Chapter Three

Brecht’s Political Development

Just as it was impossible for Brecht to continue writing without learning to understand economics, so it would be impossible for us to continue analyzing what he wrote about America after he studied economics without a brief look at what he learned. For his reading of Capital and other works on political economy, beginning in 1926, caused the most significant turning point in his entire life. Until now we have seen him as a harsh critic of bourgeois social relations, but more an angry young man than a reformer. His private stance is cynical, and his literary stance is amoral aestheticism; his attitude toward America is that it is both grand and cruel, and that it represents man’s highest level of progress so far.

All these positions change in the next few years, as a result of the change in his politics. His politics change because he reads Marx; and he reads Marx because of his interest in America. But when he applies the theories he learns from Marx back to America, after committing himself to the importance of moral principles in art, he finds his conception of that advanced country has changed drastically, so that it no longer seems so advanced. In fact, he comes to call the American (and German) system “the old”; he has discovered the system that is to supersede it. Socialism becomes “the new,” always a positive term for Brecht.

Not only Brecht’s commitments and his attitudes toward America undergo change; he also experiments in new “didactic” forms and develops the epic theater as a vehicle for his new politics. The change in style is also impossible to understand without a prior examination of exactly what it was he learned when he gave up writing Joe Fleischhacker and read political economy for two years.

It is always risky, of course, to divide a writer’s life into periods
and claim that a certain biographical event represents a real hiatus or conversion. The GDR poet Johannes R. Becher’s description of Brecht’s conversion to Marxism is surely too simple in its absolute differentiation between before and after:

Brecht’s turn to us happened like this. . . . The crisis began. Labor got cheaper. Bread got more expensive. Brecht undertook to write a play with wheat as the hero. The explanations of the political economists were deceitful and helpless. Brecht was demanding and persistent. Wheat led him to Marx, Marx to Lenin. The play never came about. But a new Brecht came about, one who left the middle ground and joined the ranks of the communist cultural workers.

Especially in Brecht’s case such isolation of single events as turning points would seem foolhardy, because of his habit of working on plays for years, using and reusing the same materials through what might seem to be different periods.

On the other hand, Brecht himself felt what happened to him when trying to write Fleischhacker was his road to Damascus. This is evident from the poem “When I years ago . . . ” just quoted, as well as from his recurrent, almost obsessive use in the following years of wheat and the wheat market as examples of both economic injustice and the proper material for the new theater.

In 1926–27 he wrote in a short poem,

Why do I eat bread that costs too much?
Isn’t the price of grain in Illinois too high? . . .
Is it wrong for me to eat?

Warum esse ich Brot, das zu teuer ist?
Ist nicht das Getreide zu teuer in Illinois? . . .
Ist es falsch, daß ich esse?

(GW 8:293)

In 1928, he complained in an essay on the new drama, “The battles over wheat and so forth can’t be found on our stages” (“Die Kämpfe
um den Weizen und so weiter sind nicht auf unseren Bühnen zu finden”) (GW 15:174).

February 1929, notes on “epic” theater: “a play set, for instance, in the wheat exchange cannot be done in the grand form, the dramatic form” (“ein Stück, das etwa auf der Weizenbörse spielt, kann in der großen Form, der dramatischen, nicht gemacht werden”) (GW 15:186)—because the drama must prevent identification with a world that is wrong.

December 1929, a review of Samuel Butler: “He conceives ‘happy’ in that double meaning it has when ‘happy [lucky] ventures’ (such as on the wheat market) are spoken of”; (“Er faßt ’glücklich’ in jener Doppelbedeutung, die es hat, wenn von ‘glücklichen Unternehmungen’ (etwa auf dem Weizenmarkt) gesprochen wird”) (GW 18:74).

In 1931, Brecht coined the term “dialectical drama,” and wrote that it was first developed when playwrights began recognizing the polemical message in the material itself “(already in preliminary studies to plays like Wheat!)”; (“[schon in Vorstudien zu Stücken wie ‘Der Weizen!’]”) (GW 15:225).

In 1930–31 he wrote a series of poems for children called The Three Soldiers: three “soldiers” return from the war and cause as many deaths among the civilian population as the war did. The soldiers are Hunger, Accident, and Cough, and they cannot understand why the people do not defend themselves against them. (When they are put to death in revolutionary Moscow, they are finally happy.) The ninth poem in the series (GW 8:352–54) is based on the Americans’ dumping of wheat into the ocean to keep the price up during the depression (which is essentially what Mauler does with cattle, in the face of starvation).

Finally, in 1935–36 Brecht wrote an article on the theater of the twenties; when looking for an example of the necessity of the epic style, he again chose his play about wheat rather than plays actually finished and performed: “No one should expect that processes in the wheat market in Chicago . . . are less complicated than processes in the atom”; (“Niemand kann erwarten, daß die Vorgänge auf dem Weizenmarkt in Chicago . . . weniger kompliziert sind als die Vorgänge im Atom”) (GW 15:238).

It would perhaps not be so impressive that Brecht mentioned wheat often as a symbol had he not also written very directly and—unusually for him—with no trace of irony about the meaning of the
Fleischhacker experience for him. Elisabeth Hauptmann notes in July 1926 that it was the most important learning experience for Brecht up to that time:

The most important change during the work occurred while we were looking over materials for Joe Fleischhacker. This play was supposed to . . . show capitalism on the rise. For the play we collected technical literature, I myself interviewed a series of specialists, even at the Breslau and Vienna stock exchanges, and in the end Brecht started reading political economy. He maintained the practices with money were very opaque, now he had to see how it was with the theories about money.

Brecht himself was not less emphatic. In 1926, presumably just after he had given up trying to write Fleischhacker, he wrote a poem putting his failure, if it can be called that, in historical perspective:

Recently I wanted to tell
You, with malice aforethought
The story of a wheat dealer in the city
Chicago. In the middle of the recitation
My voice left me quickly
Because I had
Suddenly recognized: what hard work
It would be, to tell
This story to those who are not yet born
But who will be born and will live
In completely different kinds of times
And, the lucky ones! will be unable
By then to understand what a wheat dealer is
Of the sort that we have here.

Neulich wollte ich euch
Erzählen mit Arglist
Die Geschichte eines Weizenhändlers in der Stadt
Chikago. Mitten im Vortrag,
Verließ mich meine Stimme in Eile
Denn ich hatte
Plötzlich erkannt: welche Mühe
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Es mich kosten würde, diese Geschichte
Jenen zu erzählen, die noch nicht geboren sind
Die aber geboren werden und in
Ganz anderen Zeitläufen leben werden
Und, die Glücklichen! gar nicht mehr
Verstehen können, was ein Weizenhändler ist
Von der Art, wie sie bei uns sind.

He imagines himself explaining and explaining seven years long, and none of his unborn audience understanding, till he finally realizes that what he is describing cannot be understood:

Then I recognized that I
Was relating something that
A person cannot understand.

Da erkannte ich, daß ich
Etwas erzählte, was
Ein Mensch nicht verstehen kann.

(GW 8:150)

His listeners ask him why he could not see through such an obviously false system, and when he tries to explain they simply give up on him, “With the casual regret / Of happy people”; (“Mit dem lässigen Bedauern / Glücklicher Leute”) (GW 8:151).

It is this imagined discussion that leads him to the conclusion with which he begins the poem, that language is nowadays incomprehensible because it is spoken by a decadent generation (it is “the language of a people in decline,” [“die Sprache von Untergehenden”]), who have nothing to say to the new generation. And with the first person plural he includes himself, now, in the new generation (“So we can no longer understand them,” [“Daß wir sie nicht mehr verstehen”]): he has learned something since trying to write the play. It is no longer necessary for him to understand the contemporary wheat traders—from their own point of view. What he will do is try to see the present with the eyes of the future, to portray evil conditions as historically caused, and therefore temporary and changeable (“but the point is to change it”). The historical perspective, exemplified by this poem, is the perspective of epic theater.

Ten years later Brecht wrote the poem “When I years ago . . . ,” quoted at the end of the last chapter. He already had been in exile three years, and his subjects were primarily fascism and
exile; but the memory of the study of wheat in Chicago was still vivid in his mind. The 1936 poem makes a statement surprisingly similar to that of the 1926 poem. Here too the playwright learns that the wheat market is incomprehensible because irrational. But here he recognizes that early experience as the beginning of a new period in his life. He was not angry, he says, but he knew that he had stumbled on an evil thing and that he was not going to be able to continue living an unconcerned life now that he knew what had to be done. “Much work and unrest / Awaited me” (“Viel Mühe und Unrast / Erwarteten mich”).

Apparently also written during his emigration (possibly as an introduction to a poetry reading in Russia) is an autobiographical sketch in prose describing his early apolitical attitude. He had been the barracks delegate to a soldiers’ soviet in 1918, he says, but upon taking up writing he could not seem to get beyond nihilistic criticism of bourgeois society. Not even the powerful influence that Eisenstein and Piscator had on him made him study Marxism, perhaps because he was so scientifically oriented. This is the attitude we have called “amoral,” the attitude Brecht later condemned in his play Galileo. In the sketch Brecht presents that attitude as a problem in his early life that had to be overcome.

