

**THROUGH THE EYES OF CONTEMPORARY BRITISH  
DRAMATISTS: FORMATION OF LOCAL-GLOBAL POLITICS IN  
THE NEW WORLD CONTEXT**

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**ÖZET**

Günümüz İngiltere'sinin ve dünyasının koşulları göz önüne alınarak yerel-küresel politikalar oluşturulması gereği, İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrasında, birçok İngiliz oyun yazarı tarafından üzerinde durulan bir konudur. Bu konuyu irdeleyen oyun yazarlarının eserlerinde, söz konusu amaç için güvenilir ve kabul edilebilir ilkelerin oluşturulmasının önemi üzerinde durularak, bu süreçte, çağımızın gerçekleri ile İngiltere'nin ve dünyanın özgün koşullarının doğru değerlendirilmesinin önemli olduğu vurgulanır. Bu çalışma, İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrası İngiliz oyun yazarlarının bazılarının eserlerinde, yeni dünya koşullarında yerel-küresel politikalar oluşturulmasında nelerin öne çıktığının yansıma biçimi üzerinde durmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler: çağdaş İngiliz tiyatrosu, yerel-küresel politika, yeni dünya düzeni.**

**ABSTRACT**

The need to formulate the basic principles of local-global politics taking into consideration the conditions of modern Britain and the world is reflected by a large number of contemporary British playwrights. Among the significant points observed in their plays regarding this issue is that reliable and acceptable principles are supposed to be established in the modern world. This requires that the realities of our age and the characteristic features of Britain and the world should be appraised properly. This study dwells on what comes to the fore in the formation of local-global politics in the new world context, as seen in the works of some leading post-war British playwrights.

**Key Words: modern British drama, local-global politics, new world order.**

Contemporary British dramatists overtly stress aspects of life, especially politics, in view of the needs of modern people in both Britain and the whole world. In this regard, the efforts to create an atmosphere of global

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understanding on common principles and how politicians are expected to contribute to this process have come to the fore. This article is intended to focus on the reflections of the issue of local-global politics following the loss of the Empire in the works of some particular post-war British dramatists. A certain number of those playwrights who are politically committed are included in the analysis with focus placed on the way they convey pressing questions in Britain and the world from a political viewpoint to the audience.

The interest of post-war British playwrights in issues concerning grave paradoxical features of life in the modern world as proposed in plays is not intended to cause unnecessary turmoil across the nation or the world. The dramatists only emphasize the common ground required to establish some basic assumptions concerning national and world politics at large. These assumptions are presented to be inevitable to meet the ever-changing needs of people in the global sense. When contemporary British playwrights lay emphasis on this issue, they question the respectability of politicians who have caused numerous undesirable things to happen in the world so far.

Here it should be noted that the playwrights do not appraise critically only British politicians and political ways, they relevantly present conditions stemming from political applications in many countries as well. It should also be noted that they do not disregard the difficulty of establishing proper local-global politics due to the competitive nature of relationships among nations in the modern world. Thus the playwrights of the period may be said to emphasize the forces directing the world, stressing the continuous effort of some nations to be in the forefront in the international arena.

When the place of England in the politics of the world is separately viewed as a whole, it appears, in many works of the playwrights, that the decline of British Empire has unquestionably exerted some influence upon the lives of British citizens. This influence is ultimately reflected as a cause of

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pessimism in the way citizens evaluate the nature of things in their country and the whole world. Throughout the nineteenth century, Great Britain was an intensely political country, and Westminster was, in a very real sense, the centre of the nation's life. For men of wealth, to become an M.P. was to set the final seal on a rise to respectability and power. General elections were great events; they had the excitement of colour and conflict. But after the First World War, politics became for most people a game attracting fewer players. During the war at least some young men who might have reinforced and enlivened political life were killed. It became commonplace that politicians had made the war, and that politics was a shabby or dirty business. The dreary succession of makeshifts and failures that formed the visible portion of interwar politics did nothing to lessen the revulsion. As a result, many men turned away from parliamentary politics. Some of the flight from politics must certainly have been due to the fact that the main business of government had become dull and routine. A highly able corps of civil servants, both nationally and locally, dealt with day-to-day matters according to a regular and largely unquestioned routine. Then there was a 'condition of England' question for all the poverty, all the shortcomings and injustices men felt in the thirties were not matters of minor significance from the viewpoint of a large part of the nation. (Webb, 1989: 553-555)

