Introduction

*America and the Postwar Generation in Germany*

Nearly everyone who has written about Bertolt Brecht has noted that many of his plays are set in America, and that his America has a strange, mythical quality modeled on Al Capone, boxing, and jazz culture. This study looks in detail at the works Brecht read about America, considering their influence on his picture of America and on his political philosophy, and showing how his interest in America caused changes in his philosophy and in his aesthetics, and how these changes then affected his attitude toward America. Although it is an exhaustive study of all the sources we know about from Brecht’s published and unpublished writings, it cannot hope to be definitive, partly because Brecht’s letters and journals are not yet all available to the public, partly because we can never know about all the nonliterary influences, such as the fascination of America for postwar Germany; how many children played cowboys and Indians; what Brecht and his friends said to each other about America; to what extent they believed the American dream and to what extent they used it as a posture and literary device.

Even when we have direct evidence that Brecht read a book, describing its “influence” on him is a tricky matter. He was a shameless borrower, and it is easy enough to find anecdotes or metaphors that are simply lifted from the works he read. But we also want to know how he reacted to, and transformed, the style of a book; how its ideas may have changed his; and how it contributed to his picture of America. We want to know what he may have rejected in it, too, since he had an extraordinary ability to cull the useful from the hogwash. And we may even find ourselves moved to reevaluate some half-forgotten parts of our own literary tradition, on discovering that
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Brecht found them useful. Likewise, we may possibly see America itself in a new light after learning what it meant to him and how he used its positive and negative features.

Descriptions of the fascination America held for Brecht tend to be very similar:

The city of Chicago provides a persuasive setting for Brecht's parable, for its immense size and chilling impersonality give the struggle of Shlink and Garga the very cosmic scope Brecht is after.¹

In place of a faraway land where human passions reign untrammeled, America here [St. Joan of the Stockyards] becomes the center of the capitalist world where all the evils of the system exist in grotesque and exaggerated form.²

Brecht's interest in American cities is also inspired by the coarser texture of American society, its mixture of racial types, its shameless materialism, its idiomatic speech and jazz culture, and, especially, its love of sport.³

So the need for a legend, for escape, is rationalized through a Red Indian America that would astonish that continent, Mahagonny, a world of tomahawks, hurricanes, early film gangsters and gold rush days. Jack London used in character seriousness.⁴

There is no denying that, as these critics and others suggest, Brecht was fascinated by America. There were other countries he liked to write about, such as China, Victorian England, Russia, Finland—seldom Germany—but America appears far more frequently than any other part of the world as a setting for his plays. That he chose "exotic" settings is explained by the desire to make the action on the stage unfamiliar (an aspect of Verfremdung or dramatic alienation), but that he chose specifically America so often must be explained by the content of the American image itself. Examining that content and understanding its sources and its influences on Brecht's thinking will be the task of this book.

People who knew and worked with Brecht often mention his preoccupation with the New World. An early schoolmate remembers that Brecht was, earlier than his classmates, an avid reader of Karl May, the Zane Grey of Germany who wrote many Wild West novels. At the age of eleven Brecht was interested in a public reading by Karl May in Augsburg.⁵ Elisabeth Hauptmann (Brecht's secretary and almost lifelong assistant) said he had relatives in America, and that he and she collected American recordings together in the twenties. She recalled that the single thin voice against a whole orchestra seemed to
them symbolic of the conflict between individual and society in America.\textsuperscript{6} “I think I’d like to eat my hat up” (“Ich glaube, ich will meinen Hut aufessen”) in \textit{Mahagonny} came from one of these records. Arnold Zweig speaks of a fantastic Chicago in \textit{Im Dickicht der Städte} “which the relentless imagination of the widely-read Brecht had distilled out of manifold reports” (“das sich die unerbittliche Phantasie Brechts, des Viellesers, aus mannigfachen Berichten herausdistillierte hatte”)\textsuperscript{7}. And Bernhard Reich remembers Brecht’s atelier in Berlin around 1925:

On the long table against the window stood a typewriter, always open and ready for work, lay many folders—they held source materials, mainly newspaper clippings from the Old and especially the New World.

