Chapter Four

1927–1929
Studying Marx:
“Mahagonny” and the Learning Plays

“Mahagonny Song Play,” and “The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny”

The first dramatic work that Brecht finished after starting to read Marx was again set in America. This time, however, it was a frankly mythical America, a geographical impossibility composed of various American dreams Brecht had collected in his more naïve days. *Mahagonny*, a Songspiel (Song Play) and Brecht’s first of many ventures into musical theater, simply provided a framework for the five “Mahagonny” poems from the early twenties that Brecht had included in the *Home Devotions*, plus one new poem, “But This Entire Mahagonny,” which gave the earlier poems a bitter and ironic twist. Originally, Brecht had probably not intended that those early poems on the decadent pleasures should be a criticism of capitalism: they were portraits of contemporary attitudes, with some heroism and some desperation. It is the context he provides in the Songspiel that turns the old songs into bitter criticism of American capitalism. This is, of course, another example of Brecht’s discovery, upon reading Marx, that his early writings were good data for a study of human relations under capitalism; he was now in a position to make a Marxist analysis of his own very accurate but untheoretical observations. He called the expanded version a “description of customs and morals” (“Sittenschilderung”) (*GW* 2:1*).

*Mahagonny* does not have the programmatic intent that informs Brecht’s works beginning in 1929; it is more like an explanation, in
parable form, of the origins of the different kinds of alienation capitalism produces: alienation from the enjoyment of labor and from the enjoyment of the fruits of labor, alienation between man and woman, alienation between old friends. All are caused by the interpolation of money between people and their desires. But there is absolutely no suggestion what to do about the problem. Paul Ackermann dies recognizing he has pursued a false happiness, and Mahagonny falls ever deeper into chaos, but no way out is suggested. The Director's Script of 1927 calls it a “Dance of Death” (“Totentanz”). The piece is, in short, anti-capitalist in implication, but it (like The Threepenny Opera) could easily have been written by a bourgeois reformer. There is nothing in any work Brecht wrote before 1929 that would necessarily have to come from the pen of a communist.

Nevertheless, the premieres of both the Mahagonny Songspiel (Baden-Baden, 1927) and Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny (Leipzig 1930) caused scandals; Lotte Lenya thinks the theater scandal in Leipzig was the worst in history. The bourgeoisie, who expected to see classical opera in its opera house, was certainly convinced that it was seeing communist propaganda, as is evident from the reviews. A Professor Ernst Müller, for instance, protested in the Allgemeine Musikzeitung against the presumption of making an opera stage of the rank of the Leipzig one, where today Fidelio, tomorrow Tristan, and Good Friday probably Parsifal appears, into a playground for criminals, whores, pimps, a gathering place for communist demonstrations.


For the production three days later in Kassel, Brecht and Weill toned the opera down slightly, in particular the allegedly “communist” demonstration at the end. Weill wrote,

We now have a version which the Pope himself could no longer take exception to. It is made clear that the final demonstrations are in no wise “Communistic”—it is simply that Mahagonny, like Sodom and Gomorrah, falls on account of the crimes, the licentiousness and the general confusion of its inhabitants.
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Brecht was still more interested in shocking the bourgeoisie than in building working-class consciousness. For *Mahagonny* is, in the final analysis, a picture of petty-bourgeois life unveiled, written for the bourgeoisie in order to confront it with its own hypocrisy; it is a play designed to catch the conscience of the king. This is why it is so appealing. It has wonderful, sophisticated satire, compared to the stark direct statements of positive lessons written later for workers. Its music, as Brecht later feared, comes almost too close to being "culinary": it traps the audience by appealing to our own sentimental taste and then slaps us with the satire. No members of the consumption-oriented society can fail to see ourselves in *Mahagonny*, even leftists: even those who reject the commercial ideology will still be seduced into self-recognition by the music.

This was not just Weill's addition to Brecht's text; it is impossible to differentiate sharply between Brecht as author of the text and Weill as author of the music. The two worked very closely together on both; Weill says that he and Brecht worked together almost a year on the text of the opera, and Brecht had composed melodies to some of the songs already. Weill's versions of the "Alabama Song" and "Benares Song" are almost exactly like Brecht's, and the others bear some resemblance. Furthermore they agreed completely in all their writings on the task of music in the theater, Brecht explaining what Weill was doing as naturally as if he had done it himself, which to a certain extent (both actually and through advice) he had.

It also would be a mistake to make a very sharp distinction between the two versions of *Mahagonny*, the *Songspiel* and the full-length opera. According to Weill's notes in the 1930 program, he composed music for the five Mahagonny songs in the *Home Devotions* as a stylistic study for the opera that he and Brecht had already begun. He wrote the music during the month of May 1927, and his archivist, David Drew, reports that Weill announced to his publishers at the beginning of May that "a subject for a large-scale tragic opera is already worked out." In fact, Brecht had planned a "mahagonny-opera" as early as July 1924, as we know from a dated notebook (BBA 461, 61); and Elisabeth Hauptmann claims that when the poems called "Mahagonny Songs" were first written about 1920 and 1921, Brecht intended them to be part of a play. Lotte Lenya remembers that Brecht and Weill started work on the full-length opera immediately after returning to Berlin from the
The premiere of the Songspiel. The two were really one continuous work, not an original and a later revision.

Work on Mahagonny was briefly interrupted three times for other musicals Brecht and Weill wrote together. In the middle of 1928, they took a short break (Lenya says it was a few months, Drew that it was a few weeks!) to fulfill a contract they had from the director Aufricht in Berlin. He wanted an adaptation of John Gay's Beggar's Opera. The Threepenny Opera, written as an aside during the work on Mahagonny, was performed on the last day of August 1928. It became such a success that Brecht, Weill, and the company of actors decided (according to Elisabeth Hauptmann) to put together another play quickly, to be able to keep together the group that had so much enjoyed producing The Threepenny Opera. Hauptmann wrote Happy End, but Weill wrote the music and Brecht suggested the story and may have written the song texts. Then there came another contract from the Baden-Baden Music Festival for Brecht and Weill; this time they wrote a new kind of work, a didactic radio play. The Flight of the Lindberghs (renamed Flight over the Ocean when Brecht learned of Lindbergh's support for Hitler; Brecht said, significantly, that Lindbergh “got lost in the swamp of our cities” ['verlor sich im Sumpf unserer Städte'] [GW 2:3*]) became the formal model for the communist Lehrstücke Brecht wrote in 1929-30. Both Flight of the Lindberghs and Happy End were performed in the summer of 1929.

But throughout 1927–29 Mahagonny was Brecht’s principal project. Drew says that during the late summer and early autumn of 1927, Weill and Brecht worked on it together almost daily; yet the score was not finished until April 1929, two years after it was begun. It represents the most complete dramatic expression of Brecht’s thought and attitudes in the years between his discovery of Marx and his conscious commitment to communism. (Klaus Schuhmann, in writing about Brecht’s poetry to 1933, also considers the years 1926–29 a “transitional period.” But he investigates reasons for Brecht’s ideological development mainly in contemporary German events: Nazism, the Weimar Republic, working-class struggles. It is the contention of this study that Brecht’s entire political development to 1931—his attitude toward capitalism hardly changed after that—can be read from his works on America, and that America may have been at least as strong an influence as
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Germany in causing this development.) And yet *Mahagonny* was not a very strenuous or serious work: it is an easy criticism of capitalist society; it is, as Brecht himself continually insisted, “fun” ("ein Spaß"). Since the other two and one-half plays he wrote in this period also cost a minimum of exertion, it is apparent that his serious study was occurring apart from his playwriting or even taking precedence over it; at any rate, he had not yet broken out of his creative “crisis.” He could still say of the music-dramas written in 1927-29 that he wrote them “with his left hand.” In fact, his most enthusiastic critic, Ihering, wrote in 1931, “I have always regarded *The Threepenny Opera* as a secondary work, meant for giving entertainment theater a different substance, a different form” ("Ich habe ‘Die Dreigroschenoper’ immer als ein Nebenwerk betrachtet, geeignet, der Unterhaltungsdramatik eine andere Substanz, eine andere Form zu geben").

This does not mean that the musicals are not excellent works, but only that they did not force Brecht into much new thinking. Although *Mahagonny* took several years to complete, the work on it was not very intense. A great deal of *Mahagonny*, in fact, is composed of elements from earlier works that Brecht reshuffled and quoted.

Of course, it was not out of laziness that Brecht adapted and reused material. On the contrary, he regarded all his plays as unfinished and revised them again and again. In keeping with his attitude that his own works and those of other authors were partly documentary material, he adopted from them whatever he found useful to make a point about society.

The American plays in particular borrow from each other because they are all part of the complex about mankind's migration to the cities: this theme is particularly apparent in *Mahagonny*, with its lumberjacks from Alaska and women from Havana, Oklahoma, or Alabama. In the 1930 and 1931 versions, the lumberjacks all had unmistakably German names, in accordance with the immigrant tradition of Sinclair’s *Jungle*, *The Wheel*, *Flags*, and Brecht’s *In the Jungle*. They are double immigrants: first to the New World, then from the most primitive and hard life in Jack London's Alaska to the most civilized (decadent) and soft life in the prototype of The City. Brecht and Weill recommended the substitution of German names for their original American names when the work was performed in
Germany, to avoid an overemphasis on Americanism, as Weill explains in a letter to the publishers:

The use of American names for *Mahagonny* runs the risk of establishing a wholly false idea of Americanism, Wildwest, or such like. I am very glad that, together with Brecht, I have now found a very convenient solution . . . and I ask you to include the following notice in the piano score and libretto: “In view of the fact that those amusements of man which can be had for money are always and everywhere exactly the same, and because the Amusement-Town of Mahagonny is thus international in the widest sense, the names of the leading characters can be changed into customary forms at any given time.”

The technique of using foreign settings to make the familiar strange always created the problem of striking the best balance. Apparently Brecht and Weill feared the German audience was happy not to recognize itself at all, when the exotic setting provided sufficient excuse. Brecht’s disclaimer after the production of *In the Jungle* (see above, p. 15) represents a similar retreat from the danger of letting the audience become too fascinated by the setting. *Mahagonny* is not about America; it is about capitalism. It is *set in* (mythical) America so that capitalist relations can be generalized and abstracted. But it is meant to affect how Germans view Germany.