Added to this, following the Second World War there was an American-Russian competition to dominate Europe and the world. In fact, Europe was a more important territory for competition than any other place on earth, and eventually the United States "began to push for reorganization in Western Europe in the spring and summer of 1947" (Pons, 2001: 26). In all this process of the formation of local-global policies, Labour and Conservative parties in England also took sides. This was visualized better in ideas concerning the new formation in Europe like EU. In the past, the Conservatives had always been regarded as the pro-European party in British politics; Labour's position was much more equivocal as it has changed its stance on

several occasions. Yet change in every sphere of life exerted its influence on this issue, and Labour is now regarded as the more pro-European party, which represents a remarkable transformation of party attitudes over the past years (Gamble and Kelly, 2000: 3). But there is still criticism of EU from various quarters in Britain. Some suggest that what they have personally witnessed shows that it is as yet too early to put into effect proposals of global understanding in the real sense (Matter, 2001: 199). And all this shows that the more complicated things get in the world, the more difficult it becomes to meet the needs of the emerging situation.

British playwrights in the second half of the twentieth century approached the aforesaid issues unsurprisingly from a perspective concordant with the realities of the period. Like many of them who could not turn a blind eye to the realities brought about by the new circumstances, David Hare emphasizes the loss of the Empire as an important reason to be taken into consideration to define and evaluate properly the nature of things in modern England. In Hare's estimation, formation of local-global politics in modern England is to be based on the fact that Britain is not the former Empire. He openly notes this in *Murmuring Judges* through Irina's mouth: "What British Empire? Hasn't word reached you? It no longer exists" (91). Hare also explicitly reflects that as "a world power Britain's status has fallen greatly" (Webb, 1989: 616) through the scene between Anson and Maggie in *Teeth 'n' Smiles*:

ANSON: You never seem very happy to have been English.  
What would you rather have been?

MAGGIE: American.

ANSON: Why?

....

MAGGIE: America is a crippled giant, England a sick gnome.

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Howard Brenton, too, questions in *Magnificence* the decline of power and “England’s role in the world” (80) demonstrating that the stance to be taken at present should be in accordance with the realities of the time. He tells in *The Churchill Play* that he is not pleased to see that “The British Army’s got politicised” (128). This appraisal is also indicative of the observation that there is an apparent need to reorganize the political system in the country.

As it will clearly be seen from what is said above, citizens in modern England are not so content to have to confess that the role of Britain has decreased considerably with the decline of its power in the international arena. Hare and Brenton look at the issue from this perspective and reflect the complexities of twentieth century Britain and the world. In this regard, revealing proper interpretations of the undeniable place of politics in the life of the community, they bring to the notice of the audience a number of appraisals including the criticism of the involvement of the army in politics. They make public that the changing nature of the conditions in the world must be considered with due care and attention in the formation of local-global politics in modern England. They espouse to view the supposition that politicians should do their best on the subject of the requirements caused by changes effecting the lives of modern British people. Their point of significance is that in order to be able to supervise the public by the book in such a period, those in charge of community service should be far-sighted and should weigh up all the consequences in matters with regard to public life.