Although America is evident mainly in Brecht’s early works, he retained the habit of collecting clippings about it till he died; in the Brecht Archive in East Berlin, one can still see many clippings from 1956 (the year of his death) on \textit{The Power Elite}, by C. Wright Mills, from 1954 on Oppenheimer, and many materials and anecdotes on Einstein.\textsuperscript{9} He apparently read regularly the \textit{New York Times}, the \textit{Christian Science Monitor}, and the \textit{Saturday Review}. Erwin Strittmatter remembers Brecht’s plans just before his death:

At the end he spoke frequently of his intention to write about Einstein and his “American tragedy.” One evening he said, “Ja, how would you put this scene on the stage: Einstein writes that letter full of portent to Roosevelt.—How would you dramatize that? A real problem.”

But it is not necessary to take the word of critics and friends that Brecht was fascinated by America. He himself has demonstrated the fact not only by using America as a setting but by describing often the generation he grew up with, a generation affected above all by World War I and the consequent artistic and political turmoil. He
admitted and described his “Americanism” often. In 1920 he wrote in a notebook:

How this Germany bores me! It is a good, medium-sized country, the pale colors and planes are beautiful in it, but what inhabitants! A degenerate peasant class, whose coarseness however gives birth to no fabulous monster, but only to a quiet bestialization, an obese middle class and a dull intelligentsia! There remains: America!

Wie mich dieses Deutschland langweilt! Es ist ein gutes mittleres Land, schön darin die blassen Farben und die Flächen, aber welche Einwohner! Ein verkommenener Bauernstand, dessen Roheit aber keine fabelhaften Unwesen gebiert, sondern eine stille Vertierung, ein verfetteter Mittelstand und eine matte Intellektuelle! Bleibt: Amerika!

At that time (he was twenty-two years old), Brecht seems to have been convinced that America was a kind of promised land for the bored younger generation. In the same year he expressed this sentiment in a poem, “Germany, You Blond, Pale . . . ,” that is a paean of hatred to Germany:

. . . O carrion land, anxiety hole!
Shame strangles the memory
And in the youth that you
Haven’t corrupted
Awakes America!

. . . O Aasland, Kümmernisloch!
Scham würgt die Erinnerung
Und in den Jungen, die du
Nicht verdorben hast
Erwacht Amerika!

(GW 8:69)

Later, looking back with some irony, he described the emotions of his generation on discovering America:

SHORTLY AFTER THE GREAT WAR a new age seemed to us young people to have dawned. listening to the new american music looking at the photographs of the big cities we could no longer doubt: the new age had come greater than any previous one and we were destined to spend our unique life in it. this age didn’t seem bathed in sunlight to us this life hardly seemed easy to us on the contrary: of a great hardness and extraordinary boldness. in the image of this creature of our imagination neither injustice nor cruelty bothered us.

KURZ NACH DEM GROSSEN KRIEG schien uns jungen leuten eine neue zei angebrochen. anhörend die neue amerikanische musik
betrachtend die fotografien der großen städte konnten wir nicht mehr zweifeln: die neue zeit war gekommen größer als jede vorhergehende und wir waren bestimmt unser einmaliges leben in ihr zu verbringen. diese zeit schien uns nicht in sonne getaucht dieses leben schien uns kaum leicht im gegenteil: von großer harte und außerordentlicher kühnheit. im bilde dieses geschöpfes unserer einbildungskraft stört uns nicht ungerechtigkeit noch grausamkeit. (BBA 460,63)

These few unpublished sentences cover all the ground on the subject: the excitement of a new age, the admiration for boldness and largeness, the cultural debt to America, the glorification of toughness, the roots of all this in the war. But looking back, Brecht became critical: it was an imaginary America he had made for himself, allowing him to ignore or to accept injustice and cruelty.

Another time he described his generation of young theater people as not very agreeable in their Americanism and not very effective in their rebellion:

It must have been around the year 1920 that we first caused a public stir. We came swimming in on a big but not very pleasant wave of anarchy, of profiteering in Army materiel, of relativity theory and Americanism. Our friends were young guys who sold the platinum parts of Army telephones or devoured the brochures of Lenin, but our audience was those fathers whom we let be killed on the stage in our plays.