However, Brecht’s problem with the audience’s reactions does not influence our study of his own attitudes toward America. Changing the names does not change the gold rush, Florida, and the mythology of the lawless West on which Mahagonny is obviously based.

Leokadja Begbick is lifted from *A Man’s a Man*, but most other details are adapted from poems or unfinished plays about America. Since many of the projected plays about America and the cities were not finished, it was an especially happy solution to insert their component parts into *Mahagonny* and *St. Joan of the Stockyards*.

The most obvious secondhand elements are, of course, the songs. It would be interesting to know how much the final *Mahagonny* has in common with the plans for a Mahagonny play in 1920–21 and a Mahagonny opera in 1924; it would give us more precise information on the development of Brecht’s anti-capitalism. But we can judge some from the songs themselves.
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The original five "Mahagonny Songs" were first published in Brecht's Home Devotions. The principal edition of that collection was the one Brecht revised in 1927. Weill may well have come upon him just as he was working on the new edition; Weill says he was fascinated by the idea of writing an opera about "Mahagonny," a "paradise city" ("Paradiesstadt") the very first time he met Brecht in the spring of 1927.17

In the "directions for use of the poems" in the Home Devotions, Brecht wrote that the section "Mahagonny Songs" was "the right thing for hours of luxury, consciousness of the flesh, and arrogance. (So, it comes under consideration for a very few readers.)" ("das Richtige für die Stunden des Reichtums, das Bewußtsein des Fleisches, und die Anmaßung. [Sie kommt also nur für sehr wenige Leser in Betracht.]") (GW 8:170). In this ironic instruction is contained some of the idea of Mahagonny as the type of the capitalist city. "Mahagonny" is (as Bronnen reported about the invention of the word in 1923) a petty-bourgeois utopia; of greater importance by 1927 is its dependence on wealth—which is only available to a few readers. It is no longer a dream for all of a place to escape to; now it is Brecht's portrait of the voluptuous life actually led by the rich and arrogant few, and it is aimed at them. Schumacher's criticism, that the opera is illogical because the persons inventing and carrying out the capitalist ethic are workers,18 is irrelevant. They have become rich men through their work, and now they want to reap the rewards of wealth. Insofar as Mahagonny is addressed to the working class at all, it says: years of sacrifice in order to make money are completely pointless, because the paradise the money can bring is hell; it is more alienated than the work itself.

This is the meaning of the repeated desire to return to Alaska: there the four men worked hard and lived like human beings together. Brecht was not for the abolition of work; rather, work should become an immediate pleasure rather than a painful means of making money with which to buy pleasure. Pleasure bought with money is no pleasure because the money takes precedence. Alaska, even though it is also primitive and is simply substituted for Tahiti in the poem "Tahiti," does not play the same role here as Tahiti in Jungle. Alaska is where the men came from, like the flatland for the Garga family. Mahagonny is where they want to go. Mahagonny is the realization of the earlier Tahiti dream: the escape, the natural
paradise. Here Brecht carries to its conclusion what would have happened if Garga and characters in early poems had actually gone to Tahiti, where a week is seven days without work (GW 2:502) and where they hoped to be cured of “syphilization” (“zi-zi-zi-zi-zivilis”) (GW 2:507). The result is an increase in all the evils of civilization because the paradises are run purely on a profit basis.

The “zivilis” pun comes from the “Mahagonny Song No. 1” in the Home Devotions. Here already there is an indication of what Mahagonny will become: the men expect to buy a laugh from the mouth of the moon with the paper money they have under their shirts—but then again, they don’t think much of that lovely green moon with its great dumb mouth. They want to escape civilization and buy the corporeal and decadent pleasures—horseflesh and woman-flesh, whisky-table and poker-table—but they also have a cynical attitude; they do not really expect to enjoy it.

The second “Mahagonny Song” pushes the money theme further. Mahagonny is expensive; everyone who stays there is skinned and is paid dollars for his skin; he loses every time but it is worth it—at first. By the last refrain the men win every time but it is not worth it: “but they get nothing out of it” (“doch sie haben nichts davon”). In the opera the song is divided so the first two verses are sung by the men at the beginning of the “Drinking” (“Saufen”) scene, but the last verse is sung at the end of the scene. Paul, who bought the drinks, has discovered he cannot pay; he has tried in his drunkenness to sail back to Alaska on a bar-table, and has ended in deep disappointment on finding he is still in Mahagonny.

The third Mahagonny song in the Home Devotions is the song of God in Mahagonny. God is helpless to punish the men for their crimes; he can no longer frighten them with the threats of hell because they know they are already there. This is the first hint of the theme of natural catastrophe and divine retribution, which is central to the opera: when men dare to flout all moral traditions, no natural punishment like the flood or hurricanes can reach them. When Paul Ackermann discovers in the face of imminent destruction that everything is allowed, the destruction ostentatiously avoids Mahagonny, leaving men to destroy each other. The song of God in Mahagonny has the same function. Paul forgets himself briefly in his terror of the electric chair and tries to use God (justice external to men) as a last salvation; the Mahagonny people laugh cynically,
show him a charade about how meaningless the concept of God is for a people who make their own laws, and electrocute Paul.

In all these songs there has been no indication that Mahagonny must necessarily be in America. Dollars are an international currency. In fact, even in the opera itself, it is only by inference that one concludes America is the model for Mahagonny: what other land has a gold rush, hurricanes, poker, whisky, and an electric chair? But exotic names of places in Burma (Mandelay) and India (Benares) are used indiscriminately; the city is set up under a rubber tree; Jenny comes from both Havana and Oklahoma; and to sail to Alaska, Paul has to cross the equator. Rather than saying Mahagonny is set in America, we should say Brecht purposely made it a mythical land, but with some very American characteristics. He said, together with Weill and Neher, in the Director's Script for 1930: “The name ‘Mahagonny’ just designates the concept of a city. It was chosen for its sound (phonetics). The geographic location of the city is irrelevant” ("Der Name ‘Mahagonny’ bezeichnet lediglich den Begriff einer Stadt. Er ist aus klanglichen [phonetischen] Gründen gewählt worden. Die geographische Lage der Stadt spielt keine Rolle."). Thus, it is wrong to think of geographical confusion as an oversight: it is intended to underline the mythical character of the city, so the audience realizes Mahagonny is an allegory for contemporary life. This is double alienation: not only a foreign country but a mythical version of it.

The last two Mahagonny songs in the Home Devotions were written in 1925. They are both in English, strengthening the American feeling, but one is about Alabama and one about Benares. And they are both about dependence on the trappings of civilization: if we don't find the next whisky-bar, pretty girl (boy, in the opera) and little dollar, I tell you we must die; and there is no whisky, no bar, no telephone in this town. Worst of all, Benares (the escape) is said to have perished in an earthquake. Oh, where shall we go! Here, too, much of the meaning of Mahagonny is anticipated: the sense of desperation, the need to escape, and the worst fate, having no more escape.

For the full opera Brecht chose one more early Home Devotions poem, “Against Temptation.” Paul sings it in the terrible hour of the hurricane, immediately upon discovering that nothing is forbidden. The song states the reason: there is no return; life is short so enjoy it
in large gulps; fear cannot touch you, because you die like all animals and nothing comes afterward. This is unmitigated nihilism, not just criticism of capitalism but criticism of the human condition. However, it is primarily an anti-religious statement: there is no afterlife, therefore no divine punishment. This atheism, which was certainly also Brecht's, leads to the recognition that men make their own laws, as in Mahagonny, but it does not have to mean chaos and the law of the jungle and money. It could also be a source of hope: freed of superstition, people could build a rational and just society. But in 1922, when the poem was first published, Brecht did not yet see that implication, nor does Paul Ackermann in Mahagonny. The poem comes from Brecht's period of bravado, of forging an existence in the face of meaninglessness. The speakers of all these early poems are tragic heroes just as the gold-rush America Mahagonny is set in was the cruel and lawless land that requires its people to be heroes, a land therefore to be admired. (That judgment was of course later reversed by Brecht in Galileo: "Unhappy the land that needs heroes" ["Unglücklich das Land, das Helden nötig hat"] [GW3: 1329]).

The heroism of fighting against natural enemies becomes more sophisticated with the help of technology in Flight over the Ocean (1928–29). There it is qualitatively different because it is a collective endeavor. In Mahagonny it is still brute strength and individual escape. But Mahagonny is the civilized, overcivilized, world, and such individual escape into meaning through battling nature is no longer possible there, as it was in Alaska. So another poem of the early twenties used in Mahagonny, "Tahiti," instead of being gently satirical becomes a sad anachronism. " 'Stormy the Night' is excellent when you lose your courage," (" 'Stürmisch die Nacht' ist vorzüglich, wenn man den Mut verliert"), says Heinrich, playing at sailing to Alaska on the bar-table top (GW 2:544)—but in Mahagonny, where the "sailors" after all land, courage does not help. What Paul needs is money. The same song title, which is a line in "Tahiti," was quoted by George Garga in his outburst against "the many upright and hardworking people": "may the Flood come over them with 'Stormy the Night and the Waves Roll High'" ("die vielen braven und fleißigen Leute": "die Sintflut soll kommen über sie mit 'Stürmisch die Nacht und die See geht hoch'"). In Mahagonny the one verse is in quotation marks; presumably the song was popular in
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the early twenties. Brecht used it in *Jungle* in connection with the Flood, which is one more hint that *Mahagonny* is partly about the outdatedness of divine retribution: since natural catastrophes can do no harm in Mahagonny, there is nothing to be gained through bravery against nature. All other relations have given way to the social relations based on money.

The “Mahagonny Song No. 4” was also written in the early twenties, but for some reason Brecht never included it in the *Home Devotions*. It is spoken by a mother encouraging her son to be—here again—brave, this time in boxing; but when he has made his mark, to leave and come to Mahagonny. But only the chorus is used in *Mahagonny*: when you sit with the people from Mahagonny, you too will smoke, smoke will rise from your yellow skins. Sky like parchment, golden tobacco; when San Francisco burns down, everything in it that you call good will fit in a sack. This is another *carpe diem* poem, with the premonition of destruction of the cities.