Then a kind of occupational accident helped me along. For a certain play I needed Chicago’s wheat exchange as background. I thought I would be able to acquire the necessary information quickly by making a few inquiries of specialists and practitioners. It happened otherwise. No one, neither well-known writers on economics nor business people—I traveled from Berlin to Vienna after a broker who had worked all his life at the Chicago exchange—no one could explain the processes of the wheat exchange to me adequately. I won the impression that these processes were simply inexplicable, i.e., not to be grasped by reason, i.e., unreasonable. The way the world’s wheat was distributed was simply incomprehensible. From every point of view except that of a handful of speculators this grain market was one big swamp.

gewann den Eindruck, daß diese Vorgänge schlechthin unerklärlich, das heißt von der Vernunft nicht erfassbar, und das heißt wieder einfach unvernünftig waren. Die Art, wie das Getreide der Welt verteilt wurde, war schlechthin unbegreiflich. Von jedem Standpunkt aus außer demjenigen einer Handvoll Spekulanten war dieser Getreidemarkt ein einziger Sumpf. (GW 20:46)

The term Betriebsunfall, or occupational accident, is important. As we have said, Brecht was unimpressed by all the arguments he had heard on socialism and the necessity of engaging oneself in the fight against capitalism; and he heard many such arguments, particularly in the literature he read about America. It was not until his own productivity was endangered that he found himself forced to look into the matter.

Important also is his insistence on logic. He wanted to be able to present certain mechanisms in their essence, in simple, logical form that would make sense to an audience; he was from beginning to end an advocate of clear thinking. He came to trust his belief that what is not logical is wrong—both factually and morally wrong. I got the impression, he says, that these processes were inexplicable, that is, impossible for the reason to grasp, that is: unreasonable.

He concludes:

The intended drama was not written; instead I began to read Marx, and then, only then, I read Marx. Only then did my own scattered practical experiences and impressions really come alive.

Looking back, Brecht seems to consider it was quite amazing that it took him so long to turn to Marx. He must have had strong resistance to Marx beforehand, because once he finally did start reading Capital, all his own experiences fell into place; it became possible for the first time to fit them into a rational system, to make them “come alive.”

What exactly did the acquaintance with Marx’s theories mean for Brecht? What it did not mean was joining the Communist Party (KPD); on the contrary, he was rather skeptical of organized Marxists for a while. (Some critics would claim: forever. They ignore the very close teamwork between Brecht and the East
German regime, and read only Brecht’s critical comments, failing to grasp that these are written in the spirit of socialist self-criticism, or, as Brecht himself says in an article on the subject, “When I drive, being myself at the wheel I criticize the course of my car by steering” [“Wenn ich Auto fahre, selbst am Steuer, kritisiere ich den Lauf meines Wagens, indem ich steure”]).

Marxism meant for Brecht first of all understanding the nature of conflict. He became aware not only that he wrote his plays to provoke reaction but also that the bourgeoisie had been the false target for provocation. This realization is clear in a note on Baal from 1926. When he wrote Baal, he says, he thought he would be shocking the bourgeoisie. But that class was so decadent that it only criticized the form of the play (i.e., it did not feel touched by the issues, if it even understood them). Now he sees that the real opponent to the figure of Baal is the proletarian (GW 15:64). In other words, Brecht now felt that the purpose of the play had been to provoke a specific argument from a working-class audience, namely that Baal’s reaction to bourgeois society is an inadequate one.

In a similar light Brecht was able (much later) to reinterpret Drums in the Night: he says he had no conception when he wrote it of the importance of the 1918 revolution (in which he himself took part!); but he instinctively realized that Kragler was not seriously involved in the revolution (GW 17:945-46), that he was the typical social democrat who quits as soon as he has what he wants, and that it was important for the working class to learn to recognize this type of false revolutionary (GW 17:967). In Brecht’s later interpretation, In the Jungle came close to showing class struggle without his being aware of it, and A Man’s a Man was a parable on the individual and the collective (Brecht gives various different interpretations to the value of the collective). In 1927 he rewrote In the Jungle for the book edition, leaving out most of the personal and psychological allusions; they no longer seemed to him valid subjects for drama.

All these reinterpretations became possible because Brecht became aware of class struggle. Marx and Engels claim that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of struggle between classes, and Brecht, who had always considered his plays pieces of concrete history, endeavored to see his past work in that scheme. Further, he realized the necessity of an audience that would have absolute criteria for judging the usefulness (the word becomes...
very important in Brecht’s aesthetics) of the content of any play. This is the exact opposite of Brecht’s earlier amoral position: now there is a truth, there is the possibility of being right or wrong, and characters on the stage are there to provoke the audience into thinking about whether the life-attitude shown is right, i.e., useful for the achievement of their goal. Only the workers have—have to have—the knowledge that these criteria are absolute: for them it is a matter of life and death, for the intelligentsia it is intellectual stimulation. “The real opponent I can only expect to find in the working class. Without my sensing that opposition I couldn’t have created the type [Baal]” (“Den wirklichen Gegner kann ich mir nur im Proletariat erhoffen. Ohne diese von mir gefühlte Gegnerschaft hätte dieser Typ von mir nicht gestaltet werden können”) (GW 15:64).

On the same manuscript page as the comment (1926) on Baal, Brecht wrote (possibly later):

I must confess, it wasn’t until I read Lenin’s State and Revolution and then Marx’s Capital that I realized where I stood philosophically. I don’t mean to say that I reacted against these books, that would seem highly incorrect to me. I just think I felt at home here, in these oppositions.


That he emphasizes not having really reacted against Marx and Lenin indicates he was not yet ready to subscribe fully to their ideas either. But he now knew, and knew for good, exactly what the important topics were to explore, where the productive contradictions lay. It is a truism that drama is based on conflict, but his new insight was that only some conflicts are meaningful to show (productive, or causing change). They are class conflicts, the struggle between supporters of an old society and the forces that must produce a new one.

Brecht mentions here that he read Lenin’s State and Revolution before Capital. It was available in German from 1918, but probably he read it immediately before Capital, as an introduction to Marxism. It is a good one, particularly on the revolutionary role of the proletariat and on the transition to socialism. Marx’s and
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Engels's writings on those subjects are systematized and commented upon by Lenin in lucid style. However, there is little explanation of the exact economic workings of capitalism, and this is what Brecht needed to answer his questions on the Chicago wheat market. Lenin undoubtedly whetted Brecht's curiosity considerably and was also most probably the source of his new interest in the working class. But Brecht knew, or soon saw, that for a real understanding of capitalism there was no shortcut: *Capital* had to be studied.

Elisabeth Hauptmann told me that Brecht broadened his knowledge of Marxism systematically, and that he questioned and tested his new knowledge again and again. Many of his acquaintances remember incessant discussions on socialism, revolution, and political economy. He visited the Marxist School for Workers (MASCH) in Berlin, and attended lectures by the sociologist Fritz Sternberg and by the Marxist philosopher Karl Korsch. Although Brecht soon outgrew Sternberg and criticized Korsch, his correspondence with Sternberg is very interesting; and he and Korsch discussed and learned from each other—mainly by letter—until Brecht's death. Brecht of course spent years studying Marxism; some of his reactions are recorded in notes he wrote (printed as "Marxist Studies" in the *Writings on Politics and Society*); but the more detailed record of his thought will be in his letters, which are not yet available to the public.

The two years immediately after 1926 were dedicated to a particularly intense study of Marxist political economy; we can tell this by the books Brecht read. *Capital* is a year's study in itself, but Hauptmann remembered him also reading Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* and Plekhanov's *Role of the Individual in History*, as well as material on Lassalle and the International. We can see influence from these books in his work of the late twenties: he treats the problem of anarchistic tendencies in revolutionary movements in *The Measure Taken*, and the relation of individual and mass was perhaps his principal subject in the *Lehrstücke* on *Einverständnis* (acquiescence), and in essays on the role of the artist.

We also find in Brecht's library Marxist books that were published in 1925 and 1926, such as Bukharin's *Der Imperialismus und die Akkumulation des Kapitals* (Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital) and Jakob Walcher's *Ford oder Marx: Die
praktische Lösung der sozialen Frage (Ford or Marx: The Practical Solution to the Social Question).

Finally, Brecht lists books on Marxism as some of the best books of the year in answer to the surveys by Das Tagebuch in 1926 and 1928 (GW 18:51-52, 65-66). In 1926 he recommends Henri Guilbeaux's biography Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin: Ein treues Bild seines Wesens (Vladimir Ilyich Lenin: A Faithful Portrait of His Nature) (more evidence that Lenin, whom he calls a "phomenon," was important to him in that year), and the pictures in Geist und Gesicht des Bolschewismus: Darstellung und Kritik des kulturellen Lebens in Sowjet-Russland (Spirit and Face of Bolshevism: Description and Critique of Cultural Life in Soviet Russia). In 1928 he recommends a biography, Marx, Leben und Werk (Marx: Life and Work), by Otto Rühle, a book of whose style he does not entirely approve but that presents a great doctrine clearly, which (he says) is more important.

Of course, these books that we know he read on Marxism are only a fraction of what the indefatigable reader Brecht must have studied; and the many conversations with economists and sociologists also had a strong effect. It is hopeless at this point to try to identify all the sources of his political education. It is also unnecessary for our purposes. We know that the writings of Marx himself, notably Capital, represented to Brecht the new beginning.

We have stated that the first new perspective Brecht gained from reading Marx was the universal historical principle of class struggle. The second was learning to see his own plays as documentary material, or data for a Marxist interpretation:

When I read Capital by Marx I understood my plays. . . . Of course I didn't discover that I had unconsciously written a pile of Marxist plays. But this Marx was the only viewer for my plays that I had ever seen. For a man with his interests must be interested by precisely these plays. Not because of their intelligence, but because of his. It was material for his observation.

Here Brecht claims no superiority for his own plays over those of any other dramatist who portrays reality—naturalists, for example. But he has discovered that there are significant and nonsignificant interpretations of the portrayals of reality. In the future he will be trying to solicit the right kind of interpretation, for it is important not only that he and Marx understand his plays but also that the audience learn to think like Marx.

