, pick'd; and his poor self,
A dedicated beggar to the air, with his disease of
all Shunn'd poverty,
Walks, like contempt, alone.
(Timon of Athens)

Flavius, who remains faithful to his master till the end, points up the one sin of which Timon is guilty, the one sin the society of self seekers cannot condone:

Poor honest lord, brought low by his own heart;
Undone by goodness: Strange unusual blood,
When man's worst sin is he does too much good
(Timon of Athens)

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Therein lie the seeds of Timon's tragedy. He takes a course which runs counter to the accepted code of the bourgeois society. Apemantus defines this code for us right at the beginning of the play. We have this exchange of seeds between him and the merchant:

Apemantus: Art not thou a merchant?
Merchant: Ay Apemantus.
Apemantus: Traffic confound thee, if, gods will not.
Merchant; If traffic do it, the gods do it.
Apemantus: Traffic's they god, and thy god
confound thee:
(Timon of Athens)

Timon's Athens functions as the metaphor of a society where the name of the presiding deity is traffic, that is trade. Shakespeare keeps this metaphor alive all through the play. The Atheneans, barring Timon and a few others show an inordinate greed for gold. All other values stand subordinated to the value of gold. The scene three of Act four finds Timon digging for roots. He stumbles upon a pot of gold. Thus he speaks:

Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold? No, gods,
I am no idle votarist, Roots you clear heavens:
Thus much of this will make black, white, foul fair,
Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant.

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Ha, you gods: why this? What, this, you gods?
Why this
Will lug your priests and servants from your sides,
Pluck stout men's pillows from below their heads –
This yellow slave,
.....
.....
O thou sweet king – killer, and dear divorce,
'Twixt natural son and sire: than bright defiler,
Of Hymen's purest bed; than valiant Mars;
Thou ever young, fresh, lov'd, and delicate wooer,
Whose blush dath thaw the consecrated show,
.....
.....
May have the world in empire.
(Timon of Athens)

The full significance of these utterances comes through when we lace them in the historical field. In the first instance, gold has the power to change a person's degree. It has the power to confer on a person a position

which is the exact opposite of his true identity. Gold can make fair foul and foul fair. The earlier society had put a person's hereditary status above all else. Certain traditional and relations had been

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Accepted as sacrosanct. With the rise of the middle classes a new measuring standard came into being: it was gold. Gold could give to a person a place altogether different from the one to which he had been born. The prospects of profit began to over ride all other consideration. In the second citation a person is being seen as slave to gold, the new God. Timon's utterances gain weight if we place them alongside utterances to the same point in other plays. In the Comedy of Errors, for example, we get these lines spoken by Adriana:

I see the jewel best enamelled
Will lose his beauty; yet the gold bides still
That others touch and, often touching, will
Where gold; and no man that hath a name
By falsehood and corruption doth it shame.

.....
.....

(Comedy of Errors)

Again, in King John, we get the following lines spoken by Philip the Bastard:

Mad world: mad kings: mad composition
John, to stop Arthur's title in the whole,
Hath willingly departed with a part,
And France, whose armour conscience
buckled on,

.....

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.....

To a most base and vile concluded peace,
And why rail I on this commodity?

(King John)

Timon of Athens presents the clash of two cultures, one represented by Timon and the other by those that systematically rob him. Let us first think of the culture which Timon represents. Timon says: "I'm not of that feather to shake off/ My friend when he must need me". He thus offers to pay five talents to the creditors of ventidius: "I'll pay the debt, and free him". He helps Lucilius, his servant, with a gift of three talents so that he might get married to the woman he loves: "To build his fortune I will strain a little." He rebukes Apemantus when the later calls those that cheat Timon 'knaves'. Timon says to ventidius: "You mistake my love, / I gave it freely ever; and there's none/can truly says he gives, if he receives". The following words spoken by Timon define for us the code by which he links:

They were the most needless creatures living, should
We ne'er have use for'em; and would most resemble
sweet instruments hung up in cases,
that keep their sounds to themselves.
Why, I have often wish'd myself
poorer, that I might come nearer
to you. We are born to do benefits;

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And what better or properer can we call our
own than the riches of our friends? O, what a
precious comfort 'tis to have so many like brothers
commanding one antoher's fortunes: O, joy's e'en
made away ere't can be born.

Timon gives unthinkingly because he believes that it is his moral obligation to give. The irony is that in giving freely and unthinkingly Timon has run through his estate. His estate stands mortgaged to the very people who have received bounties from him. Flavius observes of Timon's plight:

What will this come to ?
He commands us to provide and give great gifts,
And all out of an empty coffer;
Nor will he know his purse, or yield me this,
.....
.....

He is so kind that he now
pays interest for it ; his land's put to their books
(Timon of Athens)

In fact, Timon shows all the marks of the earlier profligate aristocracy. By the standards of the new aristocracy is wasteful and in-efficient. Mc Alindon has drawn

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Attention to the presence of “Two antithetical character types in Shakespeare, one represented by Hamlet, Coriolanus, Timon and particularly, Richard II; the other by Fortinbras, Auphidius, and, of course, Henry V”. One could add to the list, but as it is, we get to see the pattern. We have, on the one hand, characters who are weak, inefficient, extravagant, wasteful and vulnerable. On the other hand we get to see characters who are practical and rational, who have eyes only on their own interests. Who did Shakespeare side with? Did he side with Timon, Orlando, Richard II and others, or with such people, as Iago, Cloten and those that prey upon Timon?