In none of these early poems is there any indication that Brecht found the concept of a leisure city for the rich very appealing, and yet the activities there are largely what Brecht himself enjoyed: smoking Virginia cigars, boxing. But Brecht always recommended these as good medicine for the bourgeois theater, not as the complete content of life. In 1935 he wrote, “The theme of the opera *Mahagonny* is the culinary attitude itself” (“Das Thema der Oper ‘Mahagonny’ ist der Kulinarismus selbst”) (*GW* 15:476): the citizens of Mahagonny are ruined by their passivity, their desire always to be entertained.

The four-line poem “On Cities” spreads the feeling of purposelessness from Mahagonny to cities in general. With the tense changed to the present it frames the “Mahagonny Song No. 4” in the opera:

Beneath our cities are gutters
In them is nothing and over them is smoke.
We're still inside. We have enjoyed nothing.
We're vanishing fast and slowly they're vanishing too.

Unter unsern Städten sind Gossen
In ihnen ist nichts und über ihnen ist Rauch.
Wir sind noch drin. Wir haben nichts genossen.
Wir vergehen rasch und langsam vergehen sie auch.

(*GW* 2:505)
This could have been written for any of the planned works on cities; in *Mahagonny* it has the function of showing what the immigrants to Mahagonny want to escape from: noise, smoke, discord. “So let’s go to Mahagonny!” (“Drum auf nach Mahagonny!”) But what happens in Mahagonny? The more modern persons (of whom Brecht would have been one) find they cannot stand the quiet and harmony. No one can ever be happy there, something is missing. And so Paul discovers the law of human happiness: do whatever you want to make yourself happy. The poem “Blasphemy,” from “Poems Belonging with the Reader for City-Dwellers,”\(^{24}\) incorporates the laissez faire philosophy in the moral sphere: if you want money, take it; if you want a house, live in it; if you want to think a thought, think it:

In the interest of order  
For the sake of the state  
For the future of humanity  
For your own well-being  
You may!

Im Interesse der Ordnung  
Zum Besten des Staates  
Für die Zukunft der Menschheit  
Zu deinem eigenen Wohlbefinden  
Darfst du!

(GW 2:528–29)

But the result of this anarchy based on money is that Mahagonny becomes worse than the cities the men have left. For it is only possible to enjoy this society, where each person buys his own happiness, by giving up all sentiment toward other people; one is forced to be selfish. Garga mastered the technique in *Jungle* and survived the fight against Shlink; Jenny and Heinrich master it in *Mahagonny* and they too survive. But all have had to dehumanize themselves; like Baal, they have to be “bad” to survive in a bad world. And Jenny’s and Heinrich’s best friend is executed. Jenny justifies not paying Paul’s debt for him by singing back at him the very song he had made up to proclaim the new order of egoism:

You lie in the bed that you make for yourself  
No one will come tuck you in  
And if someone kicks then it’s me  
And if someone gets kicked then it’s you!
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Denn wie man sich bettet, so liegt man
Es deckt einen keiner da zu
Und wenn einer tritt, dann bin ich es
Und wird einer getreten, bist's du!

(GW 2:530)

Paul's mistake was allowing his sense of human sympathy free rein, and this is the downfall of every "good" character in all Brecht's plays set in capitalist society.

Two songs in Mahagonny were adapted from English-language recordings of the day, according to Werner Otto. They are the strange "I think I'd like to eat my hat up . . .", which Paul sings to express his utter boredom in the too-quiet Mahagonny, and "Can bring him vinegar . . .", sung over Paul's corpse in the finale. The text of neither song is very significant in itself, but as with this whole collection the context turns it into a symptom of the age. If the songs were known to the audience to be American, that would of course increase their significance too, as symptoms of the most extreme stage known today of the disease the opera diagnoses.

One more song can be traced to a source: "Fast, boys, hey! / Start to Sing the Song of Mandelay" (sung by the men waiting in line for their turn in the brothel) is part of the "Song of Mandelay" in Happy End. These songs, all expressing the desperate search for entertainment in a world without meaning, are really interchangeable, and Brecht did interchange them ruthlessly, as the Berliner Ensemble still does today.

Brecht inserted into nearly all his plays songs he had already written that do not have directly to do with the plot or characters but make a comment on the same topic from another perspective. Thus it makes no difference that the songs often describe events in faraway exotic places where no one in the play has ever been; they are sung by the actors as songs, not as dialogue set to music. The proper response to them is to ask: what does that song describe that is similar to the subject of the play? The opera Mahagonny uses songs the same way as the plays, as commentary on a particular type of attitude or behavior.

The use of music was an important part of Brecht's earliest "epic" theater theories. He wrote in 1935 that the new kind of music necessary for epic theater was invented by Weill when he wrote the music to the Mahagonny Songspiel; he had previously written
rather complex serious music, but bravely broke with tradition when faced with composing “more or less banal song texts.” The new music had to serve epic theater, and

epic theater is primarily interested in people’s behavior with each other, when it is historically significant (typical). It works out scenes in which people behave so that the social laws under which they live become visible.

In order to show typical behavior, the music had to contain typical emotions and yet be simultaneously ironic, so that the audience would maintain a critical position. Weill’s music accomplished this double task remarkably. It helped to unmask bourgeois ideology precisely by behaving purely emotionally and not throwing out any of the usual attractions . . . It became as it were the muckraker, provocateur, and denouncer.

Sentimentality was allowed—but in order to underline the banality of the words and of the character. At the same time the audience had to be prevented from becoming involved in sentiment. Therefore, all illusion was removed from the staging of the music (the characters broke out of their roles to sing, the message of the song was projected on a screen, the orchestra was visible on the stage), and the cool, self-mocking jazz forms were used.

This style of theater music Brecht named *gestisch*, because the audience is aware that it is being shown something just as when an actor makes a gesture with his body. “Practically speaking gestic music is music that allows the actor to present certain basic ‘gests’” (“Praktisch gesprochen ist gestische Musik eine Musik, die dem Schauspieler ermöglicht, gewisse Grundgesten vorzuführen”). (Brecht’s neologism *Gestus*—the basic gesture of a passage, character, or scene—meant almost the same thing as the English theater term “subtext.” “Gestic music” was music capable of making a comment on the action or the text.) And here we return to the
importance of the American tradition, from which Weill learned jazz and Brecht learned so much of the popular culture he championed: "So-called cheap music, especially in cabaret and operetta, has been a kind of gestic music for some time already" ("Die sogenannte billige Musik ist besonders in Kabarett und Operette schon seit geraumer Zeit eine Art gestische Musik") (GW 15:476). For Germans, American jazz was an extremely important step toward matter-of-factness and self-irony. Brecht was consciously determined to separate again the elements Wagner had brought together as Gesamtkunstwerk ("total art work"): text, music, visual media, and acting (GW 17:1010-11). The more independent they were of each other, the more conscious the audience would be of their use to show something, to make a point.

Mahagonny, it is clear, is more important for the development of Brecht's ideas on form than on ideology. That is, in fact, the significance of all the works in this interim period: the happy accident of Brecht's meeting with Weill provided the chance for him to experiment with, and perfect, the idea of epic theater that had come to him while working on Joe Fleischhacker. He wrote as late as 1935 that the production of The Threepenny Opera in 1928 was the most successful demonstration of epic theater (GW 15:473). He did not feel that Mahagonny was an adequate piece of revolutionary theater, though it did have a "society-changing" function, namely, putting the "culinary attitude" up for discussion. "It still sits splendidly on the old branch, so to speak, but at least it saws away at it (absentmindedly or from a bad conscience) a little bit" ("Sozusagen sitzt es noch prächtig auf dem alten Ast, aber es sägt ihn wenigstens schon (zerstreut oder aus schlechtem Gewissen) ein wenig an") (GW 17:1016), he wrote of Mahagonny.

But such an innovation in form could not really lead to a change in society because opera itself could not help being "culinary" to a certain extent. His comment on Mahagonny continues: "Real innovations attack the base" ("Wirkliche Neuerungen grijfen die Basis an"). Brecht felt that the opera Mahagonny had pointed the way to its own destruction as a genre by revealing the commodity nature of pleasure and pleasure-seekers. In short, opera could not destroy capitalism without first destroying itself. But that is only the tendency of the epic opera thought out to its logical conclusion. Actually, of course, the theaters were and are capable of putting on
any number of self-destructive shows and the audience capable of
simply consuming them. Recognition of the futility of trying to
change society through the commercial theater led Brecht after
writing *Mahagonny* to seek radically different audiences: workers
and high-school students and even grade-school students. *Mahagonny*
can only be seen as an experiment in what opera could be; Brecht himself
never had much faith in its political effect.

It was a great advantage to Brecht to be able to work with these
light experiments in form while doing his heavy study of Marxism.
But gradually the implications of Marxism became clear for him;
Sternberg says: “There was probably no sentence of Marx’s that
moved him more strongly than the one that the philosophers till now
had only interpreted the world in various ways but the important
thing was to change it” (“Es gab wohl keinen Marxschen Satz, der
ihn stärker berührte als der, daß die Philosophen bisher die Welt nur
verschieden interpretiert hätten, daß es aber gelte, sie zu
verändern”). Brecht found it necessary to leave the entertaining
opera behind and work on “real innovations” that “attack the base.”
In 1938 he stated his new approach to the opera:

The opera *Mahagonny* was written 1928–29. In the next works attempts
were undertaken to emphasize the instructive more and more, at the cost
of the culinary. That is, to develop an instructional object out of a means
of enjoyment and to rebuild certain institutions from places of
amusement to publicity organs.