For the next few years the idea of drama as document, data, or material occupied him. We have seen that in 1926 he praised Frank Harris's book for its documentary value and suggested that should be the purpose of literature altogether; the word “document” was his high praise for Chaplin (GW 18:138), and he also praised the classics (in conscious contradiction to some Communists) for their material value (GW 15:175), meaning literally the value of the materials that go into the work. No one should find it wrong that the Vandals used Roman wood-carvings for firewood, he says (GW 15:105); i.e., no one should find it wrong that a Marxist audience sees class struggle as the useful subject in a play intended to be about a metaphysical struggle.

A similar analogy provided the title of Brecht's later dialogues on dramatic theory: Buying Brass. A philosopher comes into the theater and wants to use it ruthlessly for his own purposes, which are not those of the theater people. It is, the philosopher says, as though he were to go into a music store and ask to buy a trumpet because he needs brass. The theater should be a true reflection of events among men (reality, like brass, is the material), and allow the taking of a position by the audience (GW 16:500). This aesthetic of course still allows the writer to produce amoral plays. But Brecht did not say it was his intention to write plays himself that were mainly useful as brass, for their sociological raw material; he used the term in interpreting his early plays and defending the usefulness of the classics. Shakespeare for instance: “He is absolute material” (“Er ist absoluter Stoff”) (GW 15:119).

Plays written before the development of the “new theater” (theater put in the service of the working class) were to be used, Brecht decided after reading Marx, for their documentary value: the message (Tendenz) of the author was to be ignored, and the situation portrayed by him was to be interpreted by the audience. For himself, as an adherent of the new theater, Brecht had more ambitious plans:
not only the presentation of situations to an audience but the education or creation of a new kind of audience. That also is a principal perspective of epic theater.

In short, upon giving up trying to write Fleischhacker and reading Marx instead, Brecht made a complete about-face from his previous position. He now wanted to put theater in the service of a political movement. In order to understand accurately the extent of the change, let us look more closely at Brecht's early political stance, which we have until now simply characterized as "amoral."

It was not Brecht's political position that made an about-face but rather his ideas on the uses of theater. His politics had always been to the left of center (except for patriotic essays he wrote as a sixteen-year-old schoolboy), that is, he was always anti-bourgeois. Long before he had any theoretical knowledge of the historical role of the bourgeoisie, he was cursing it with furious energy. But when we look closer, this rebellion unmask itself as a rebellion against the older generation, not against the capitalist class. In the important notes on dialectical drama, written in 1931, Brecht looks back on his and his friends' early work and calls it idealist and capitalist. Although the pettiness of bourgeois thought was condemned in it, he confesses, the grandeur and ruthlessness of the bourgeoisie's accomplishments was praised; the rebellion was "merely a generation question," ("lediglich eine Generationsfrage") (GW 15:218). Many other remarks by Brecht, with which we are already familiar, also emphasize his early political naivete. He felt that he was revolutionary purely by virtue of being young, and that the function of the new generation was to create chaos, knock down the old order, and refuse to "understand" the old generation or be understood by it (GW 18:36–37). That was still Brecht's attitude in early 1926; in that year he wrote a great deal against the older generation.

It was this notion that all older people are reactionary and all younger people revolutionary (or at least destructive to the old order) that prepared for his disappointment at the poetry of 400 young poets in the contest he judged at the end of 1926: "What use is it to strike several generations of harmful older people dead or, what is better, to wish them dead, if the younger generation is nothing but harmless?" ("Was nützt es, mehrere Generationen schädlicher älterer Leute totzuschlagen oder, was besser ist, totzuwünschen, wenn die jüngere Generation nichts ist als harmlos?" (GW 18:56). Brecht
chose instead of the entries a poem on the subject of sport; he was still faddishly interested in whatever nonliterary fields would provoke the literary bourgeoisie. But we see in his comments on the poetry contest signs of his new attitude as well: he writes that poetry must have *Gebrauchswert* (use value, a Marxist term) and documentary value, and that the literature of the declining bourgeoisie is by all means an expression of class struggle, namely, of reaction.

Also in 1926 he wrote that the fight between the generations would be a fight for the means of production, i.e., the presses, the theaters, etc. (*GW* 18:39). At the same time he began using the term *bourgeoisie* in a more precise sense and to oppose it, not just to himself and his rebellious young artist friends, but to *working class*. And soon the furious railing at the older generation died out of his diction, and he judged everyone as being on the side of one *class* or another. Questions about what role the artist or intellectual could play in the working-class struggle replaced the assumption that he and the entire younger generation of writers were automatically playing a revolutionary role.

Brecht felt from his earliest days as a playwright that he was on the side of rebellion, but he did not know exactly where the barricades were. The inability to finish a play because of his ignorance and the subsequent study of Marx put new content in his rebellion and taught him always to ask whether an emotional act really served the necessary revolution, whether every particular act or play was *useful*. This is the autobiographical reason for the severity of the decision in *The Measure Taken* (1929–30).

Almost incidental to this rebellion of the young writer against the stuffy bourgeoisie, expressed in his articles and reviews, is the background in Brecht’s early plays. It was to these plays that he referred when he wrote toward the end of his life that although his political consciousness was shamefully poor, nevertheless he had sensed social discrepancies without recognizing their origins, and reproduced social conflict in his works (*GW* 19:397); and that he knew almost nothing precise about the Russian Revolution but had a presentiment of the fighting spirit of the working class in *Drums* (*GW* 17:945–46); and that he came close to writing about the real struggle—the class struggle—in *Jungle*, without knowing it (*GW* 17:949).

This could be an opportunistic reinterpretation of his early plays;
a case can be made that since they in fact supported no particular doctrine, but were rather (as he himself says) true pictures of the times and therefore material for observation, any position could be read into them, and that Brecht when he lived under a Marxist regime decided to read a Marxist position into them. So claim Western critics of the school that creates and believes the legend of Brecht as the opportunistic anticommunist who denied his beliefs and cooperated with the East German regime because it gave him a sumptuous theater. So, for instance, Martin Esslin, the father of this school: “He did not, as he later tried to make it appear, and as the official legend now fostered in the Communist world proclaims, support the Russian Revolution from the moment he heard of it.”

Of course not, nor did he ever claim to have; nor can there be any pretense that he did, since his references to the subject such as “On Looking through My First Plays” (GW 17:945–52) are as available in East Germany as in the West. Every time Brecht wrote about his early political attitudes, he was painfully honest about how naïve and even reactionary they were. Once when he describes his experience in the Bavarian soldiers’ soviet, he admits frankly that he was not enthusiastic, found his position as delegate too much work, and was unable to think politically. He ends by saying he does not particularly like to think about it (GW 20:25). In the comments in the early plays, too, Brecht’s tone is confessional.

The point is, he was an embryonic socialist in spite of himself. The image he had of himself was that he was blasé and interested only in pastimes with which to while away time while waiting for catastrophe (“Of Poor B.B.”); it was good form to rail against the theater-bourgeoisie and tradition but bad form to become seriously engaged in fighting for anything. Thus the sympathetic presentation of Kragler in Drums: he shocks Anna’s petty-bourgeois family, but he avoids dedication to the revolution. Baal, Kragler, Eduard, Garga are all characterized primarily as persons who maintain their individuality and self-interest come what may. Galy Gay, in the original conception, is a negative parable: he is what happens to people who have no sense of self.

But this is only the principal character in each play. Their stories are told against, and in interaction with, a background of complex social reality. It is in this portrayal of the milieu that Brecht’s political observations are expressed. And although he does not say
something must be done about the conditions shown, he does
definitely sympathize with the poor and oppressed and recognize
that something is very wrong with the system that produces their
misery. The mercilessness of the social system and the dehumaniza­
tion of its objects are quite clear. This is not simply the result of
realistic portrayal of the age; Brecht's early plays are slightly more
"Marxist" (in the sense of "leftist") than he himself says in his
comment on Marx as their best interpreter. There were reasons why
he chose those particular backgrounds where he could just as well
(whose he not Brecht) have demonstrated the necessity of defense of
the fatherland or other proto-fascist lessons. But it was not until the
decision to write a play on the wheat market that he found a theme
where the message was implicit in the material itself (GW 15:225).
When there was a social message in the earlier plays, it was the result
of conscious additions, selection, and emphasis.

For instance, *Baal* is not a paean to individualism but a satire on
it; it was written as a criticism of an expressionist play. Baal lives an
intense life and has no regrets, but he destroys all human life he
comes in contact with. Baal, close to nature as he is, is himself the
natural catastrophe that threatens civilization; he is pure id without
any superego or civilizing drive; he is perhaps poetic and exciting
and is certainly preferable to bourgeois vicarious living, but he is
above all destructive. The reaction the play should produce is that
Baal is no answer because he produces nothing; he only destroys and
then himself decays. But if Baal is destructive, it is in response to a
destructive society. "Baal's art of living shares the fate of all other
arts in capitalism: it is attacked. He is antisocial, but in an antisocial
society" ("Die Lebenskunst Baals teilt das Geschick aller anderen
Künste im Kapitalismus: sie wird befehdet. Er ist asozial, aber in
einer asozialen Gesellschaft") (GW 17:947). Any attempt to fit into
society would be equally wrong. Either he must be destroyed or he
must destroy. Baal demonstrates through badness and selfishness
what characters in many of Brecht's plays demonstrate through
goodness and unselfishness: a world in which it is impossible to be
good must be changed; a world in which one must be bad should
lead to the same conclusion. But the particular nature of this world
is scarcely analyzed.