The relation between military and political powers dealt with by Brenton was an important facet of the set of conditions in countries involved in World War II. At the very beginning of the search for an idiom to articulate the emerging situation, there was a deliberate intention to identify those who were responsible for the outbreak of the war. John Whiting’s play, *Marching Song*, is worth considering in view of the approach it brings to the ambiguous status of powers controlling the fate of nations and directing them to uncertainties. As

Whiting delineates through Cadmus, a prime minister may sometimes have to accept the fact that he is not totally free in actions and decisions concerning his country and the pressure of forces both within and without the country may be felt deeply:

You may or may not know that modern government is based not on theory or even practical policy but on emotion. This country has been compelled to accept that system of government from the conquerors. It is known as democratic. It means that I have an opposition party. This, of course, is a great novelty. My opposition party is liberal minded, and they have all the savagery possessed by good men. They say it is love but they bare their teeth when pronouncing the word. (277)

Whiting's play elucidates that there was a time when even politicians in some countries felt that they were controlled by powers outside themselves. This has much to do with the influence of some mighty nations on the international sphere. What makes Cadmus sacrifice a commander is the apparent paradox in the principles of the new order in countries involved in the war. Political uneasiness having been deeply felt by those in power, a kind of professed justice had to be put into effect in place of so-called injustice. Cadmus' following comment, an answer to Catherine, accusing him of murdering Rupert Forster on Rupert's forceful suicide, is reminiscent of how international powers can control a state, and indicates the controlled nature of establishing local-global politics highlighting the undeniable influence of international powers:

We're all victims of injustice, Catherine, every moment of our lives. We can shut ourselves in the day and lie awake at night dreaming of revenge. But revenge against whom? Against each other? Why? Forster had great cause to dream in that way. It was an injustice that we had to imprison him, and he had reasons to sit in that camp in the hills thinking up ways of reckoning. But he didn't do that. All he wanted was to be taken back into the service of the world. The world wouldn't have him so he turned away. In acceptance. (320)

A prominent playwright that could rightly be labelled as the leading figure of post-war British drama, John Osborne does not neglect the importance of formation of local-global politics in his representation of the modern world in his plays. Osborne is aware that the power of England in directing the affairs of the world is not the same as it once was, and professes it in *Déjàvu*: “No wonder we were trounced at Suez” (333). But he believes that modern British people cannot mourn continuously for the things their forefathers had in the past and they cannot possess at present. He is of the opinion that citizens of Britain must not lose their hope of a better future just looking at the lost glory of the past. That is why, while bringing to the stage the hardships of people in modern British society, he implies that life is not much easier in other parts of the world. In *Déjàvu* he also questions the lifestyles of individuals and stresses the significance of being a member of the public, or rather, being a member of “the human race” (289). This is a very crucial point noting the duty of politicians who are to formulate the details of local-global politics for the whole world paying attention to human nature and expectations of the public.

In his description of the list of urgent things to be taken into account by politicians, Osborne dwells on a number of issues, from new world conditions to the importance of effective interpersonal relationships. He emphasizes the inevitability of caring about human health when he discusses at length where and how governments should spend money in *Déjàvu*. He notes that the money spent on a “vile industry could go to providing a thousand kidney machines” (297). This observation is intended to warn those in power in developed countries that they should restructure the scope of political applications both at a local and global level, and should “bring human emotion back into the centre of cultural life” (Rebelatto, 1999: 32). In the play, Osborne reminds the public of the notion that the prime responsibility of a politician is to look for effective and applicable means to “create a better and more just society”. (355)

What Osborne and many other British dramatists following him want to reflect in their plays is the ultimate need to provide mankind with a better way of life in every respect. This does not, in any way, mean that they criticize every aspect of life in their country and the world. They only long for betterment in social areas needing improvement, and remind the basic responsibility of politicians in their community service. Osborne openly declares this in *The World of Paul Slickey* in an ironic way: “So there are such things as trust, loyalty, honest intentions” (221). And he asks at the end of the play: “Why is there no justice in this world?” (271). This question reflects openly the importance of the formation of local-global politics to improve human life in every possible way and to urge politicians to think about the issue in a more responsible manner.