Brecht became formally very strict with himself; strongly influenced
by Waley’s translations of Japanese Noh plays (translated into
German for him by Hauptmann), he began writing the *Lehrstücke*,
starting with *Flight over the Ocean* (1928–29). Kurt Weill worked on
music for this new experiment, too, and on the *Lehrstück The Yea-
Sayer*, but he then separated from Brecht until they wrote their last
work together in 1933. That work, *The Seven Deadly Sins of the
Petty Bourgeoisie*, is a ballet, with an ideology similar to that in
*Mahagonny* and a setting in several of the United States. *Flight over
the Ocean, like the epic musicals, shows the stirrings of a need for a new form but does not yet fully incorporate the political philosophy Brecht was accumulating. (See below, pp. 204 ff.) It is pure praise of technology, and America is presented not as capitalist but merely as the very confident other side of the ocean. It is a play on a very limited subject; Mahagonny is much richer.

Yet Mahagonny too is incomplete in its exposition of capitalism. It is a truly uncomfortable satire of the commercial society, where all pleasures and people become commodities, to be bought and sold; regardless of what other laws or values there may be, paying up is the highest law and money the highest value. The beautiful sad poem about the cranes suggests that even love is an illusory value; Jenny’s behavior when Paul runs out of money proves it. When Paul bets all he has on his friend’s boxing, there is hope that there may be room for human gestures; but the entire courtroom of spectators lives by the rules and insists that there is no escape, Paul must die for allowing spontaneity and sympathy to overcome his sense of business. Sitting in the electric chair, Paul recognizes that his ruin was sealed when he first entered the city of Mahagonny to buy happiness with money. This recognition sums up the message of the opera:

Now I’m sitting here and have had nothing. I was the one who said: Everyone must cut out a piece of meat, with every knife. But the flesh was rotten! The happiness that I bought was not happiness, and freedom for money was not freedom. I ate and was not satisfied, I drank and grew thirsty.


The echo of Job in these lines is consistent with parody of Bible and hymnal throughout Mahagonny, especially during the hurricane. But the use of the Bible in connection with natural catastrophe and life in the capitalist cities is more than just parody; it is a recapitulation of the theme of the American fragments from 1924–26: The Man from Manhattan, The Flood, Joe Fleischhacker. Paul Ackermann is the first completion of a long list of characters who set out to conquer the world (“cut out their piece of meat,”

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which is also the Mitchel family's expression in Fleischhacker, who then become trapped by the city and are finally destroyed. The dramatic situation—delivering a last speech from the electric chair—is, of course, the same as Calvin Mitchel's. But the speech is very different. Mahagonny is the play where the fear of divine or natural retribution is conquered and men are left to destroy themselves alone:

We don't need any hurricane  
We don't need a typhoon  
For the worst that it can do to us  
We will do to each other soon.  
The hurricane is bad  
Worse yet is the typhoon  
But the worst of all is man.

Wir Brauchen keinen Hurrikan  
Wir brauchen keinen Taifun  
Denn was er an Schrecken tun kann  
Das können wir selber tun.  
Schlimm ist der Hurrikan  
Schlimmer ist der Taifun  
Doch am schlimmsten ist der Mensch.  

(GW 2:526)

This song from the night of horror in Mahagonny is reminiscent of the lines in Man from Manhattan,

the world  
is very bad  
but the worst is  
the human race  
die welt  
ist ganz schlecht  
aber das schlechteste ist  
die menschheit  

(BBA 214, 72)

There man's evil was punished by God (i.e., nature); in Mahagonny man's evil is its own punishment. But this song fragment does not contain the total message of the opera. Mahagonny is not a condemnation of man's evil nature; on the contrary, several characters show signs that they would like to be kind. It is the system of buying and selling in Mahagonny that makes men cruel to each other.
The hurricane itself, of course, also comes from Miami and Fleischhacker. Miami is, in fact, almost completely taken up into Mahagonny. Both cities are called “paradise city.” Both plays tell the story of the rapid growth and destruction of a resort city that is basically parasitical, making money by advertising in the metropoles. Mahagonny seems sometimes to be in Florida; the neighboring city destroyed by the hurricane, for instance, is Pensacola. Clearly the city of Miami and the play Brecht had started served as partial models.

But one of the clippings Brecht saved with the materials to Miami is titled (Hauptmann’s translation) “THE STORM REACHES THE WEST COAST” (“DER STURM ERREICHT DIE WESTKÜSTE”), and “West coast” (“Westküste”) is strongly underlined (BBA 214,30). In the same article one of the destroyed cities is named Hollywood. It is possible that Brecht was honestly confused here and thought the hurricane went all the way to the West Coast of the country rather than just Florida’s west coast. That would partly explain why the city of Mahagonny seems to be simultaneously in Florida and in or near California. Brecht simply combined the public-relations stunt that built Miami Beach with the gold rush, which he probably knew from Jack London and from the German translation of stories by Bret Harte, which he had in his library under the title Kalifornische Erzählungen (California Tales). They are in fact similar phenomena. The gold rush is an excellent subject for Brecht’s purposes: a whole land is gripped by the fever, willing to risk everything in order to get money from rivers. It is the perfect combination of the pioneer spirit with the mercenary.

Leokadja Begbick and company are not, however, ordinary gold diggers; they are criminals as well, fleeing from the law. On the way to the “gold coast,” their car breaks down in the desert, and they decide to build a city right there in the middle of nowhere, which will catch people on the way to and from the coast like a net, and coax their gold from them by selling all pleasures. This entire description has an uncanny and prophetic similarity to modern-day Las Vegas, on the road to California, with its well-known underworld connections and its reputation for allowing everything, provided it is paid for. A city that lives not so much from the productive work of its inhabitants as from tourist trade, its role in the economy of the country is to provide an outlet for persons, often working-class, who
have made their money elsewhere, where they can enjoy getting rid of huge amounts of surplus. "They lost out every time. / But they got something out of it" ("Sie verloren in jedem Falle / Doch sie hatten was davon"). If one thinks of Las Vegas, the pleasure city, the lessons of *Mahagonny* become clear; love, entertainment, excitement are all unreal (vicarious, decadent) when their real purpose is to make money. The city of Miami Beach is, of course, also a good example of this dead end in capitalism; as a city for rich vacationers and pensioners, it too can provide everything for money except authenticity.

Certainly these cities are two of the most unfortunate manifestations of the American spirit. Brecht was himself a fervid admirer of boxing and jazz and Chaplin and much of American literature. So we must answer several questions that are often raised about *Mahagonny*: does it express what Brecht really thought of America? And: even though it claims to condemn American society, does it not really betray a love of anarchy and bravado? And (this one asked both from the left and from the right, which really makes it two questions), does it present an adequate picture of capitalism?

First: *Mahagonny* is a portrait not of America but of the alienation produced by commercial society, a theme straight out of *Capital*. Brecht came to study the topic because of his interest in the American myth, incorporated in its cruellest form in the great American cities. The use to which he put America in his plays never claimed to represent the whole truth about the country. In *Mahagonny* the picture of the capitalist system is deliberately incomplete. The play makes no pretense of showing the production process or the exploitation of the working class (unlike *St. Joan*). It shows only that even if one does manage to get rich in capitalist society, there is no real pleasure to be had because the means, money, becomes the end: bought pleasure in Mahagonny is no pleasure, bought freedom is no freedom; eating does not satisfy, and drinking leaves one thirsty. In Mahagonny Brecht concocted a mythical city, a chronological and geographical impossibility, with features inspired by certain American cities, historical events, literature, music, and sport, but also inspired by the theory of capitalism. As Brecht began to study capitalism, especially since interest in America had first led him to the study, it was inevitable that America should become the dramatic model. In his essays as
well, he always used Standard Oil and Rockefeller as examples of capitalist institutions rather than Krupp and Stinnes. (Since he read other works by these authors, he may have read Ida Tarbell's *The History of the Standard Oil Company* or Upton Sinclair's *Oil!*) Also, as he learned more and more about the theory of capitalism, particular works on the nature of America had less influence on his portrayal of that country; he was interested in dramatic expression of a theory, and his symbols became more fixed.

So the question of whether the theory adequately describes America is irrelevant; Brecht cared more whether America adequately illustrated the theory, and there can be no doubt that it did, and proudly. The United States was and is the self-proclaimed model of free-enterprise capitalism; Brecht did not invent that.

But perhaps he was secretly still attracted to it. Many critics believe he was, pointing out that after all *Mahagonny* is *ein Spaß* (fun). That is, in fact, Brecht's own criticism of his opera's inadequacy. But not because his subconscious love of capitalist anarchy and tough individualism could not be suppressed by Marxist dogma; rather, because the very nature of opera is "culinary." A reading of the text alone, with the strict attempt to forget the music, makes clear that Brecht's conception really is a mercilessly bitter satire, much more drastic than *The Threepenny Opera*. It is Weill's music that seduces an audience into enjoying the show and then (instead of thinking about its own suspect reaction) drawing the false conclusion that Brecht really would have liked to live in Mahagonny himself. Yes, Brecht was very fond of boxing. And of lumberjacks from Alaska or railroad builders at Fort Donald. And of jazz. And undoubtedly of eating, drinking, and making love. The point of *Mahagonny* is the perversion of all these activities and people: they have become compulsive, the search for stimulation and pleasure becomes more and more frantic, and nothing satisfies.

And what about *In the Jungle*—"The chaos is used up. It was the best time" ("Das Chaos ist aufgebraucht. Es war die beste Zeit")? For Brecht that chaos was ended with *Jungle* itself, and by the time he wrote *Mahagonny*, he was insisting on rational order in society. It was the irrationality, the swamp (jungle) character of the Chicago wheat market, that had shocked him into studying capitalism. Showing America as anarchistic was nothing new: Chicago in
Jungle and Fleischhacker was also an incomprehensible jungle for the people from the flatland, it also required "THE STRUGGLE OF ALL AGAINST ALL" ("DEN KAMPF ALLER GEGEN ALLE"). New was the concentration on the capitalist system (or aspects of it) and the clear ideological condemnation.