In *Drums in the Night* the social context is obvious: the necessity
for revolution, the reaction of the bourgeois Balicke family, the
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return of a soldier from war who finds no thanks at home. The oppressed workers fight for their rightful share in society, the bourgeois ex-soldier fights for his rightful woman; both have been exploited by the Balickes, factory-owners who play nationalistic songs and religious hymns on the record player and make money on the war. Only the rebellious workers feel sympathy for the unwanted soldier returned from war. He seems in fact to join them just because they are human to him; and when the woman he wants provides him with this human warmth, he leaves them again. Here is Brecht's simultaneous recognition that the world should be changed and his refusal to involve himself in that fight. The plot supports private life; the context and primary impact of the play support revolution. Kragler has a bad conscience at the end; he screams at the audience that it is all only illusion: "It's ordinary theater. Those are boards and a paper moon" ("Es ist gewöhnliches Theater. Es sind Bretter und ein Papiermond" (GW 1:123). This is romantic irony used by the character to rationalize his failure. But he cannot help what he does; love is the stronger need for him. And it is right, Brecht implies here, to do that which is true to your own character. But why the bad conscience? How did Brecht himself feel about not having taken his role in the soldiers' soviet seriously?

Fritz Sternberg, the sociologist whom Brecht met in early 1927 and later dubbed his "first teacher," remembers Brecht's approximate words in their first discussion. They were spoken after Brecht began to read Marx, but they refer to a process that began as soon as he finished Drums:

I once wrote a drama Drums in the Night, and although the First World War and the Bavarian revolution made up the background, the relation of a man to a certain woman was the focus of attention. . . . Since I wrote that drama, the relation of a man to a woman can no longer provide me with a vision that would be strong enough for writing a whole drama.

Ich habe einmal ein Drama "Trommeln in der Nacht" geschrieben, und obwohl der erste Weltkrieg und die bayerische Revolution den Hintergrund bildeten, stand doch in diesem Drama die Beziehung eines Mannes zu einer bestimmten Frau im Mittelpunkt. . . . Seitdem ich dieses Drama geschrieben habe, ist es mir nicht mehr möglich, aus der Beziehung eines Mannes zu einer Frau eine Vision zu gewinnen, die stark genug wäre, ein ganzes Drama zu schreiben.
"It is ordinary theater": Kragler's bad conscience is Brecht's own. The very act of writing the ending of *Drums in the Night* made Brecht realize Kragler's decision was wrong: too traditional to be "new" theater, and morally wrong.

His next play was radically different. Not only did he avoid love between man and woman for a long time to come, but he wrote with *Jungle* a play that was dramatically and philosophically completely new. Simultaneously he began his study of the great cities and the "new age."

*In the Jungle* contains the beginnings of Brecht's social consciousness. The Garga family is destroyed not only because of George's private affair with Shlink; their fate is representative of the fate of all who come from the "flat land" to the city without money. They can barely exist; they are trapped, dependent on George's meager earnings. He dreams of Tahiti because all that he can do is dream. His girl friend Jane is equally trapped; she can never stop sewing clothes. A bottle of schnaps is a holiday for her, and prostitution is the only escape besides death. Shlink, member of the exploiting class, has to divest himself of his property in order to be able to fight with Garga at all; otherwise their relationship would be the conventional one between ruler and ruled or exploiter and exploited.

Ironically, in *their* fight, whoever is at any moment physically better off is losing, because he has fought to gain material advantage, not psychological. This underscores the fact that, for all the social background in the play, theirs is not a social but a metaphysical struggle; it is again, as in *Drums*, a case of individual interest that destroys the collective in the background. The social struggle in this play is the struggle of the Garga family to stay alive. Like the family in Sinclair's *The Jungle*, they just barely make it until disaster strikes; in their case, the disaster is that the breadwinner cannot stand it any more and feels he has to be free.¹³ But had that not happened, some other emergency would have destroyed the family.

Ernst Schumacher points out, in his meticulously Marxist interpretation of Brecht, that *In the Jungle* shows not only the material but also the spiritual effect of capitalism. The theme of the play is *Vereinzelung* (the process of people becoming isolated from each other), and the creation of the desire for community:¹⁴ these are
the effects of capitalism not only on the workers but also on the bourgeoisie. It is Shlink who is lonely. Having built up his business for ten years, he finds that all he has gained is meaningless. Capitalism also causes hatred of the family, says Schumacher, and turns people into commodities—Shlink wants to buy Garga’s opinion. But Schumacher is not clear on what Brecht consciously intended and what was unconscious. He says on the one hand that Brecht reproduced the conditions of capitalism only unconsciously,\(^\text{15}\) but on the other hand he claims Brecht intended by the use of irony to develop the idea of an abstract behavior *ad absurdum* so as to show that there can be no real conflict without concrete relations to class conflict.\(^\text{16}\)

Marxist criticism can take any work of literature and describe the class relations presented in it; this should not be confused with the author’s own consciousness. Brecht was more accurate than Schumacher is for him when he wrote that his early plays were not Marxist, but reading Marx told him how to interpret them (*GW* 15:129). Brecht was a little too modest; as we see from this examination of the contexts of his early plays, his political position where he had one was unequivocally on the left. But Schumacher goes too far, failing to differentiate between the primary and secondary levels. The play is *about* a struggle that has nothing to do with social relations, but this struggle occurs against a *background* of capitalist oppression. Brecht’s political message is contained almost exclusively in the background story of the Garga family.

It is perhaps a weakness of the play (which leads to confusions in interpretation) that Brecht requires two completely different sets of reference for the two plots; this weakness is eliminated in *Fleischhacker*, where the events on one level are the direct cause of the events on the other. There both plots are in the economic sphere, whereas the metaphysical struggle in *Jungle* is in a completely different category from the economic ruin of the family, despite some cause and effect relationship. This is another example of Brecht’s split-level consciousness in those years: the attempt to separate private affairs from social. It is still the problem of *Drums in the Night*.

*The Life of Edward the Second of England* is less uniquely Brecht’s: it is both an adaptation of Marlowe and a joint project with Lion Feuchtwanger (who, however, contributed much the smaller
part). But it is constructed on the same dialectic as the other early plays: private versus public interest. Because of Edward's passion for Gaveston, the people of the kingdom suffer. In the other play Brecht and Feuchtwanger wrote together (Calcutta, May 4th), a private passion in a ruler leads to suffering for the people—but the passion is for road-building, hardly a sexual passion. The situation is the imperialist occupation of India, which may have given Brecht the idea of putting *A Man's a Man* in the same setting.

In all Brecht's own plays so far, there has been a social system needing change, and people living in it seeking a private escape through the natural passions. These persons who escape into a private life do some harm to others, but they are not the root cause of suffering. Themselves victims, they accept a personal escape rather than a permanent solution through collective action. That description makes the plays sound highly political, but their emphasis is always on the private actions and desires of the principal characters. Despite Brecht's new style, he still considered the valid subject matter of the drama to be individual love, hate, loneliness, communication, personal freedom, faith in self—in short, all the private passions that literature has traditionally built on.

But meanwhile a new approach was welling up in Brecht, which became public when he finished *A Man's a Man* in 1926. The pattern of focus on private passions changed radically. Here Brecht confronted the problem of individual versus collective explicitly. Galy Gay is the man whose sense of identity is so weak that he "lets his private fish swim away"; his desire to belong to the collective becomes so strong that he denies his wife and eventually his own name and identity—which by then really does not exist any more. He neither asks questions nor cares what the truth is when he can find a material advantage for himself; he is the man who cannot say no. He is precisely the opposite of the principal characters in Brecht's previous plays. They all escape out of the social relations pictured, but he submerges himself in them, or rather he takes himself out of one set of conditions and subjugates himself completely to another set. But at no time does he strive for freedom or a private life, and he has no passions.

Did Brecht recognize that it was wrong to seek a private existence and decide to write a play on the process of socialization? Certainly not. Such an interpretation misses the tone of the play. The fact is,
every time Galy Gay thinks he is being particularly clever and fooling the soldiers, it is they who are manipulating him, taking shameless advantage of his simple-mindedness. The only exception is the final scene, where Galy Gay has turned into a fanatical war machine.

Because of the parable character of the play, it cannot be definitely classified as right or left; like the foreground plot in *Jungle*, it simply shows a process. Brecht is doing just what he says he is doing: proving that a man can be rebuilt, that one can do anything one wants with a man (GW 1:336).

A few concrete details point toward an exposé of conditions under capitalism: after all, it is an imperialist army that Galy Gay is seduced into. Schumacher may be right when he writes that the scene where the elephant is sold demonstrates the fate of workers who hope to escape their oppression by becoming small businessmen. However, capitalism is hardly the central theme of the play.

If there was one specific political target for the criticism implied in *A Man’s a Man*, it was probably the totalitarianism of the developing Nazis. Different early friends of Brecht have different memories of his consciousness of fascism around the time of Hitler’s *Bierkellerputsch*: Arnolt Bronnen remembers that Brecht was made very uncomfortable by the “Brown Shirts” in Munich in 1923, that the word “Mahagonny” first occurred to him when he observed the wooden color and behavior of the masses of middle-class fascists. “‘When Mahagonny comes, I’m going,’ Brecht said as good-by” (“‘Wenn Mahagonny kommt, geh’ ich’, sagte Brecht zum Abschied”). Bernhard Reich, on the other hand, writes of the putsch:

Arnolt Bronnen claims that Brecht was already concerned about “National Socialism” then. I can’t remember any statements by Brecht to that effect. The day after the rout of the Hitler nonsense he rehearsed especially intensely, to compensate for time lost the day before.


Fascist tendencies were growing during the time Brecht worked
on *A Man's a Man*, but it is not a play about fascism. It is a play about the relation between individual and collective. Apparently Brecht noticed that all his plays had at least on the surface supported individualism, and decided to try the experiment of writing a play that did exactly the opposite: proved there was no such thing as an individual.

But this play is as amoral as the others. The novelty is more formal than ideological: rather than building two parallel plots, one of which is political and one personal, Brecht produced here a single integrated story with many possible applications to political reality.