Now let us look at the other side of this cultural divide. In the opening scene Shakespeare introduces the motif of the cruel turn of fortune. The poet says that Timon has received the bounties of fortune, which he shares with those who come to him but fortune is a fickle mistress; when it ceases favouring a person, those who have been attending on him so long make haste to disappear. Thus the poet describes the situation:

When fortune in her shift and change of mood,
Spurns down her late beloved, all his dependants,
Which labour'd after him to the mountain's top
Even on their knees and hands, let him slip down,
Not one accompanying his declining foot.”
(Timon of Athens)

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The Renaissance society, the social historians tell us, was highly dynamic in its characters. It has been viewed as one of its attractive features. You were a lonely man one day; the next day you could be at the top of things. You were a favourite at the court one day; the next day you could be thrown into the Tower. It happened to Lord Burghley, it happened to Essex and many others. Fortune's wheel did indeed turn fast. The social historians, however generally failed to mention the ugly aspects of this social fluidity. Apemantus is more forth-right in his description of those who favour on Timon:

O you gods, what number of men eats
Timon, and he sees'em not:
It grieves me to see so many dip
Their meat in one man's blood; and
All the madness is, he cheers them up too.
I wonder mendare trust themselves with men.
Methinks they should invite them without knives:
Good for their meat and safer for their lives.
There's much example for't; the fellow that sits
next him now, parts bread with him,
pledges the breath of him in a divided
draught, is the readiest man to kill him.
'T has been proved. If I were a huge man
I should fear to drink at meals,

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Lest they should spy my wind pipe's dangerous notes,
Great man should drink with harness on their throats.
The Athenions, it would seem, are engaged in cannibalistic ritual. They are tearing Timon apart joint by joint.

As I have mentioned earlier, traffic is the God of the Athenians. It becomes apparent in scene one of Act two. A Senator enters, with papers in his hands. Thus runs his soliloquy:
And late, five thousand. To Varro and to Isidore,
He owes nine thousand; besides my former sum,
Which makes it five and twenty, still in motion,
Of raging waste? It cannot hold; it will not,
If I want gold, steal but a beggar's dog,
And give it Timon, why, the dog coins gold.
If I would sell my horse and buy twenty mules,
Better than he, why, give my horse to Timon,
Ask nothing, give it him, it foals me straight,
And able horses. No porter at his gate,
But rather one that smiles and still invites,
All that pass by. It cannot hold; no reason
can sound his state in safety.

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We have no difficulty in charting the direction of the Senator's mind from his loud thinking. No considerations of the state, no consideration of the welfare of the people, and no consideration of human relationship enter his mind. He is thinking only of the gains to be made from his transactions. The details come from the world of commerce. The Senator, it needs to be noted, represents a whole culture, the culture of the bourgeoisie. Alcibiades is aware of the commercial links of the ruling elite of Athens. His indictment of the Senators is severe:

I have kept back their foes,
While they have told their money and let out,
Their coin upon large interest, I myself,
Rich only in large hurts. All those for this?
Is this the balsam that the usuring senate.
Pours into captain's wounds?
Banishment:
It comes not ill; I hate not to be banish'd.

The Senators would rather banish an honest soldier than banish usury from the state.

There are many details in the play which are indications of the commercial interests of the Athenians, who do everything possible to destroy Timon. While Timon and Alcibiades are seen pledging their reputations and honours in order

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To receive some favour, the Athenians on the other side of the divide are seen insisting on tangible security. Thus Lucullus speaks when approached for a loan which might save Timon:

But thou art wise, and thou know'st well enough, although thou com'st to me, that this is no time to lend money, especially upon bare friendship without security.

To this Flaminia says: "Is't possible the world should so much differ/ And we alive that liv'd". One can ignore all these pointers only to one's peril. Timon of Athens takes us into the animal world of the bourgeoisie. The play like King Lear, is rich in images of snarling animals. It is also rich in details of commercial dealing. Arthur Sewall holds that Timon's generosity shows "no trace of human understanding". Sewall is in fact echoing the logic by which Timon's adversaries live. They are all practical people who will not compromise their interests in the least. Timon, on the contrary, is not a realist. He is not a thinking man, but a feeling man. His outbursts are violent much as his generosity is on restraint. Timon goes mad with rage when he realizes that the ideal of charity has no place in a "nest of vipers". He is a man way out of his time.

One might ask if it is altogether a depressive image of the time that Timon of Athens has to offer. We have no character such as Portia in this

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Play. Timon does not have it in him to speak the kind of poetry that Hamlet speaks. The poetry spoken by Hamlet redeems the oppressive, and dejected polity in which Hamlet finds himself. The poetry spoken by Timon is touched with rhetoric. But there is no denying that the play throws up issues which were of vital importance to Shakespeare's age. And there is in the play an affirmation which is radical in nature. The end of the play finds Alcibiades threatening war against the established order. He rouses to end the misrule of the power elites whose unholy alliance with "traffic" and trade stands established.

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