But if Mahagonny is supposed to lay bare the mechanism of a system, surely it is unfair to select just one aspect of that system and judge the whole system by its worst manifestations—say the voices from the right. But most admirers of the United States would not agree that Miami, Las Vegas, and unlimited opportunity for the moneyed are the worst aspects of the country—on the contrary. That criticism is perhaps applicable to St. Joan, but Mahagonny intends to demonstrate that precisely the fulfillment of the American dream, the best capitalism has to offer, is humanly unsatisfying. Not that Brecht did not also find much in American culture that is satisfying, but most of that is not the cream of capitalism but rather the beginnings of a revolt against capitalism. Long before he started using the word capitalism, Brecht differentiated sharply between conservative and progressive culture. When he opted for popular mass culture instead of bourgeois individual "high" art, Brecht was instinctively operating on the Marxist principle that capitalism creates the conditions for its own destruction by creating collective man and collective culture. Thus Brecht was able to continue approving wholeheartedly of some American cultural achievements even while learning more and more to condemn the American political and economic system.

But then the voices on the left become loud: if he wanted to teach what is wrong with the system, he should have shown how it really works, including the ownership of means of production and the exploitation of labor to create surplus value, rather than choosing such an artificial milieu with no production at all; Mahagonny could lead to the false conclusion that abolition of money would solve everything. Basically this criticism says that Mahagonny is not a very serious work, and of course that is true. It does not intend to be. It intends to be a subversive work, with catchy tunes and a lot of fun but a devastating moral. It is not a complete and complex investigation of the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation; it is more a tying-together of threads Brecht had left dangling before he read Marx than it is an illustration of the new concepts. Brecht knew, of
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course, that Mahagonny was not an adequate explanation of how capitalism works—the cause of the "crisis," for instance, is hardly economically grounded at all—and St. Joan and The Bread Store are attempts at accomplishing that more difficult task. If we say, nevertheless, that Mahagonny is an exposition of the system of capitalism, we mean not that the entire system is explained but that Brecht is showing logical conclusions of a theory: his characters act as representatives of certain social types or classes; their motivation is to be sought in the pressures their economic and social position puts on them and not in any individual, psychological drives.28

The question of whether Brecht thought America was really like Mahagonny is a useless question. The point is, Mahagonny shows the tendencies of the system that rules America; in that sense, even were there no American city remotely like Mahagonny, the play would be an accurate though incomplete picture of the inner logic of all American cities.

"Happy End"

The other two dramatic attempts Brecht worked on in 1928 that are set in America (Happy End and Flight over the Ocean) make far less claim to be an accurate portrayal of the capitalist system than Mahagonny. The first, Happy End, is not primarily Brecht's work. But a study of it is necessary for an understanding of Brecht's development because it is an important source of themes in later works. Happy End is the story of Hallelujah-Lilian, who is kicked out of the Salvation Army for adopting the ways of the underworld character she tries to convert, but who ultimately brings about a Gilbert-and-Sullivanesque happy ending with religious, criminal, and law-enforcement characters all turning out to be each others' long-lost lovers. It is concretely set in Chicago, yet it is more unreal than Mahagonny precisely because it does not attempt to disclose anything about the nature of society. Its ideology does not go much further than making a connection between the criminal underground and the local government, while taking a swipe at the Salvation Army in the process too. In The Threepenny Opera the connection criminals-police-religion was clearly established and given an irrefutable logic; Happy End simply accepts the social structure demonstrated by The Threepenny Opera and relates the amusing story of certain individual fates. Mahagonny and The
Threepenny Opera established the dialectical necessity of corruption in a bad system; in Happy End it is gratuitous.

There is a certain amount of controversy about Happy End's authorship; but recently the situation has become fairly clear. Herta Ramthun, of the Brecht Archive, said that Brecht suggested the plot, but Hauptmann wrote the text, with corrections and, above all, songs by Brecht; Emil Burri also helped with the text. (A letter from Brecht to Elisabeth Hauptmann in the Archive contains part of the plot.) Frau Hauptmann herself said modestly that it was a collective endeavor, but she probably felt constrained to maintain that impression both out of loyalty and for copyright reasons. In a note in the Archive, on the other hand, she says the contents of Happy End follow a little story that she had in an old issue of an American magazine. Brecht, she says, advised her to adapt the story because it contained all the elements of a kind of folk literature that is the basis for film and magazines. He also promised her a few songs for the piece. Furthermore, Hauptmann continues, the story contained a "not uninteresting portion of the concept America". Unclear is only the question of the source in the American magazine, supposedly a story by a certain Dorothy Lane. No one (including me) has ever been able to find this story, so it is generally assumed to have been invented, and Dorothy Lane is assumed to be nothing more than a pseudonym for Elisabeth Hauptmann. Also the plot contains references to a suspiciously large number of pet interests of Brecht and his collaborators. However, none of this proves that there never was an obscure short story in some uncatalogued popular magazine.

What is probably the first version of Happy End is preserved in the Archive under the title Salvation Army Play (BBA 1357). On its first page is written "Hauptmann," and it is typed with majuscules, and not on Brecht's typewriter. But none of the technical evidence would be necessary to show that it is not by Brecht; there is no trace of his characteristic and always recognizable style. His aphoristic compactness, his dialectical absurdities and logical forked-sticks, his "gestic" syntax, above all his sardonic humor are all missing, replaced by a style without describable characteristics, that is, a lack of style. The general direction of the plot is the same as in the final typescript of Happy End, but many details are different, and there is only one short song ("Go forth into battle . . . "). The most ob-
viously assumption is that this is the version Hauptmann prepared, and that Brecht then added some songs and made suggestions for plot and dialogue changes. (The final version, however, also has few signs of Brechtian style, except for the songs.)

Interesting in the Salvation Army Play version is the complete adoption of Brecht's short story "Four Men and a Poker Game or Too Much Luck Is Bad Luck," published in 1926. In the Salvation Army Play one of the bank robbers keeps winning at a poker game against his will; he notices that the others are beginning to act strange, but he cannot stop winning no matter how hard he tries. He leaves his money lying on the table, but they remind him of it; finally he tries to leave, but they follow him and shoot him. The barmaid, Saidie, runs back in and cries, "Too much luck is bad luck!" ("Zuviel Glück ist kein Glück!"). Such unimaginative adoption of the exact plot of a previous work would be unusual for Brecht, and in the final version of Happy End, there is no hint of it; the "Governor" is shot for having pocketed part of the booty. The close imitation is probably explained by Hauptmann’s admiration for Brecht's story. In April 1926 she noted:

I am charmed by the beginning of B’s short story: "Too Much Luck Is Bad Luck." The first sentence reads: "We sat in wicker chairs at Havana and forgot the world." I find that splendid, and I can remember it. After a beginning like that anything that can happen between heaven and earth can happen in the story. (Quotability!)


Also printed in the year 1926 was the edition of Shaw’s Major Barbara in Brecht’s library, which has many similarities to St. Joan of the Stockyards and probably also provided an inspiration for the unconventional Hallelujah-Lilian.

Sinclair’s Jungle may also have influenced the Salvation Army Play. Not only does the severed finger of one of the gangsters lie around in the guesthouse because no one wants to carry it away (which reminds one of the fingers severed in the meat machines in The Jungle); there is also reference to the dead pigs in Packingtown.
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(BBA 1357, 5), and to the worst cold spell and worst unemployment ever in Chicago.

In both versions there is mention of the First National Bank and of Standard Oil, but not in a context to give them any meaning. Similarly, in the Happy End version one criminal asks another whether he has read the newest detective story (Kriminalroman) yet; and the criminals discuss boxing and consider themselves to be sportsmen, and they read the Chicago Tribune. But these details are just mentioned in passing; they are not alone enough to make the play an example of the “concept of America.”

This concept is contained more in the attitudes of the gangsters than in any of the details: they admire each other for cold-blooded revenge and unsentimental ruthlessness; they consider criminal acts against the society legitimate, and the fun of the play comes from the toughness of the characters. However, Happy End’s Americanization of the Threepenny Opera milieu eliminates most of the latter play’s humor; the gangsters are impressive only because of their brutality and not because of the incongruous high sense of style and propriety of a British Macheath.

Brecht used the gangster world of Chicago later in Arturo Ui, where it is not so harmless. More important, however, for Brecht’s future work is the introduction here of the Salvation Army. He had briefly mentioned it in Jungle, but without social implications. In Happy End the Salvation Army is still politically insignificant, but that play marks the beginning of a fascination with the “Army of God,” so that within a year it symbolized all Brecht’s ideas of the role of religion in capitalism. During the depression he visited the soup kitchens and prayer haunts of the “Army” in Berlin; he made it central in both The Bread Store and St. Joan, and in exile in Sweden he was still collecting materials on the Salvation Army and writing a fragment on it. The Salvation Army is a superficially proletarian sort of institution that was the perfect vehicle for Brecht to demonstrate his ideas about the role of religion in capitalism precisely because it (in William Booth’s own words) “goes for the center and goes for the worst,” i.e., the most depressed sector of the working class. The aggressive, military religiosity of the “Army,” its drum-banging method of advertisement, is simple-minded speeches and very secular sorts of symbolism and nomenclature make it an organization that clearly tries to speak to the uneducated; these qualities
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would appeal to Brecht's preference for crudity over bourgeois subtlety. But at the same time, he was always clear that the real purpose of the "Army" was to dampen the struggle, to "co-opt" the people it addressed, and that it was simply a tool, probably a conscious tool, of the capitalist class. He did some research of his own on the Army's funding; we see the results of this research portrayed in St. Joan.

Bernhard Reich, who helped direct Happy End, claims influence on the transformation of Hauptmann's Salvation Army play into the more subtle critique of religion and capitalism of St. Joan:

In my opinion, we have in Happy End an attempt with an unsuitable subject. What do the efforts of the Salvation Army lieutenant, the pure maiden Holidey who would like to convert the head of a clan of rascals, show in the end? Suppose the gangster improves—neither success nor failure is relevant. But if Holidey wanted to persuade a capitalist to abandon his unchristian behavior, the girl's failure could illuminate some important relations. Brecht said he'd like to think about that. He thought about it: St. Joan of the Stockyards carries the Happy End project further.


It is true, nothing is really changed when the gangsters join the Salvation Army. They had not even been able to do much harm in their latest bank robberies, because the days of the small skilled worker were gone; only stocks were in the safes, and the big businesses—the real criminals—were too much competition: "What is a skeleton key compared with common stock, what is breaking into a bank compared with found ing a bank" ("Was ist ein Dietrich gegen eine Aktie, was ist ein Einbruch in eine Bank gegen die Gründung einer Bank"). This is the moral that informs revised versions of the Threepenny Opera, and it is the only political statement in Happy End. But it has nothing to do with the Salvation
Army; the gangsters could just as well have become circus performers for all the significance their joining the "Army" has.