How he happened to turn from that parable to writing (or trying to write) on economic themes cannot be seen from looking at the plays. There is hardly any connection between *A Man's a Man* and the proliferation of attempts from 1924 to 1926 to write on American financial relations. The answer is sooner to be found in Brecht's sources on America that we have already examined, but even they do not explain why he began to be so interested in economics. The interest seems to have developed with his plan of writing a series about the migration to the big cities, which automatically involves the development of technology and capitalist industry; that this theme must involve study of economic exploitation is clear from the subplot in *Jungle*. We can only assume that Brecht's analytical mind, plus the reading of certain key books like *The Pit*, led him down a more and more specialized path because he had to understand how the cities worked in order to write about the lives of people living in them.

This brief study of the political content of Brecht's earliest plays should make clear that when his interest in economics brought him to Marxism, he by no means changed his political direction. From the beginning he had sympathy for the poor; he portrayed exploitation and alienation and the transformation of human beings into commodities; he reacted instinctively against bourgeois values; he was a pacifist and anti-nationalist; and he was a materialist and anti-idealist.

Why, then, did he consider his initiation into systematic Marxism to be an epochal new beginning? What did Marxism do for him?

Marxism *ended Brecht's political naïveté*. Through long and careful study of the Marxist analysis of social development, Brecht
was able to develop a sophisticated philosophy that comprehended all social phenomena. Sternberg tells the story of Brecht's treatment about 1930 of young writers who came to him for advice on their plays: he pointed to a shelf with five copies each of *The Communist Manifesto*, Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, and other Marxist texts, and asked if the young writer had read them. When the answer was no, and it always was, Brecht gave him a copy of each pamphlet and told him to read them. If he still felt his play stood up, then he could return for a second visit. Brecht was fully aware of what had caused the transition from naiveté to analysis in himself.

Marxism taught Brecht the names for concepts he already had. It fit Brecht's intuitive sympathies and isolated political tendencies, which he had expressed in his early plays, into a system with clear cause-and-effect relationships and with a precise terminology. He could now consciously develop a philosophy and find definitive answers to questions he had always left unanswered. That meant that instead of merely reproducing observed phenomena in his writing he could show the *causes* of the phenomena. It was a thrilling experience for him at last to find a set of ideas and explanations that he could consider objectively right. As he read Marx, he recognized his own barely conceptualized ideas, but he found them not only supported but also fitted into a world analysis.

His excitement at learning names for his own recognitions expressed itself in a proliferation of the use of Marxist terminology in the next years. We have already seen that *bourgeoisie* and *working class* acquired precise meanings and received frequent use. *Commodity, means of production, dialectic, class struggle,* and many other Marxist terms became common in Brecht's writing. He also kept a notebook in which he wrote studies of topics suggested to him by Marx. These studies are attempts to apply to his surroundings and to the theater the insights and language he learned from reading Marx. They are unrelated to each other and often cryptic, since we cannot know which particular passage in his reading prompted them; but they are interesting because they demonstrate Brecht's feeling of intellectual excitement at discovering this new language, and his desire to try it out on all possible different subjects.

Marxism showed Brecht what to fight against. His plays now began to deal with capitalism itself, not just its results. He dropped
his pose of rebellion and began thinking seriously about strategy. This included thinking about the role of the theater in a political revolution, not just a revolution of the theater. And so he began to write political plays that emphasized his new recognition: who the real enemy is, how it happens that some people starve and others get rich. This was the direction in which Dan Drew and Joe Fleischhacker were already moving; Capital made it a one-way road.

Marxism showed Brecht what to fight for. Implicit throughout Capital and explicit in other Marxist writings is that wherever capitalism is irrational, socialism is the rational alternative. It was the irrationality of capitalism—the Chicago wheat market was incomprehensible because unjust—that drove Brecht to Marx; and it is clear that if he could not only find the inconsistencies explained but also find a cure, he would be interested. He accepted socialism, once he understood it, because to his highly rational mind it made sense.

This view of socialism as simple because so logical is stylistically expressed in the simplicity of form Brecht chose for his agitprop plays: the Lehrstücke (ca. 1929–30) and The Mother (1931). Werner Hecht makes a revealing comment on this point with regard to The Mother:

> Ever since the premiere bourgeois critics have constantly found fault with the “primitive form” of the play (which Brecht chose, after all, with much art, as can be seen from the many textual variations). What in fact angers them is that they are being “enlightened” in the theater over a few basic questions of communism.

> Bürgerliche Kritiker bemängeln ohne Unterlaß seit der Uraufführung die “primitive Form” des Stückes (die Brecht mit viel Kunst, durch die vielen Textvarianten verfolgbar, schließlich gewählt hat). In Wahrheit sind sie darüber verärgernt, daß sie im Theater über einige Grundfragen des Kommunismus “aufgeklärt” werden.24

The point is, what appeared to be primitive form was consciously chosen to show exactly what the critics did not want to see: the logical simplicity of communism. Brecht expresses that idea in primer-book style in the song “In Praise of Communism,” which he wrote for The Mother:

> It makes sense, you can understand it. It is easy.
> You are not an exploiter and so you can grasp it.
It is good for you, find out more about it.
The stupid call it stupid, and the dirty call it dirty.
It is against dirt and against stupidity.
It is not chaos
But order
It is the simple thing
That's hard to do.

Er ist vernünftig, jeder versteht ihn. Er ist leicht.
Du bist doch kein Ausbeuter, du kannst ihn begreifen.
Er ist gut für dich, erkundige dich nach ihm.
Die Dummköpfe nennen ihn dumm, und die Schmutzigen nennen ihn schmutzig.
Er ist gegen den Schmutz und gegen die Dummheit.
Er ist nicht das Chaos
Sondern die Ordnung
Er ist das Einfache
Das schwer zu machen ist

(Brecht's America, GW 2:852)

Brecht knew shortly after he started reading Marx that the socialist revolution must come; he wrote in 1926:

In my opinion it's certain that socialism, revolutionary socialism, will change the face of our land in our lifetime. Our life will be filled with struggles of exactly that kind.


This recognition, prompted by the sheer logical and moral force of Marx's argument, jerked Brecht for the first time, and forever, out of his early amoral stance. He now knew what he had to fight for. Knowing was "the simple thing" ("das Einfache"); but who would make the revolution and how, and what should his own role be?

Marxism showed Brecht who would fight. The poor did not have to remain passive victims, as they had been when he showed "sympathy" for them. In 1920 he had called Gerhart Hauptmann's Rose Bernd "a revolutionary play" (GW 15:24) because it showed the suffering of a poor farm girl. In 1928 he wrote:

The fate of Rosa Bernd, the weavers and so on can no longer be perceived as tragic and so can no longer be alleged to be tragic in an age that can already reduce these catastrophes simply to a deficiency of
civilization, for the elimination of which the age has already worked out perfectly practical suggestions.

Das Schicksal der Rose Bernd, der Weber und so weiter kann nicht mehr als tragisch empfunden und also auch nicht als tragisch vorgegeben werden in einer Zeit, welche diese Katastrophen schon auf einen bloßen Mangel der Zivilisation zurückführt, den zu beheben sie schon höchst praktische Vorschläge ausgearbeitet hat. (GW 15:173)

It is not tragedy when the poor simply accept their lot and do not fight back; it is pure folly. Furthermore, Brecht wrote about 1930, naturalist drama is a crime because it presents contemporary conditions as “natural,” i.e., permanent, and human beings as pieces of nature, unable to change conditions (GW 15:207).

Evoking pity is only a tactic to prevent change. Reading Marx taught Brecht to think of the poor not as objects of pity who are always with us but as a class of fighters, the force for change in the contemporary world. There was no room in Brecht’s revolutionary Marxism for charitable help for the poor. Persons who attempt it in his plays meet with the bitterest failure: either mere ineffectiveness, or a downright counterrevolutionary effect (e.g., The Measure Taken, St. Joan, The Good Person of Sichuan.) From the time he began reading Marx, Brecht no longer wore his worker’s cap just as a protest against literary high society; he was consciously on the side of the working class, because they were the group in whose own interest it was to make the revolution, and who therefore would be the fighters. The rejuvenating effect he had previously sought in New World culture he now sought from the working class, the revolutionary force. Not that the two are by any means mutually exclusive—most of Brecht’s early nonliterary influences had been from American popular or lower-class culture—but solidarity with, inspiration from, and respect for the working class is different from a mere escape from stuffy bourgeois art. For instance, Brecht credited the working class with the development of dialectical thinking (GW 20:76), which shows his respect, since he himself became a master at dialectics (see every page of Refugee Conversations!).

Finally, Brecht learned from Marxism to take his own writing seriously. This eventually led him out of the creative crisis he was in, but only after long study and much self-questioning on the role of the artist. Having learned that revolution was necessary and that it
would be made by the working class, Brecht, like every intellectual who becomes a Marxist, was confronted with the question whether persons of middle-class origin could contribute anything to the revolution. Brecht certainly did not identify himself with the bourgeoisie!—in fact, he thought of himself as a class traitor. In the 1938 poem “Driven Out for Good Reason,” he wrote:

When I was grown and looked around my world
I found I didn't like the people of my class
Nor giving orders nor being served
And I abandoned my class and hung around
With ordinary [lesser]people.

Als ich erwachsen war und um mich sah
Gefielen mir die Leute meiner Klasse nicht
Nicht das Befehlen und nicht das Bedientwerden
Und ich verließ meine Klasse und gesellte mich
Zu den geringeren Leuten.

(GW 9:721)

But being alienated from one's own class is not positive reason enough for being dependable help when another class fights to take power. In Drums in the Night, Brecht had already written a play showing that anyone who joins the revolutionary working class without needing a revolution for himself is not reliable. This is also a theme of St. Joan. Brecht wrote about this problem often, particularly when he first started reading Marx. Always strict and unsentimental in his thinking, he accepted from the start Marx’s contention that revolutions are made by classes, in their own self-interest, not primarily by individuals. In 1926 he wrote, “Real revolutions are not engendered (as in bourgeois histories) by feelings, but by interests” (“Die wirklichen Revolutionen werden nicht (wie in der bourgeoisen Geschichtsschreibung) durch Gefühle, sondern durch Interessen erzeugt”). It was necessary for intellectuals, then, to find their own reasons for needing a revolution:

If the intellectuals want to participate in the class struggle, they must intellectually conceive their sociological constitution as unified and caused by material conditions. Their opinion, heard frequently these days, that it is necessary to submerge themselves in the proletariat, is counterrevolutionary. . . .