Arnold Wesker, on the other hand, looks at the issue of politics from a viewpoint including not abstract terms but visible happenings. In his appraisal of the state of affairs in the world following World War II, he notes that political idealism is not to be only propaganda, and suggests that examples in application should initiate people into certain decisions. In this context, he brings supporters of socialism in Britain to the stage in *Chicken Soup with Barley* and claims that what the characters dedicated themselves to has not given real satisfaction to individual members of British society. Witnessing “what happened in Hungary” (71) naturally puts them into an absolute froth of anxiety. Disappointed at what Russians did in Hungary, Ronnie, presenting the writer’s thoughts in the play, tells his mother Sarah, who is still a passionate supporter of socialism, that his mind is so complicated that he does not know what to believe in any longer:

What has happened to all the comrades, Sarah? I even blush when I use that word. Comrade! Why do I blush? Why do I feel ashamed to use words like democracy and freedom and brotherhood? They don’t have any meaning any more ... I was going to be a socialist writer. I can’t make sense of a word, a



simple word. You look at me as if I'm talking in a foreign language. (71)

Wesker's above expression reflects the conviction that it is not so easy to formulate political movements that will inspire millions of people with a feeling of continuous contentment. This is presented as the most challenging problem underlying the formation of local-global politics in the modern world. In fact, as seen in this expression, the playwright delineates the difficulty of people looking for a political idealism suiting their nature best. Although individuals are, in a sense, in a position to follow this or that path when it comes to dedicating themselves to political systems, they are not actually sure that they are doing the right thing. Drawing attention to this dilemma in the modern world, Wesker emphasizes the point that the significance of political movements in the minds of individuals is directly related with the ultimate effects of what is put into practice. However much a political system may dominate the world, its proper evaluation is the one assessed by individual minds. Here it is important to note that the playwright's messages concerning the defects of political systems are not meant only for socialism, Wesker includes also capitalistic systems in his criticism noting that they force people to live in a cut-throat world. He shows this by making Dave and Ada seek a life in the green countryside of Britain in *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*. Dave's criticism of life in a capitalist society and his confession that they "can't change it" (164) is indicative of the writer's belief that individuals have enough reasons to try to get rid of the spiritual damage done by capitalism.

Edward Bond, occupying a distinguished place with his centre of attention on a critical evaluation of today's world, takes this topic into consideration from a variety of viewpoints. In his analysis of happenings in the modern world regarding the function of theatre, he comments that there needn't be a world war in order to get a theatre and find what opportunities there are to do social work in theatre. Pointing out that violence "shapes and obsesses"

(Innes, 1982: 200) contemporary British society, he lays finger on the need for a wide range of precautions to be taken if life is supposed to be maintained in an ideal order. In *Summer*, reflecting how unbearable conditions may sometimes be in the world just to satisfy the greed and passion in the minds of some politicians, he notes that the politics of the world after the Second World War is not to be built on enmities experienced in the past. Although his citizens also suffered a lot from destruction caused by Germans during the war, Bond notes that what happened was a political affair, and Germans as a race are not to be blamed for the outbreak of the war. He stresses in the play “how man can reshape experience from the circumstances the world provides” (Lappin, 11), and generalizes the dominant characteristic structure of man’s behaviour for all peoples of the world:

Men are animals. We can’t be trusted with another man’s wife or his money. Not even with our own daughters. No one’s safe on our streets at night. If we don’t get our fodder we whine. What saves us from ourselves? Culture. The standards of our fathers. They struggled for centuries to make them strong. (35)

Bond does not only focus on wars while bringing to the stage the need for proper local-global political improvements, he attracts attention to the difficulty of creating an atmosphere of peace among individuals belonging to different races and nationalities as well. This perspective is inserted in *Grandma Faust*, the first part of *A-A-America!*, to remind the audience of the situation peoples of the modern world are to deal with properly. His description of the whiteman’s eyes, from Paul’s mouth, is supposed to create a rather emotional spiritual mood:

I looked in the whiteman’s eyes an I felt you curl up like something in the fire. It was so long an grey behind his eyes an I looked an felt you jip up in me like a humpity horse but I jist had t’ state – it went back so far inside his head like there was an old wide wide plain stretchin way off till it come t’ the edge of the sky but there weren’t no sky there jist the bars of a cage. (21)