Nevertheless, Brecht took a good many details from *Happy End* when he wrote *St. Joan*. The cast of "Army" characters is similar. The song "Take care, pay heed! . . ." is used in *Happy End, The Bread Store*, and *St. Joan*. The style of Lilian’s speeches is similar to Joan’s; they both use simple and very secular but clever similes. (This image in *Happy End*, for instance, appears again in *St. Joan* [GW 2:675]: "You are cowards . . . to tread across God's threshold into His light, for there it would be revealed that you do not have a stand-up collar on, but at best a rubber collar" ["Ihr seid Feiglinge . . . über Gottes Schwelle in sein Licht zu treten, denn dort würde es sich zeigen, daß ihr keine Stehkragen umhabt, sondern bestenfalls einen Gummikragen"]).

Joan is altogether very similar to Lilian; she is as irreverent and fresh to the great capitalist Mauler as Lilian to the great criminal Bill, and they are both thrown out of the "Army" for behavior unbecoming to a Salvation Army lass. But every time Brecht adapts a detail of the *Happy End* plot into *St. Joan*, he uses it to make a point. Lilian learns nothing, Joan learns everything.

The use of the Salvation Army in *Happy End* is not ideological—nor is the use of any of the other American elements. Hauptmann’s remark that it contains “not uninteresting” elements of the concept of America is revealing: these elements are in fact only treated as “interesting.” Fascination with technique—be it the technique of robbing a bank, the technique of boxing, or the technique of converting souls—remains an end in itself. The play appeals to the European attitude that America is full of quaint characters and lifestyles; therefore it is entertaining in its own right.

Hauptmann seems to have learned the *Neue Sachlichkeit* technique of paying loving attention to the details of how things work. But of course this is unfair to her; Brecht had a hand in *Happy End* too, including its direction on stage, and made no attempt to give it any significance. It is one more indication that he was not primarily interested in his writing but in his study during those years. *Mahagonny* was a pastiche of old songs and fragments; *The Threepenny Opera* was written at record speed on commission; *Happy End* was an intellectually lazy "culinary" pastime. And even the Americanism was no advance over the somewhat faddish attitude Brecht had
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toward America before 1926; in fact, ideologically the play, were it by Brecht, would belong to the period of the song of the Fort Donald railroad men.

“Flight over the Ocean” and the Learning Plays

This uncritical interest in America ran parallel in time to Brecht’s criticism of capitalism as exemplified by America. But the two are not necessarily contradictory, nor does their concurrence mean that Brecht was torn between love and hatred, emotional attraction and ideological rejection, or any other kind of confusion. On the contrary, he was very conscious of what he thought, and his attitudes on a great variety of scattered subjects were perfectly consistent with Marxism, even before he began studying Marx.

It is Marxist theory that the possibility of communist consciousness and communist social organization grows out of the conditions that capitalism creates. Brecht had instinctively admired just the aspects of Americanism that Marxism considers progressive developments in capitalism. Mass culture was one of these. He started affecting sport, jazz, popular songs, Chaplin, and the like as a reaction against bourgeois individualism and sentimentalism; later he became aware that they were manifestations of working-class culture. He admired technology very early, from a Neue Sachlichkeit point of view, which is also a rebellion against sentimentalism and idealism. Nowhere does Brecht suggest that machines oppress or dehumanize man; they may de-individualize him, but that is a necessary step (Brecht learned) to a greater humanity.

America was, of course, the most industrialized country, and from the beginning Brecht’s model for technological progress, which is one of capitalism’s positive achievements and simultaneously (in orthodox Marxist theory) a basis for communism. The series on migration to the big cities, always associated with America, treated one aspect of industrialization: the collectivization and new forms of struggle forced on men by progress. Flight over the Ocean (1928–29), the dramatization for radio of Lindbergh’s flight across the Atlantic, treats another aspect: technology itself, and man’s conquering of nature through the use of technology. 41
Written during the time of work on *Mahagonny*, this first *Lehrstück* also overcomes the fear of natural catastrophe, although from a different point of view. In both plays man alone is capable of doing anything; there is no other force or divinity that will avenge itself upon him or help him. Both these plays are important breakthroughs against the old notion of *hybris*, preparing the way for the recognition that man can also change his society and his own nature.

In *Mahagonny* human beings do not achieve anything after their discovery that they are omnipotent; the society they create, rooted in the laws of profit, destroys them. In *Flight over the Ocean* the discovery of atheism is hopeful. A Promethean view of man’s positive possibilities informs the tone: “When I fly I am / A real atheist” (“Wenn ich fliege, bin ich / Ein wirklicher Atheist”) (*GW 2:576*). Atheist is a positive word for Brecht. It means: one who fights against the superstition that man cannot control his fate. The important section called “Ideology” (“Ideologie”) in *Flight over the Ocean* states unequivocally that the advance of science makes God unnecessary. *Learning* was becoming important to Brecht: here he writes that there are two classes of man, not exploiter and exploited, but exploiter and ignorant. There can only be exploitation because there is ignorance; when the working class learns about its conditions, it eliminates them. And it eliminates the power of nature over man and with it belief in gods:

> Therefore take part
> In the struggle against the primitive
> In the liquidation of the hereafter and
> The banishment of every god, where
> Ever he surfaces
>
> Darum beteiligt euch
> An der Bekämpfung des Primitiven
> An der Liquidierung des Jenseits und
> Der Verscheuchung jedweden Gottes, wo
> Immer er auftaucht.

(*GW 2:576–77*)

Brecht did not believe that the working class would become more revolutionary as it became poorer, but rather as it became more conscious and as the means to create a better life were invented. He believed progress was revolutionary:
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But it is a battle against the primitive
And an effort for the improvement of the planet
Comparable to dialectical economics
Which will change the world from the ground up.

Aber es ist eine Schlacht gegen das Primitive
Und eine Anstrengung zur Verbesserung des Planeten
Gleich der dialektischen Ökonomie
Welche die Welt verändern wird von Grund auf.

*Flight over the Ocean* is, then, a further development of the atheism theme in *Mahagonny*; but whereas in the opera it led only to chaos, in the *Lehrstück* it combines with science and progress and it is revolutionary.

From this perspective Brecht's America is truly positive. Nothing is mentioned about Rockefeller and Ford, only the workers in San Diego who built the *Spirit of St. Louis* and with whom the flyers feel solidarity. America is full of confidence about the flight; the primitive Scottish fisherman are skeptical ("Why look there, where it / Can never be?" [*Wozu da schauen, wo es / Doch niemals sein kann?*] [GW 2:583] is an argument repeated by Galileo's opponents.) And America proves to be right in *Flight over the Ocean*. Because it is the land that most believes in progress, America is the most revolutionary land, although it is also the most capitalist land.

The very poem that Calvin Mitchell spoke from the electric chair in *Joe Fleischhacker* is quoted by the flyers. But now it is a justified vision of true progress; there it was a fiendish vision of the human sacrifice necessary to build the great inhuman cities. The first verse is worth repeating, to show the remarkable adaptability of Brecht's jigsaw-puzzle pieces that he fit into different contexts. The dialectical change in meaning that this one verse can have is as startling as the change in his whole picture of America. The words, or concrete details, are constant; but the historical context, and therefore the evaluation, changes. (See also the discussion of "Vanished Glory of the Giant City New York," below, pp. 226 ff.)

Many say the age is old
But I have always known it is a new age
I tell you: not by themselves
Have houses grown for twenty years like mountains from ore
Many move each year to the cities as if they expected something
And on the laughing continents
The word is getting around that the great dreaded ocean
Is a little water.

Viele sagen, die Zeit sei alt
Aber ich habe immer gewußt, es ist eine neue Zeit.
Ich sage euch, nicht von selber
Wachsen seit 20 Jahren Häuser wie Gebirge aus Erz
Viele ziehen mit jedem Jahr in die Städte, als erwarteten sie etwas
Und auf den lachenden Kontinenten
Spricht es sich herum: das große gefürchtete Meer
Sei ein kleines Wasser.

But then instead of continuing, “I will die today, but I am convinced / The big cities now await the third millenium” (“Ich sterbe heut, aber ich habe die Überzeugung / Die großen Städte erwarten jetzt das dritte Jahrtausend”), the Flight over the Ocean version substitutes:

I'm flying now as the very first over the Atlantic
But I am convinced: tomorrow
You will already laugh at my flight.

Ich fliege jetzt schon als erster über den Atlantik
Aber ich habe die Überzeugung: schon morgen
Werdet ihr lachen über meinen Flug.

(GW 2:575)

The fliers' feat is only one in a long, optimistic process of conquering the primitive. At the beginning, the song continues, we and our technology are primitive; let us fight nature until we ourselves become “natural.” The play ends with praise of the courage to do what has never been done before. It calls the epoch of man's flight across the ocean the time “when humanity / Began to recognize itself” (“wo die Menschheit / Anfing sich zu erkennen”), but the poem that ends the play is also a dedication to “the not-yet-achieved” (“das noch nicht Erreichte”). The whole play expresses an unadulterated optimism that is unique in the early Brecht (except for the more sober but moving optimism of The Mother). Here is the best chance to understand what could be attractive about America.

But Flight over the Ocean cannot be interpreted independently. Just as it is a dialectical Aufhebung (synthesis: a combination of elimination, preservation, and carrying to a higher level) of Fleischhacker and Mahagonny, so is The Baden Play for Learning Acquiescence (1929) a dialectical opponent to Flight over the
OCEAN. It begins with exactly the chorus that ended Flight over the Ocean, but now that it is the introduction to a play, this chorus asks: what is "the not-yet-achieved" ("das noch nicht Erreichte")? Unfortunately, the end of the play is confused, so it is not clear exactly what Brecht wanted the next step to be; he recognized this weakness himself and wrote, "The play proved at the end to be unfinished: there is too much weight given to dying in relation to its small use value" ("Das Lehrstück erwies sich beim Abschluß als unfertig: dem Sterben ist im Vergleich zu seinem doch wohl nur geringen Gebrauchswert zuviel Gewicht beigemessen") (GW 2:3*).