The proletariat's interest in the class struggle is clear and unambiguous, the intellectuals’ interest, which is historically verifiable, is harder to explain. The only explanation is that the intellectuals can
expect the development of their (intellectual) activity only through a revolution. That determines their role in a revolution: It is an intellectual role.

Wollen die Intellektuellen sich am Klassenkampf beteiligen, so ist es nötig, daß sie ihre soziologische Konstitution als eine einheitliche und durch materielle Bedingungen bestimmte intellektuell erfassen. Ihre häufig zutage getretene Ansicht, es sei nötig, im Proletariat unterzutauchen, ist konterrevolutionär.

Das Interesse des Proletariats am Klassenkampf ist klar und eindeutig, das Interesse von Intellektuellen, das ja historisch feststeht, ist schwerer zu erklären. Die einzige Erklärung ist, daß die Intellektuellen nur durch die Revolution sich eine Entfaltung ihrer (intellektuellen) Tätigkeit erhoffen können. Ihre Rolle in der Revolution ist dadurch bestimmt: Es ist eine intellektuelle Rolle.

Sternberg writes that about 1930, at the time of the depression and Hitler's rise to power, Brecht believed the job of a writer was to analyze and to make suggestions on what reason each particular subgroup in the middle class would have for needing a revolution; to denote this motive, together they invented the word *Umwälzungsgrund* (reason for revolution) and shortened it to *Ug*. As a partial answer to the question of the intellectual's *Ug* (pronounced "oog"), Brecht came back to his old theme of freedom (*GW 20*:56)—but not the kind of freedom Garga had sought, not simply an individual escape, but rather a freedom that would be permanent and universal because based on a change in the economic and social system. In *Refugee Conversations* (1940–41), the worker tells the intellectual that intellectuals are exploited: "They have to rent out their head to the employer as we do our hands" ("Sie müssen ihren Kopf ausvermieten an die Unternehmer wie wir unsere Hände") (*GW 14*:1482).

To make his revolutionary role as a dramatist clear, Brecht used class terminology in referring to the theater: the owners and producers are the capitalists, those who write plays are the workers (*GW 15*:136, 171): they own no means of production and have nothing to sell but their labor, and have no voice in how their own plays are to be produced and how they are to be used, i.e., to what ideological purpose before what audience. It is not in the realm of possibility that the bourgeois interests that own the theaters would change them, just as Rockefeller cannot transform Standard Oil into a socialized enterprise. Therefore, the demand for a new theater
is the demand for a new social system (GW 15:172), and dramatists are revolutionaries when they regard themselves as a cultural proletariat and use the fighting methods of the working class.

And how can the working class use intellectuals? “To shoot holes in bourgeois ideology . . . For study of the forces that ‘move the world’ . . . To develop pure theory farther” (“Um die bürgerliche Ideologie zu durchlöchern . . . Zum Studium der Kräfte, die ‘die Welt bewegen’ . . . Um die reine Theorie weiterzuentwickeln”) (GW 20:54). These answers are not as simple as they sound, of course. Brecht, like most Marxist intellectuals, spent a good part of his life thinking about the role of intellectuals and the middle class in general in a revolution to be made by the workers.

The artist is a special case in the intelligentsia. Brecht thought about and discussed the role of art and especially theater right to the end of his life, including a good deal of argument with East German cultural policies. But it is important to note that from the beginning of his Marxist study, the question was always how he as an artist and intellectual could take part in the revolution, not whether he wanted to.

From then on, Brecht considered himself both a communist and an artist, and he remained convinced that theater could be useful in a revolution and in a socialist country. He saw no need to sacrifice his belief in art for communism or his belief in communism for art. This pushed him to extraordinary new forms in drama, theater, and poetry, because he was always interested in the usefulness of his work, without ever neglecting its quality. Thinking of new forms, he juxtaposed the world of crass business and the world of poetry and asked, “Can we speak about money in the form of the iamb?” (“Können wir in der Form des Jambus über Geld sprechen?”) (GW 15:197). His answer was to use the most heroic classical forms precisely to talk about money, but in a satiric style. In St. Joan and Ui the Shakespeare, Goethe, and Schiller parodies are intended not to make the classics look ridiculous but to show how once progressive forms become an ideological cover for reaction and to show the importance of economic laws, which Brecht considers equivalent to the older conceptions of providence and fate. Although he felt the classics were reactionary when used by today’s bourgeoisie, Brecht decided they could be put to revolutionary uses if seen through new (workers’) eyes. The city and the stock market were the new battlefields.
BRECHT'S POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

But in every case—reactionary or progressive—art was engaged on one side or another. Never was it to be seen as neutral; naturalism for instance, because of its defeatism, tended to prevent revolution. And worse:

The working class has the terrifying position that art is harmful, because it distracts the masses from the struggle. But it hasn’t distracted the bourgeoisie from its struggle, not for one minute.

Das Proletariat steht auf dem schreckeneinflößenden Standpunkt, Kunst sei schädlich, da sie die Massen vom Kampf ablenke. Aber sie hat die Bourgeoisie von deren Kampf auch nicht abgelenkt, keine Minute. (GW 15:65)

The bourgeoisie knew how to use art as a weapon in class struggle; the working class must learn how to do the same. It would be a mistake simply to want to get rid of art, as recommended by some people on the left; here Brecht was adamant. He always believed both that art could be useful and that it was a valid pursuit for itself as well. Brecht openly criticized leftists who polemicized against art, and he defended the necessity that art develop as collective expression, rather than being ordered by individuals to express something in particular. Art had its own needs and laws of development. It would serve the class that produced it because it was collective in nature, but it could not be forced; then it would no longer be art (GW 15:66).

We have then in Brecht a communist who cared equally for the integrity of his art and for the use to which it could be put in his political cause. Disagreements between him and the Communist Party (KPD) or its GDR descendant the Socialist Unity Party (SED) were intensely interesting discussions on the use of art for political education. Brecht refused to compromise either on his belief in communism or his belief in art, which makes his comments on the subject important and unusual reading.

The interaction between art and politics—specifically between theater and education to communism—became the central theme of his thought for the thirty years he lived after reading Marx. In the first period of this preoccupation, he wrote in order to teach persons living under capitalism about the machinery of capitalism and methods of revolutionary discipline. In the second period, he wrote works against fascism, and political parables. And in the third, he wrote and directed plays to contribute to the development of a...
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communist consciousness in a socialist country. In all these phases (which are influenced by historical circumstances), Brecht believed the particular function that theater could have in the revolution was to teach. It could teach negatively—the nature of capitalism (and its distortion, fascism)—and positively—revolutionary tactics, the nature of socialist and communist man, and the dialectic between individual and collective. The word teacher became for Brecht the highest praise, and the process of learning became the most fascinating human activity.

After his Schaffenskrise (creative crisis) in the second half of the twenties, Brecht never again hesitated to define himself primarily as a writer; but at the same time, he was never again “just” a writer. In short, he had found a purpose outside his work that made it imperative that he continue. This is what reading Marx in 1926 did for him; this is why he considered that year and that experience the turning point in his life.

As Marxism brought a purpose to Brecht's drama, that purpose brought it a new form. Or, more exactly: he had already started writing about new subjects, and “just grasping the new subject matter requires a new dramatic and theatrical form” (“schon die Erfassung der neuen Stoffgebiete kostet eine neue dramatische und theatricalische Form”) (GW 15:197), but he did not begin writing dramatic theory until it became clear to him what he wanted to accomplish with his drama. His theories of drama and theater, which he wrote prolifically after reading Marx, were (like his adoption of Marxism itself) largely a process of putting names to instincts and practices already evident in his work. The difference is that in this field he created his own terminology. That is one of Brecht's contributions to revolutionary theory.

Audiences and critics had always sensed that there was something strange and new about Brecht's writing. But until 1926 the newness had been largely a rebellion against the sterility of the old theater. After 1926 Marxism helped him coordinate the new formal possibilities he had found more or less by accident before; he combined them into an aesthetic system that was a consistent result of the philosophical system he was adopting. That is: his dramatic theory became the logical and necessary means to promote the socialist revolution through theater. His “epic theater,” as he first called it, was not an arbitrary invention; he could show logically why it was
necessary for political purposes. It was also not a private idiosyn­
cracy of Brecht's; it was convincing to others working in revolution­
ary dramatics. Günter Weisenborn, who worked with Brecht on
production of *The Mother*, wrote:

In the course of long conversations I had with Brecht about Germany, I
recognized that his theory of epic theater is almost indispensable for
certain specific purposes. . . . I soon concluded that, at least when the
theme of the play is political behavior, the epic form of theater is the
best.

Im Verlauf langer Unterhaltungen über Deutschland, die ich mit Brecht
führte, erkannte ich, daß seine Theorie vom epischen Theater für ganz
bestimmte Zwecke kaum zu entbehren ist. . . . Es ergab sich für mich
bald, daß die epische Form des Theaters zumindest dann die beste ist,
wenn das Thema des Stückes politisches Verhalten ist.