Es müß um das Jahr 1920 herum gewesen sein, daß wir zuerst von uns reden machten. Wir kamen auf einer großen, aber nicht sehr sympathischen Welle von Anarchie, Heeresgutschiebung, Relativitätstheorie und Amerikanismus dahergeschwommen. Unsere Freunde waren junge Burschen, die Platinteile aus Heerestelefonen verschoben oder die Broschüren von Lenin verschlangen, aber unser Publikum waren jene Väter, die wir in unseren Stücken auf der Bühne umbringen ließen. (GW 17:974-75)

To understand the appeal of America for these young cultural rebels, it is necessary to have some idea of what they were reacting against. The German defeat in World War I created conditions that polarized German society quickly into radicals of the right and radicals of the left. Fascist and extreme nationalist tendencies appeared very early on the one hand; on the other, most intellectuals were on the left, and among the people who had taken part in the war there was a sort of counter-nationalism, a feeling of extreme antipathy to Germany. This was the period of the Russian Revolution, the Bavarian Räterepublik or soviets, the assassination
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of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg—though Brecht managed to remain remarkably undisturbed by those events when they happened. It was also the period of expressionism, the literary and artistic expression of extremes that produced some of the most thrilling art and poetry of the century and some of the worst, most turgid drama. Expressionism did battle with naturalism, and Brecht eventually did battle with both styles. He was never very enthusiastic about expressionism; he satirized it in his first play, *Baal,* and he later characterized it as “a dull, idealistic wave” (“eine dumpfe idealistische Welle”) and a mere phenomenon of inflation that changed nothing.\(^\text{12}\) (Nevertheless, he profited greatly, possibly unconsciously, from the expressionist style, which at its best is concise and vigorous.) But then came a period of relative stability after the inflation, when American financing kept Germany on its feet, and a new literary movement began, called *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity or sobriety). Kathe Rülicke-Weiler describes the background to Americanism and *Neue Sachlichkeit*—two very closely related phenomena:

With American finance capital’s Dawes Plan dollars had flowed to Europe, the great monopolies—in 1925 IG Farben, in 1926 the United Steelworks Inc.—organized themselves anew, the economy was reorganized and began to rise. Technology celebrated triumphs: sobriety, efficiency, the “American way of life” with sport, auto, radio, movies—matter-of-factness in all spheres and relations of life—were popularized.

Brecht too was fascinated for a while by the accomplishments of this advancing technology, but he saw at the same time the sharpening of the contradictions of reality: “Fordism” brought the growth of unemployment along with rationalization and the assembly line; the exploitation of the workers was intensified.


Auch Brecht war eine Zeitlang fasziniert von den Errungenschaften dieser Technisierung, aber er sah zugleich die Verschärfung der Widersprüche der Wirklichkeit: Der “Fordismus” brachte neben der Rationalisierung, dem Fließband, auch das Anwachsen der
Arbeitslosigkeit mit sich, die Ausbeutung der Arbeiter wurde intensiviert.\textsuperscript{13}

The center of these and all other political and literary movements in postwar Germany was Berlin. And Berlin in the twenties was certainly the single most important influence on Brecht. All the progressive people were attracted to Berlin; it was a cosmopolitan city full of new energy and future, but with a smell of decay as well (best preserved for today in George Grosz’s art). The conflict between newness and decadence in the arts was a reflection of the conflict between revolution and reaction in politics. At first this correspondence was expressed as a generation conflict, an extreme rejection of everything the older generation produced: plays by expressionist playwrights used the theme of parricide repeatedly. One influential example was \textit{Vatermord (Parricide)}, by Brecht’s friend Arnolt Bronnen, which Brecht attempted to direct in 1922. But, as Brecht says, the young rebels played these plays to the very fathers they were talking about murdering. Their revolt was an affectation; it was not until it received real political content that it became effective.