Nevertheless, it is clear at the beginning what the fliers have not accomplished: they have not helped create a society where men help each other; they have invented a wonderful machine that conquers nature, but they have had no effect on social relations. The leader of the "learned chorus" relates similar achievements—discovery of America and growth of cities there, invention of the steam engine, scientific and philosophic research—but after each achievement mentioned the chorus responds, "It didn't make bread any cheaper" ("Das Brot wurde dadurch nicht billiger"). The third time the chorus adds:

Rather
Poverty has increased in our cities
And for a long time now no one has known
What a human being is.

Sondern
Die Armut hat zugenommen in unseren Städten
Und es weiß seit langer Zeit
Niemand mehr, was ein Mensch ist.

(GW 2:592-93)

Here Brecht returns to the theme of the growth of the cities and their inhumanity, the theme of 1924-26. The fliers relate of themselves: "We were caught up in the fever / Of city-building and oil" ("Uns hatte erfaßt das Fieber / Des Städtebaus und des Öls") (GW 591). We know these lines already from Man from Manhattan. Now five years later Brecht is using exactly the same image, but it is not the suffering of a single man that the fliers forget; their moral failure plays on a much larger stage. As machines and speed became ends in themselves,
We forgot in the battles
Our names and our face
And in the swifter takeoff
We forgot our takeoff's goal.

Wir vergaßen über den Kämpfen
Unsere Namen und unser Gesicht
Und über dem geschwinderen Aufbruch
Vergaßen wir unseres Aufbruchs Ziel.

The dialectical relation between *Flight over the Ocean* and *The Baden Learning Play* is clear from this criticism of the fliers by the learned chorus:

For example: while you flew, crept
Something similar to you on the ground
Not like a human!

Zum Beispiel: während ihr flogt, kroch
Ein Euch Ähnliches am Boden
Nicht wie ein Mensch!

*Flight over the Ocean*, like *Mahagonny*, is an incomplete picture of American, or industrial, society: it shows only the promise of progress. *The Baden Learning Play* raises doubts again; it is a play that only asks questions.

These three plays together show more clearly than Brecht's notes in "Marxist Studies" how he developed his political understanding. *Mahagonny* shows his interest in the theory of alienation caused by money; *Flight over the Ocean* shows his hope for the revolutionary potential of technical progress; and the *Baden Learning Play* shows him checking, doubling back, and putting progress in its social context.

*The Baden Learning Play* and *Flight over the Ocean* (and of course *Mahagonny*) also show clearly the two sides of Brecht's attitude toward America: simultaneous admiration of technical progress and hatred of social injustice and poverty. Both these elements coexisted in his understanding of America at least from the time he wrote *Jungle*; but it is Marxism that brought them together. They are contradictions, but it is not inconsistent for one person to hold both positions because they are contradictions that are actually
present in capitalist society. As Brecht recognized in the plays about cities, industrialization and urbanization can produce terrible suffering; in *Mahagonny* he wrote about the spiritual poverty they can produce; in *Flight over the Ocean* he turned around and praised the conditions they could create, namely, “atheism” or the courage to progress. But in the *Baden Learning Play*, he insists that those conditions are only preconditions.

The antiphonal dialogue between the fliers and the chorus can be read—in places—as an argument between America and Europe. The lead singer says:

One of us has come over the ocean and
Discovered a new continent.
But many after him
Have built great cities there with
Much work and cleverness.

Einer von uns ist über das Meer gefahren und
Hat einen neuen Kontinent entdeckt.
Viele aber nach ihm
Haben aufgebaut dort große Städte mit
Vieler Mühe und Klugheit.

*(GW 2:592)*

And the fliers present the ideology of that America, with its unlimited confidence but no direction. The pilot, who is now called Charles Nungesser, is the most “American”: “I flew for nothing and no one. / I flew for flying” (“Ich bin für nichts und niemand geflogen. / Ich bin für das Fliegen geflogen”) *(GW 2:606—moral neutrality again)*. But the contrast between America and Europe is not consistent. If Brecht wrote the play to answer the question “What should have been our reaction had Lindbergh’s flight failed?” then he had to have the Europeans simultaneously lower and higher on the scale of progress than the fliers, the Americans. This is the reason for the division into a “learned chorus” and a crowd: the crowd learns together with the fliers from the learned chorus or new man, whose geographical position is unclear. The learned chorus thinks a step beyond the Americans, who know how to progress technically but not socially. It represents those who think beyond the achieved to the not yet achieved; it is the coming generation of whom the fliers in *Flight over the Ocean* say, “tomorrow / You will already laugh at my flight” (“Schon morgen / Werdet ihr lachen über meinen Flug”).

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We have then, in the transition period of 1927–29, two different conceptions of America, which are in Marxist theory perfectly consistent: in *Mahagonny* and *Happy End*, America is the land of justified criminal rebellion against a capitalist society; chaos, anarchy, and lawlessness are romanticized to be sure, but it is shown that they actually produce alienation. The mood is of a frantic kind of consumption-oriented decadence. In *Flight over the Ocean* and *The Baden Learning Play*, America is the land of technological progress, where workers cooperating together can achieve a positive atheism and produce machines that conquer the old gods of nature. There is no question that this was a progressive development in Brecht’s eyes, as well as in Marx’s.

Something of this same dialectical irony—that advanced capitalism and industrialization are both good and bad—is expressed also in the poem “Song of the Machines” (1927?), written for a planned “*Ruhrrevue*” that was never realized. Here too there is radio contact with America (Brecht seems to have been impressed by radio partly because it brought America closer); but there is question as to what language to use. The answer is that the language should be the singing of machines, “Which are understood here and in America / And everywhere in the world” (“Die man versteht hier und in Amerika / Und überall in der Welt”). The comment on the machines’ song follows:

That is the wild howling of our daily work
We curse it and we’re fond of it
For it is the voice of our cities
It is the song we like to hear sung
It is the language that everyone knows
And soon it will be the world’s mother tongue.

Das ist das wilde Geheul unserer täglichen Arbeit
Wir verfluchen es und wir haben es gern
Denn es ist die Stimme unserer Städte
Es ist das Lied, das uns gefällt
Es ist die Sprache, die alle verstehen
Und bald ist es die Muttersprache der Welt.

(*GW* 8:297-98)

The “Crane Songs,” also written for the *Ruhrrevue*, say expressly that the machines and their operators, the workers, both belong to the working class and will fight together to achieve a new social order. Brecht portrays the machine in the hands of the capitalist as
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an instrument of oppression for the worker; in the worker's own hands, it can be an instrument of liberation.

In Brecht's writing from now on, all technical advances as well as all ideological products are to be judged according to whom they serve. Particularly important is the invention of the radio, because it belongs to both categories: it is a technological advance and an instrument of ideological expression. But of course it belongs to the bourgeoisie. Brecht was excited by the possibilities radio offered and disgusted by the uses to which it was actually put. This is why he wrote *Flight over the Ocean* for radio. For a while he must have cherished the idea of revolutionizing this marvelous new invention as he intended to revolutionize theater, but he found the ruling class had even better control of the radio than of the theater. During Brecht's period of study of Marxism, images of cities filled with antennas are frequent; even in Hauptmann's *Salvation Army Play*, Lilian compares reception of God with reception of radio waves.

The radio was the first new instrument of mass communication since printing was invented, and Brecht sensed what importance it could have. From 1927 to 1932 he wrote several essays collected together as "Radio Theory." In comments on *Flight over the Ocean* (1930), he writes that it is important not to provide the radio with material but to change it, through a kind of revolt by the listeners (*GW* 18:125–26). By 1932 this seemed hopeless to him; the radio was invented too soon. If it is to have any function at all, he writes, it must be transformed from a means of distribution to a means of communication; it must receive from the listener as well as broadcast to him (*GW* 18:129—the pedagogical technique he uses in *Flight over the Ocean*).

Brecht's argument here is almost exactly like Upton Sinclair's in *Oil!*, available in German from Malik Publishers from 1927. Brecht writes, "The radio [has] one side, where it should have two. It is a pure distribution apparatus, it merely allots" ("der Rundfunk [hat] eine Seite, wo er zwei haben müßte. Er ist ein reiner Distributionsapparat, er teilt lediglich zu") (*GW* 18:129); and he talks about the lack of interest that the state has in experimenting with democratic radio. Sinclair writes, "The radio is a one-sided institution; you can listen, but you cannot answer back. In that lies its enormous usefulness to the capitalist system... It is a basis upon which to build the greatest slave empire in history."
Already in 1927 Brecht admired the invention of radio but wondered what it was for. His images in the article “Radio—An Antediluvian Invention?” are significant here: he says that the first he heard of the radio was from ironic newspaper articles about a regular “radio hurricane” that was devastating America; nevertheless, it seemed to be a really modern matter. This is the symbology of The Flood, Miami, and Mahagonny: man’s extension of his own nature (hybris) is threatened by natural catastrophe; here the invention itself is the catastrophe. Of course, Brecht himself did not think the radio would destroy America; on the contrary, it seemed to be a great step forward. Only when he found out how idiotic the programming was did he get the terrible feeling that, far from being modern, the radio was “an unimaginably old piece of equipment that was lost to memory in its time through the Flood” (“eine unausdenkbar alte Einrichtung, die seinerzeit durch die Sintflut in Vergessenheit geraten war”) (GW 18:119).

An invention is usefully new or progressive only when it forces social change and improvement; the radio seems, however, to be equivalent to the “flying people” (“Flugmenschen”) who appear in the years of the Flood in The Flood: “in the final years epidemics of monstrous inventions proliferate flying people appear . . . they fall in the water laughter” (“in den letzten jahren verbreiten sich seuchen von ungeheuren erfindungen flugmenschen treten auf . . . sie fallen ins wasser gelächter”) (BBA 214, 17). The Flood wipes out the results of a bad experiment; it is the symbolic expression of Brecht’s temptation to be attracted to nihilism. It is undialectical. But Brecht knew that it is not possible to wipe the whole thing out and start fresh, that the forces for change could develop only within existing society. Thus The Flood itself and Flight over the Ocean are written for the radio not to destroy the monstrous invention but to utilize and transform it. Brecht concluded that radio was only as modern as its application to progressive ends.