Brecht formulated the theory of epic theater in detail for the first
time in the well-known notes to *Mahagonny*, where he contrasted
lists of attributes of the "dramatic" form and the "epic" form, for
instance:

| doing         | telling a story          |
| suggestion    | argument                  |
| the unchangeable | the changeable and      |
| person        | changing person           |
| one scene for | each scene for            |
| the other     | itself                    |
| thinking      | social existence          |
| determines    | determines thinking      |
| existence     |                          |
| emotion       | reason                    |
| handelnd      | erzählend                 |
| Suggestion    | Argument                  |
| Der unveränderliche | Der veränderliche und    |
| Mensch        | verändernde Mensch        |
| Eine Szene für die | Jede Szene für sich    |
| andere        |                          |
| Das Denken bestimmt | Das gesellschaftliche   |
| das Sein      | Sein bestimmt            |
|               | das Denken               |
| Gefühl        | Ratio²⁷                 |

These are elements of Marxist theory, but they are also stylistic
techniques Brecht had used before. Piscator called his own theater
epic; Brecht in fact says that naturalist drama was the first epic
drama, because it was an attempt to bring Zola's novels to the stage
(GW 15:214). And he also suggests his own first play, *Baal*, as an example of early epic form (GW 15:133). But it is clear that *Baal* was by no means what Brecht meant when he began, after reading Marx, to write a whole theory of epic theater.

Happy with Brecht's late plays but unhappy with his theories, some Western critics like to say that he was a greater dramatist than theorist and that the late plays contradict the schematic theory of epic theater. Of course they do, if the notes to *Mahagonny* are taken as definitive; even when he wrote them, he said they were not definitive, and later he revised his theory considerably. About 1930–31 he practically stopped using the term "epic" theater, which is unfortunately the term that posterity has clung to, and started calling what he was writing and writing about "dialectical" theater. Its meaning becomes clearest when we compare the *Lehrstücke* to *A Man's a Man*: in the latter (earlier) play there is no conflict, Galy Gay is simply manipulated. In the *Lehrstücke* there are both conflict and the need to find an answer: *The Measure Taken*, for instance, presents what seems to be an insoluble dilemma; it can only be resolved with reference to the context, namely, the necessary strategy for revolution. The play is not self-contained; solution of the problem presented in it requires thought about reality. (The correct answer may even change depending on historical conditions when the play is performed.) In *The Mother* there is a standard theme of psychological theater: estrangement of the son from the mother. It is transcended with reference to "the third thing," which is the context of the play: their common fight for revolution. Again: in *The Yea-Sayer* and *The Nay-Sayer*, the dilemmas presented cannot be solved simply from the dramatic premises of the plays. The audience must think of the values beyond the plays; it is forced to bring external criteria for judgment. Dialectical theater then is the putting of a certain conflict within a historical context.

This began, Brecht later claims, when economics were brought into drama. The economic basis of life is the context into which conventional conflicts are placed; the purpose of theater is to show the relationship, thereby providing new insights about the conventional conflicts. Theater should descend as deep as it can into the base or substructure (GW 15:132–33); if it remains a creature only of the superstructure, it will continue to be pure entertainment, or "culinary." These convictions were developing in Brecht before he started reading Marx, rather as a result of his interest in America,
which led him independently to a concentration on economic themes in drama. Thus it is that America led Brecht not only to Marx but simultaneously, or even a little earlier, to epic theater. Elisabeth Hauptmann makes this fact clear in her description of Brecht's work on *Joe Fleischhacker*. We have already quoted the part of her journal entry from 26 July, 1926, in which she tells how Brecht was determined to see if he could understand theories about money (see above, p. 137). The entry continues:

Before he made the at least for him very important discoveries in this direction, he already knew that the hitherto existing (grand) dramatic form was not suitable for demonstrating such modern processes as the distribution of the world's wheat or the biographies of people of our time or for that matter any act that has consequences. “These things,” B. said, “are not dramatic in our sense, and when one ‘poeticizes’ them they are no longer true, and drama isn’t that kind of thing any more anyway, and when one sees that today’s world no longer belongs in the drama, then the drama just doesn’t belong in the world.” In the course of these studies Brecht established his theory of “epic drama.”

It was the conviction that new subjects must be shown that led to the theory of epic theater; but Brecht later chose to call his own version dialectical theater; and he restricted the term *epic* to production and acting: “epic style of presentation” (“epischer Darstellungsstil”). This was probably to differentiate his own theories from the many early productions (e.g., Piscator) that he had named “epic.” So when he writes that “dialectical theater” developed with the addition of economics to naturalism (*GW* 15:216), he is probably referring to everything he wrote from about 1926, and simply renaming it.

Probably the principal stylistic means of “dialectical” theater was *Verfremdung*, or dramatic alienation, i.e., making the familiar strange. Brecht did not use the term, however, until the later thirties
(Ewen says 1936, in connection with the Danish production of *The Roundheads and the Peakheads*). But Brecht had used the technique almost from the start. He writes in 1954 that he had not been aware of the possibilities of dramatic alienation when he wrote *Drums in the Night* (*GW* 17:946), but his explanation of why he chose the American milieu for the next play, *In the Jungle* (see above, p. 15), is an example of an alienation effect.

In fact, not only was America Brecht’s first experiment with setting as alienation effect; that remained a principal use of the American setting throughout. In *Arturo Ui* (1941) the American background is there to make the characters’ actions appear as social phenomena or “types,” produced by a certain set of social or economic relations. Were the plays set in Germany, the audience would react to the characters as exceptional individuals (*GW* 17:971-72).

Brecht used this technique, then, as early as 1921. But he did not have a programmatic purpose for it, and so did not formulate a name and a theory for it, until he felt he was sure of the relation between social structure and individual behavior. Then he was able to say that a play set in the wheat exchange cannot and must not have “dramatic” form, which encourages empathy, because it is wrong for the audience to believe it possible to understand or identify with the world as it is (*GW* 15:186).

In 1939 Brecht was able to define dramatic alienation and provide a full explanation of its purpose. Definition:

To “alienate” an event or a character means in the first instance simply to take the obvious, familiar, evident from the event or character and to produce astonishment and curiosity over it.


Purpose: presenting behavior as a social phenomenon that has specific causes, and therefore is *not* a universal principle. It must occur to the audience that in another society the character might have acted differently. To “alienate” means, then, to historicize. And the value of historicization is that the audience does not consider characters on the stage unchangeable and helplessly ruled by fate; rather, it sees that people are a certain way because conditions are a
certain way, and vice versa. Both character and the conditions could be different. Brecht gives a primer-book example of the technique of historicization when he writes about his experience in trying to finish Joe Fleischhacker, in the poem “This Babylonian Confusion” (see above, pp. 137–38): from the point of view of later, liberated generations, the behavior of the wheat speculators and of the people who allow themselves to be exploited is strange and incomprehensible.

At the same time as he started talking about Verfremdung, Brecht also developed his dramatic theory further and began calling his plays not just “dialectical” but “non-Aristotelian” drama. A definition of the new term is simple: it is theater that does not produce empathy (and therefore, also, not pity or fear or catharsis). But the theory that is subsumed under this concept is a new step, a complication and sophistication of the earlier theories, now covering not only non-culinary opera and Lehrstücke but also Brecht’s great late plays.

The prevention of empathy or identification was also an element of Brecht’s art from the beginning; he wrote in 1922 that he hoped in Baal and Jungle to have avoided the mistake of most art: “its attempt to carry away” (“ihre Bemühung, mitzureißen”) (GW 15:62) (i.e., to affect the audience’s emotions). But he was unable to say why his way was any better; it was only different. The audience should remain in “splendid isolation,” he continued—using the English words—because interest in the Gleichnis (parable) is a higher kind of interest. Why is it higher? Brecht could not say until he knew what he wanted to make images or parables of. As Hans Mayer points out, this kind of intellectual theater was still art for art’s sake: it was producing a particular kind of pleasure; i.e., thinking; it was not yet teaching a historical context. (That is similar to the criticism Brecht later made of his character Galileo.)

In summary; there are stylistic elements of epic/dialectical/non-Aristotelian theater and of dramatic alienation in almost all Brecht’s work. But Brecht himself did not know what the purpose of these techniques was until he developed a philosophy that demanded of him that he use drama not just to interpret the world but to change it. This happened directly as a result of his interest in America; in fact, he began to discover some of the principles of Marxism and of epic theater even before reading Marx, while working on a play on America.
When we say Brecht gained all this political and artistic perspective by reading Marx, we do not mean that he immediately overcame his creative crisis; on the contrary, he continued to produce very little in 1927 and 1928. But it was no longer paralysis; it was deliberate. He was learning how to walk before he could run. He remained convinced that he should write plays explaining economic mechanisms, but he had to understand economics thoroughly before he could write the plays. Sternberg notes:

When we were talking about the necessity of reason, I once told him he might hate me later on. As long as he tried to form a picture of today's society through use of reason, he would not be able to write. And this period could last a long time. Brecht admitted this. And in fact, in the first two years that we knew each other he wrote very little. But at the same time Brecht said he would struggle against the feelings of hatred for me, since he would know where they came from. Understanding reality was, he said, a life-and-work necessity for him.


If, as Sternberg feels, Brecht did later come to dislike him, it was because their political differences made it impossible for them to talk (Sternberg found Brecht too Stalinist) and not because Brecht resented having been seduced away from his writing for two years. His study of the roots of social relations was, as he said, absolutely necessary for him—and for his work.

It was a study that he carried out intensely for the first two to two-and-a-half years; Käthe Rülcke-Weiler writes that “Brecht devoted more than two years—from 1926 to 1928—primarily to the study of Marxism and gave up writing plays.” (“Brecht verwandte mehr als zwei Jahre—von 1926 bis 1928—in erster Linie aufs Studium des Marxismus und verzichtete aufs Schreiben von Stücken.”) During that time he wrote musicals, which were transitional pieces without the agitprop purposes of the plays that he began writing in 1929. Only after two years of intense study did he feel qualified to write the
kind of play that Fleischhacker had set out to be: a play requiring a knowledge of Marxism. The development of Brecht's thought in those two years and the later refinements of it are subjects for another study. Such a study would be crucial to an understanding of Brecht, and more: a contribution to the theory of learning and influence. Reinhold Grimm says that Brecht's study of Marx was comparable in intensity and effect to Schiller's study of Kant—and it has hardly been investigated at all.