However, in Berlin in the early twenties, most of the extremism on the left remained in the arts. Brecht’s first contribution too was not in revolutionary politics, even though he was chosen as a representative to the soldiers’ soviet in Augsburg in 1918, but in—he hoped—revolutionizing the theater. All his sharp polemics were vented on the bourgeoisie of the theater. Even when he wrote a play with revolutionary new form, he thought of it as a means of revolutionizing (“organizing”) the theater: “The theater work \textit{Jungle}, in content a critique, had the formal assignment to organize the theater (that is revolutionize)” (“Das Theaterwerk ‘Dickicht’, dem Inhalt nach eine Kritik, hatte die formale Aufgabe, Theater zu organisieren [das heißt umzuwälzen]”) (\textit{GW} 15:209).

For those Germans who were not political enough to be dedicated either to Germany or to the new Soviet Union, America rushed into the ideological gap. These were a class of people whose life centered around the arts anyway, and everything new in the popular arts and recreation seemed to come from the United States: jazz, Chaplin films, the Charleston, skyscrapers and neon lights, boxing, clothing styles. America’s youngness and freshness and confidence were just what the disillusioned young German generation wanted.
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This cultural need is described by Frederic Ewen, who has written a biography that shows Brecht's development against the background of the German social scene. He writes of postwar Germany that it had constructed out of America a fabulous, visionary domain, partly concocted out of reality, mostly built on fantasy. The reality had, of course, been the presence of American troops in Europe, the occupation of German territory, the collapse of President Wilson's dream of a new world and a new Europe, and, not least, the ever-present lure of the American dollar seen as a sort of radiant vision against the background of the nightmarish collapse of the mark. There were also reminiscences of the past, the "American dream" brought to Europe by Walt Whitman; the American West and the Indian, celebrated by Fenimore Cooper and domesticated by Karl May; the grand adventures of the open prairies, buffaloes, cowboys, and not least, the lure of the great American cities with their "Wolkenkratzer"—their skyscrapers.

In those hectic, hysterical days, when Germany was a land that felt enclosed and prison-like, the appeal of "open spaces" was supplemented by the wonder aroused by skyscrapers, the fury and battle of the prize-ring, American boxers, six-day bicycle races, American lingo, American jazz, and Negro spirituals. Nor was Germany alone enthralled by this American invasion. All of Europe was captivated. Add also the "terror" and awe inspired by the American's cavernous, tortuous, labyrinthine cities, with their inexhaustible potentialities for mystery, crime, and adventure. So, in German eyes, appeared New York, Chicago, and San Francisco.

Ewen's description sounds too rhapsodic to be Brechtian, and certainly Brecht was intelligent enough to treat the whole fad with some irony. Americanism was always a role he played consciously, a game that made a close community with his friends. With the exception of a few early poems, America appears in none of Brecht's works as El Dorado; on the contrary.

To determine why Brecht's image of the American dream was tarnished from the beginning, we will presently examine his literary sources. But first, to illustrate how far the cult of America did go among Brecht's contemporaries (including himself), here is a catalogue by John Willett of its expressions in the early twenties:

A spurious Anglo-Saxon mythology grew up, and Brecht embraced it in his plays and even in his life. Bertolt was Bert, Georg (Grosz) became George, Walter Mehring passed as Walt Merin; Helmut Herzfelde had earlier taken the name of John Heartfield as a deliberate gesture against the war. Sport was the culture of this mythical world, jazz its music, the
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Salvation Army the most intriguing religion. It was the same rowdy, popular combination as fascinated other poets of the 'twenties: Cocteau, Lorca, Mayakovsky. . . . Boxing, wrestling, racing became the symbolic forms of struggle, whisky and ale the drinks, "Virginia" the correct brand of cigar. Lion Feuchtwanger (himself one of Brecht's earliest friends and collaborators) compiled Pep. J. L. Wetcheek's Amerikanisches Liederbuch; the Expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser included a hectic bicycle race and a Salvation Army scene in his play Von Morgens bis Mitternachts; Ringelnatz put a boxing match, a wrestling match and another bicycle race in his Turngedichte of 1923.15

The popular aspect of these affectations, and the obvious sense of fun involved in their celebration, remained important elements of Brecht's style throughout his life; he always wrote in a deceptively simple idiom, not less comprehensible to the average sport fan—or, later, worker—than to the learned; and he almost always wrote with humor, or at least with irony and sarcasm. But his treatment of America itself in his plays is neither frivolous nor is it very favorable.