Bond also suggests the important role of justice in the formation of local-global politics. In ‘Author’s note’ of the second play of *A-A-America!*, *The Swing*, he expresses his personal ideas on the importance of acceptable terms of political applications for all, and notes that if people

enjoy the benefits of an unjust society, and seek their security in maintaining it, then they are responsible for the great injustices that always follow from little injustices. Those who sniggered at the broken windows of a Jewish shop in 1933 are responsible for Auschwitz. They made the building of Auschwitz possible – just as they did the destruction of their homes. We, too, are responsible for the injustice of our daily life – and therefore for the nuclear bomb sites that our leaders build. The bombs will be used to destroy our enemies and ourselves unless we change our society so that we may live justly. (33-34)

As seen above, the dramatist finds it difficult to accept how passively people can accept such threats as nuclear bombs to humanity and puts the blame on those people who avoid responsibility for taking actions in the name of all humanity. This is a crucial point reflecting the playwright’s belief that political applications at present do not include the participation of all people who should have a word on issues directly affecting their lives. He thinks that this is the shameful picture of humanity, and demonstrates this helpless condition of modern people in quite an insulting way, as seen in Greta’s expression in *The Swing*: “We live on the border between civilization and barbarism”. (41)

Formation of local-global politics is an area of interest closely related with also the investment in man for Bond. Since he feels himself as “undeniably a part of an active and innovative period in modern British theatre” (Spencer, 1981: 123), Bond wants his plays to include messages having universal validity as regards social as well as political issues. Trying to create a distinctive voice in theatre and being firmly committed to humanitarian values, he tries to reflect as much as he can the controversial appearance of the modern world. He includes deeply rooted problems of today’s world in his description and truthful representation of the issues concerning human life. In his attempt to present

representations of the reality of modern people, he makes suggestions in a politically responsible manner. To underline people's needs is almost an obsession for him. His concern for the complexities of his fellow citizens leads him to define, in a proverbial style, the inevitability of close interest in the way individuals are to be viewed in a society, as expressed by Trench in *The Worlds*: "What you invest in a man is what you get from him" (13).

By examining the notion of investment in man in the play, one can deduce that the playwright firmly emphasizes what modern societies need more than anything else. Bond believes that this problem cannot be avoided continuously, and focuses on the significance of organizations in societies whose cause of existence depends on this purpose. He is obviously in favour of organizations working hard to eliminate the destructive effects of corruption resulting mostly from mismanagement. He wants policy makers to take this crucial point into consideration while making decisions on matters affecting lives of individuals at large. It is also important to note that he does not limit the scope of this concept to Britain only, he includes all world countries in it, specially designating western societies. He pays extraordinary attention to the case of those backward countries in the above-mentioned play, presenting an impartial perspective bringing to the fore the deplorable conditions of life there: "Possible yet it becomes increasingly irrational resources are wasted and poorer countries. Plundered while their people starve people. Are forced to seek their ends. Without regard for the common good human relations. Are destroyed organization breaks down western society no. Longer works ...". (23-24)

Not being content with the process the world has been undergoing, Bond wants more effective policies to be applied, and believes that there is still a possibility to do so. He puts forward his ideas connected with this issue in *The Worlds* as follows: "If we knew what we are the world would change very fast. The little voice of truth" (44-45). He adds that the "world that can't change loses all that it has". (67)

In Bond's estimation, the ultimate outcome of the formation of local-global politics should aim at initiating people into placing peace and solidarity in relationships among world nations. As an individual witnessing the destructive effects of all means involving violent actions, the dramatist stresses the importance of establishing peaceful means in every single affair concerning human life. He claims that political as well as public institutions that are supposed to exert some influence on the lives of individuals are largely responsible for the increase in terrorist activities. He is afraid, as seen in *The Worlds*, that if terrorist activities cannot be prevented, all "the advantages our fathers worked for –our silence and technology– could be perverted to evil ends" (61). Thus he maintains on the topic of terrorist activities that if "the public saw it as politics we'd be lost" (61). In addition, his ideas about terrorism are reminiscent of the notion that the politicians are supposed to find ways of preventing undesirable occurrences in societies. Bond announces that "beautiful phrases" (69) of politicians cannot help solve urgent problems of the public, and asks them to feel the responsibility of the public-centred operations of their occupation.