Brecht seems at first to have mistrusted organized socialism and concentrated his study and writing on the criticism of capitalism. The Communist Party does not appear in his imaginative work until St. Joan, and in his essays and notes he is critical of the Party and of socialists. This fact should invalidate the psychological interpretation of some critics who wish to "excuse" Brecht's belief in communism by saying he needed a stern discipline. Brustein, for instance, writes: "His attraction to Communism, therefore, can also be ascribed to the fact that it offers a system of regimentation, a form of rational control over his frightening individualism and terrifying subjectivity"; and "Brecht responded as eagerly to the Communist discipline as to the Communist dogma; there is something almost religious about his attachment to his new creed." The fact is that Brecht's early interest in Marxism was not primarily characterized by a desire to submit to discipline. It was clearly born of the desire to understand: as Brecht himself makes perfectly clear, it was a rational, not a psychological motivation. What he wanted to understand was capitalism, and his work continued for a while to be an exposure of capitalism. It was the emphasis on rationality that eventually made Brecht see the need for positive action and therefore discipline, and he wrote several plays showing how discipline (= strategic action) must be learned. But there is no evidence that he welcomed discipline per se, or for psychological reasons. It was the goal (he had never had a goal before), communism, that he welcomed, because it was rational and just. Discipline was the necessary and often unpleasant means to achieve the goal.

Dedication to revolution came to him fast but dedication to a party or organization much more slowly. In fact, he never joined the
KPD or the SED (many dedicated communists do not), but by 1930 he approved in the main of their direction. Thus he was able to say honestly to the literal-minded House Unamerican Activities Committee that he had never been a Communist, though of course in fact he was every inch a communist, and people who knew him in America say (with exasperation) that he was indefatigable in proselytizing.

In one of the first studies he wrote after he began reading Marx, Brecht described the Party in unflattering terms: “a rather small-minded, but strong and sly petty bureaucracy” (“eine geistig ziemlich niedrige, aber kräftige und schlaue Kleinbürokratie”) (GW 20:49) that would be swept away without sentimentality after the revolution because it would turn out to have material interests different from those of the working class. One has to respect the Party, Brecht wrote, because it held a mass of a million people together in the opposition—but it clearly did not appeal to his sense of what the revolution should look like. In short, Brecht held at that time what might forty years later be called a “new left” position.

His objection to a boring bureaucracy is echoed in a projected foreword to *A Man's a Man* from 1926 that was never published. Here he criticizes socialists for not being seriously enough involved in struggle: their arguments are so weak that one can only conclude they do not know what they want, which must mean they are not suffering as much as they claim. “I am curious what socialism is . . . it is absolutely vague and fuzzy” (“ich bin neugierig was sozialismus ist . . . er ist absolut vage und verschwommen”). He continues: one must really control oneself to avoid exploding in anger on hearing what nonsense an otherwise useful man speaks. When he has heard socialists in debate, he has usually chosen their side, “but their babble was dreadful” (“aber ihr geschwätz war entsetzlich”). They react emotionally but are ashamed of emotions. They claim they cannot express themselves because the bourgeoisie will not allow the working class to learn how to think, but Brecht finds that an insipid argument: to express oneself one only needs strong feelings. He has never heard, for instance, of a polar explorer who starved because he could not say in Eskimo that he was hungry or because he was too hungry to talk. Brecht “allows himself to conclude” from the fact that the worker cannot express himself that his emotions are too weak. “but that is a monstrous accusation” (“das ist aber ein ungeheuerer vorwurf”) (BBA 348, 31).
BRECHT'S POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

Brecht knew that the poor suffered; this we have seen sufficiently in his early plays. What he most likely meant in this very strange outburst is: the working class would know well enough what it wanted and be able to say so in plain language, if only the socialists would stop confusing things with their gibberish. Brecht continues:

having arrived here i will allow all possible objections except the one that socialism is something clear i mean as clear as a struggle requires.

hier angelangt lasse ich alle möglichen einwände zu nur nicht den daß sozialismus etwas klares und zwar etwas so klares ist wie es zu einem kampf nötig ist. (BBA 348, 32)

As in other writings of this time, he was for the struggle, but found the means of the organized group too far from the direct emotional idea of revolution, too unclear and tied up in subtle tactical considerations. Probably there was some validity in his criticism, but probably he also suffered from the romanticism of the revolutionary neophyte who wants quick direct action and no politicking. (It is also possible that Brecht meant to contrast socialism to the more revolutionary communism; in light of what he says about the Party, however, it is more likely that he meant to contrast both forms of organized Marxism to revolution.)

The foreword seems to have little to do with A Man's a Man. The connection is simply that that is a play about a man who does not think clearly, which is the danger the socialists are imposing on the working class. But Brecht wrote another foreword to A Man's a Man, in 1927. It is on first sight also strange; it tries to maintain that Galy Gay becomes stronger when he gives up his own personality; that by becoming part of the mass he can only win, that in fact he is a predecessor of the “new type of person” who is the goal of our future. To be sure, Brecht ends by saying to the audience, “But perhaps you’ll come to another opinion. Against which I would be the last person to object” (“Aber vielleicht gelangen Sie zu einer anderen Ansicht. Woegen ich am wenigsten etwas einzuwenden habe”) (GW 17:978). That could mean Brecht had exactly the opposite opinion from what he wrote and only wanted to provoke thought.

Brecht's critics on the right will claim he was making fanatic application of the communist contempt for individuality, the same fanaticism that he reveals in the Lehrstücke on acquiescence, and that he is blind here to the nature of the collective Galy Gay joins.
BRECHT'S AMERICA

But Brecht does not say that this particular collective is good, only that the process of learning to be part of a collective is a necessary step toward a socialized society that will contain the “new person.” Let us remember Marxist theory: the increasing collectivization of industrial capitalist society creates a new consciousness in the working class, who eventually find it necessary to destroy anachronistic private ownership of their factories in order that society be structured in the way that technology and consciousness now make possible. Galy Gay is already the collective man; when his sort get together the revolution will come. Brecht stretched A Man's a Man there a little to give himself a concrete example from his own works of the theories he was reading; 1927 is the year in which he revised In the Jungle, leaving out much of the private touches. It is also the year in which he wrote The Flight of the Lindberghs, later Flight over the Ocean, praising man's oneness with technology and the possibilities of technological progress to liberate rather than enslave. In all these cases Brecht worked with the new theories he was learning, testing them with his own experiences and studies. His sometimes farfetched reinterpretations are comments on his thoughts on Marxism at the time: neither of the forewords quoted has much to do with A Man's a Man. He used his own plays, as he felt Marx himself would, as Anschauungsmaterial (material for observation), sociological data.

In 1930 he also attempted the last rewriting of Baal, left in fragment form as Bad Baal the Antisocial Man. Here Baal was to be made to look like a useless romantic aesthete, and the workers whom he meets have the more serious business of avoiding starvation to worry about. This fragment was apparently part of the cycle of works in which Brecht tried to illustrate Marxist theories: The Bread Store, Fatzer, Nothing Will Come of Nothing, and Bad Baal the Antisocial Man were all written about 1929-30, and they all remained fragments. This new emphasis is also clear from the changes Brecht made at the same time in The Threepenny Opera for the filmscript, which was to be called The Lump on the Head: the beggar hordes Peachum unleashes threaten to destroy the whole status quo, Macheath and his gang expropriate a bank, and their clothing is suddenly transformed into business dress as they step from a stolen car to the bank steps.37

Brecht's “conversion” to Marxism did not occur quite as suddenly
as Saul's to Christianity then after all. As Lenin explains it, there are three revolutions in thought contained in Marxism: the development of the philosophy of dialectical materialism to apply to human society, the development in political economy of a "scientific" explanation of capitalism based on the theory of surplus value, and the development of socialism from a utopian appeal to intellectuals to a program for class struggle. 38 Brecht began his study with the critique of capitalism, and the first works he wrote after starting to read Marx reflect his first reading. His interest in dialectics developed slowly but steadily and eventually informed every aspect of his style and even his nomenclature; materialism was easier to grasp and is expressed baldly in the famous anti-idealistic line "First comes eating, then comes morality" in the Threepenny Opera of 1928. About socialism and the methods of struggle necessary to achieve it, Brecht seems to have learned more slowly. We do not know exactly which Marxist works Brecht read after Capital, but we can state with certainty that after 1926 the next big change in his thought, at least as far as it is expressed in his writings, came in 1929, when he began to write not only against capitalism but also for communism, and began to approve the methods of the Communist Party.

Sternberg dates Brecht's "conversion" to communism from May Day 1929. He describes the workers' demonstration, which had been forbidden. The workers held it anyway, while he and Brecht watched from a window. The police broke up the demonstration, and to the observers' horror twenty were shot.

When Brecht heard the shots and saw that people were hit, his face turned whiter than I had ever seen him in my life. I believe it was not least this experience that led him more and more strongly to the communists.

Als Brecht die Schüsse hörte und sah, daß Menschen getroffen wurden, wurde er so weiß im Gesicht, wie ich ihn nie zuvor in meinem Leben gesehen hatte. Ich glaube, es war nicht zuletzt dieses Erlebnis, was ihn dann immer stärker zu den Kommunisten trieb. 39

Not the least important thing, but surely a single experience was also not the only, or even principal, cause for Brecht's "conversion." To understand Brecht's development from critic of capitalism (a position he came to through his interest in America) to fighter for communism, it is necessary to turn again to his studies of the American system.