Race relations, one of the most grasping aspects of the formation of local-global politics Bond refers to in *A-A-America!*, too, must not be disregarded in any evaluation of life in the modern world. David Edgar's play, *Our Own People*, also dwells on this issue, which is of prime importance for the modern world. As far as Edgar is concerned, the argument sometimes becomes so complicated that it may create controversies in even developed countries. This is not peculiar only to England; in a world undergoing a continuous change and mobility, more relevant principles are to be established for race relations. Otherwise, as Edgar asserts in his play, there is bound to be a worse problem to solve for all humanity. When Edgar focuses on the question of employment in view of race relations in a society, he proposes that there should be more acceptable terms for all sides included in the area under consideration. He

illustrates the prominence of this concept calling attention to the necessity of “equal opportunities” (9) for all in modern societies.

Edgar’s insistence on equality for all individuals is of a character pointing out the assumption that there is still a lot to do to found politically perfect communities in the modern world. It most probably seems that the playwright does not feel very hopeful of the success of policies in application either in his own country or in the rest of the world regarding race relations. Assuming that the problems witnessed in this matter are mostly of political origin, he inevitably and directly puts the blame on politicians who have not been capable of organizing modern societies in a manner that provides the necessities of public well-being without any discrimination.

Tom Stoppard should also be mentioned among those playwrights viewing politics in connection with public well-being. His ironic expression about Mussolini in *The Real Thing* indicates that the first and foremost objective of politics should be public service: “People used to say about Mussolini, he may be a Fascist, but at least the trains run on time. Makes you wonder why British Rail isn’t totally on time” (49). Besides, while making a mixture of genuine and spacious complaints about corruption in every sphere of life in the modern world, Stoppard points towards that “war is profits, politicians are puppets, Parliament is a farce, justice is a fraud” (53), which openly shows that politics in Britain and the world needs reformulating in essence. He remarks that it is high time politicians obeyed the rules of politics, which he believes should have a moral side.

The above belief leads Stoppard to note that people in underdeveloped countries should be convinced that they do not need to imitate Western ways in every detail of their daily lives. He is sure that this is not the way globalization is to be established for all peoples of the world. Thus he regrets to say that there has been a tendency in many poor nations of the world to think that everything

in European countries is perfect, which is a totally misleading conviction. In *Indian Ink* his criticism of an Indian artist, who finds it difficult to answer the question, “Why do you like everything English?” (43), is of a nature pointing out that politics of the world must urgently be redefined properly in the local-global sense.

Yet Stoppard’s criticism does not necessarily mean that modern British playwrights are dissatisfied with the notion that their country should be a leading one in world affairs and be a perfect example as a state in the modern world. Therefore, it should be borne in mind that what they do is to express their “fears of a general queering of culture”. (Rebelatto, 1999: 223)

There are many other plays of the playwrights dealing with the focal point of this study, some of whose works are included in this article. Besides, there are a good many other contemporary British playwrights giving messages in connection with the issue of formation of local-global politics. It is practically impossible to refer to all of them here; however, it should at least be noted that each related play focuses on a different aspect of the issue, which means that formation of local-global politics has always been an area of interest attracting attention of almost all post-war British playwrights. The basic reason to be sought in the efforts of playwrights to present proposals regarding the issue is their never-ending will to do their best to provoke those who are supposed to take this problem into consideration. And they want members of their society to approach this topic impartially but boldly to establish more acceptable terms of human life not only in England but also the whole world. They all think and firmly state that things could be much better in the world if politicians performed their duties more responsibly.

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