Brecht began a poem about his experience in writing Flight over the Ocean that suggests new pedagogical uses for the radio; although written in 1930, it is very similar to the 1936 poem about the Joe Fleischhacker experience, “When I years ago.”

It is hardly a poem really; rather, it is an attempt to discipline his thoughts by writing in lines, so as to understand the failure of his
plan for transforming radio. The plan, he says, had taken into account the exact nature of available technology, the growth of needs and demands of the people, the increasing concentration of means of production, and the necessity of educating many more people in the use of technology; therefore, it aimed at simple schooling in the spirit of mechanics \((GW\ 8:329)\). The plan was very reasonable, but it was a failure because, no matter how many compelling reasons there were for fulfilling it, one reason was always missing. The fragment breaks off before he says what that reason was. From his other writings, though, it is clear that his reason was something to do with the fact that radio was controlled by the ruling class and his plan held no advantage for them.

This was apparently another important learning experience for Brecht: he learned that rationality is not enough to get a suggestion adopted unless it appeals to self-interest. After \textit{Mahagonny} he stopped addressing his protest and suggestions to the bourgeoisie and turned to youth and workers as a new audience.

It is a measure of the strength of his political engagement that he was able to forfeit a big name in the bourgeois theater just after his success with \textit{The Threepenny Opera}. Writing smaller-scale plays to be performed by workers and students in their own territory instead of in conventional theaters was a big step toward political effectiveness but a big step away from fame; it is a hard move for a playwright to make.

\textit{Style}

It was not only the move away from professional productions that was difficult. At the same time that he turned to new audiences, Brecht changed his style radically. Tendencies that had been hinted at in \textit{A Man's a Man} became paramount: the rich, metaphorical language of the early dramas was unsentimentally disposed of, and only the starkest simplicity remained. This new ascetic style is the bane of translators; in translation it sounds not ingeniously simple but ingenuously simple-minded. It is the kind of simplicity that takes much longer to write than does complexity: "the simple thing that's hard to do" ("das Einfache, das schwer zu machen ist") \((GW\ 9:463—\) like communism itself in Brecht's poem). It was not easy for Brecht to write in such a style; it meant a sacrifice of a part of his creativity, of precisely the language for which Ihering had so ad-
mired him in the early twenties. No longer did Brecht's characters speak in images of life and decay straight from the gut; they began to speak a highly stylized, compact, rational and yet colloquial language, in which every word contained a thought and a gesture. Brecht observed that the rational form of the Lehrstück actually produced a stronger emotional effect than the less controlled forms (GW 15:242—that is, the Lehrstück produced emotions leading to action, not to catharsis); but for the author it was certainly not easy to chisel and chisel away at all the rich outer texture until only the simplest, most comprehensible and comprehensive piece of pure material was left. The complexity of the Lehrstücke lies entirely in the dialectical confrontation of two opposed ideas and the necessity of choosing—not choosing arbitrarily but finding the right choice. All other complexity is eliminated so that the dialectic in the material itself can become completely visible.

Brecht described the sacrifice that this new controlled style involved, in a 1938 note comparing the Svendborg Poems to the Home Devotions:

The Home Devotions, my first lyric publication, carries without doubt the stamp of the decadence of the bourgeois class. Fullness of the senses includes confusion of the senses. Discrimination in expression includes elements of decline. Wealth of motives includes the factor of aimlessness. Vigorous language is sloppy, etc. etc. In contrast to this purpose the later Svendborg Poems stand for a retreat as much as an advance. From the bourgeois standpoint an astounding impoverishment has taken place. Isn't everything more one-sided, less “organic,” cooler, more “conscious” (in the derogatory sense)? My comrades-in-arms will not, I hope, just let that pass. They will call the Home Devotions more decadent than the Svendborg Poems. But it seems to me important that they recognize what the advance, insofar as it can be established, has cost. Capitalism has forced us into the struggle. It has laid waste our environment. I don't walk “just strolling along in the woods” but among police. There is still fullness, the fullness of struggles. There is discrimination, that of problems. No question about it: literature is not flourishing.


Here it is quite clear that the simplicity of his language was difficult and almost sad for Brecht; he forced himself to it for political reasons. This was finally real political commitment. In 1926 a crisis in his creative work drove him to the study of politics; by 1929 the process came full circle, and his political commitment forced a change in his creative work. He had to put his work at the service of something larger than immanent aesthetic principles; in this historical period writing for him could never be limited to self-expression.

In the comment on the Svendborg Poems, Brecht said he felt it was important that his comrades understand what is lost by commitment to political literature. It is indeed important, for it shows that his commitment was not born of a need for discipline and that he was not at heart ruthless or Stalinist. The regret he expresses in recalling his old style that he has had to reject shows that the choice in The Measure Taken was an agony, not a pleasure. Brecht was a humanist revolutionary. He would have liked to have been soft, but he felt compelled by the times he lived in to be hard. That is the theme of many wistful statements during the period when he used his art to fight Nazism.

The poem “Bad Time for Poetry,” for example, ends with the lines:

In my song a rhyme  
Would almost seem like arrogance to me  
Inside me contend  
Enthusiasm over the blossoming apple tree  
And horror over the house-painter’s speeches.  
But only the second  
Forces me to my writing desk.

In meinem Lied ein Reim  
Käme mir fast vor wie Übermut.
In mir streiten sich
Die Begeisterung über den blühenden Apfelbaum
Und das Entsetzen über die Reden des Anstreichers.
Aber nur das zweite
Drängt mich zum Schreibtisch.

(GW 9:744)

(The house-painter is, of course, Hitler.)

There are many references in the poems of the thirties to the curse of having been born in "dark times," in the "time of disorder"; the best-known is in the justifiably famous poem "To Those Born After," which as the last poem in the *Svendborg Poems* makes a key autobiographical statement analogous to "Of Poor B.B." in the *Home Devotions*. The historical period in which he lives, Brecht writes in "To Those Born After," forces his generation to fight evil by themselves becoming hard and unfriendly; as in "This Babylonian Confusion" he speaks to a future generation who may not understand how difficult it was to live in an age when a conversation about trees was almost a crime.

Truly, I live in dark times!

What kind of times are these, when
A conversation about trees is almost a crime
Because it includes silence about so many abominations!

I came into the cities at the time of disorder
When hunger ruled there.
I came among people at the time of rebellion
And I was outraged with them.

Streets led to the swamp in my time.
Language betrayed me to the butcher.
I could do little. But the rulers
Sat more securely without me, that I hoped.

You who will emerge out of the flood
In which we perished
Think
When you speak of our weaknesses
Also of the dark time
Which you escaped.

Besides we do know:
Even hatred of baseness

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Distorts the features.
Even anger over injustice
Makes the voice hoarse. Alas, we
Who wanted to prepare the ground for friendliness
Could not ourselves be friendly.

Wirklich, ich lebe in finsteren Zeiten!

Was sind das für Zeiten, wo
Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist
Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!

In die Städte kam ich zur Zeit der Unordnung
Als da Hunger herrschte.
Unter die Menschen kam ich zu der Zeit des Aufruhrs
Und ich empörte mich mit ihnen.

Die Straßen führten in den Sumpf zu meiner Zeit.
Die Sprache verriet mich dem Schlächter.
Ich vermochte nur wenig. Aber die Herrschenden
Saßen ohne mich sicherer, das hoffte ich.

Ihr, die ihr auftauchen werdet aus der Flut
In der wir untergegangen sind
Gedenkt
Wenn ihr von unseren Schwächen sprecht
Auch der finsteren Zeit
Der ihr entronnen seid.

Dabei wissen wir doch:
Auch der Haß gegen die Niedrigkeit
Verzerrt die Züge.
Auch der Zorn über das Unrecht
Macht die Stimme heiser. Ach, wir
Die wir den Boden bereiten wollten für Freundlichkeit
Konnten selber nicht freundlich sein.

(GW 9:723-25)

It is a truly authentic revolutionary speaking those lines, one who keeps his commitment alive by questioning and by remembering what the revolution is to be made for, not just against.

A few years earlier Brecht had written an entire poem about the political necessity of limiting his style and subject matter, which is simultaneously a limiting of one’s own fulfillment and experience:

Exclusively because of the increasing disorder
In our cities of the class struggle
Some of us have decided in these years
No longer to speak of harbor cities, snow on the roofs, women
Smell of ripe apples in the cellar, sensations of the flesh
All that makes a person rounded and human
But to speak more of the disorder
Thus to become one-sided, arid, caught in the affairs
Of politics and the dry, “unworthy” vocabulary
Of dialectical economics
So that this terrible compacted concurrence
Of snowfalls (they aren’t only cold, we know that)
Exploitation, tempted flesh and class justice
Won’t engender in us approval
Of such a many-sided world, pleasure in
The contradictions of such a bloody life
You understand.

That Brecht began writing poems about nature after moving to
East Berlin is often taken as a sign that he was not really dedicated to
communism. But we can see from this poem that he considered
private life and nature to be human and proper subjects for poetry,
and it was only the inhumanity and unnaturalness of the age that
forced him and others to write not about what makes man human
but about the prevailing disorder. As he writes in *Me-Ti*, it will be
possible to write poetry about the sound of falling raindrops when
there are no more homeless people who get the raindrops between
their neck and collar (GW 12:509). (Compare the poem “Landscape of Exile” [GW 10:830-31]). For him socialism was the human system, and when he went to live in East Germany, he allowed himself finally to write about private subjects; he was able at last to become “rounded,” not “one-sided.” Perhaps in those last years he even allowed himself to close his eyes to some of the less socialist practices of his government while he wrote about nature and private subjects in the Buckow Elegies. That is a question for some other book.

The laments quoted above stem from the period when he was using his writing to fight fascism. But the language in the last poem is directed against all capitalism, not just fascism. And the painful decision to give up richness of style for ideological clarity dates from Brecht’s “conversion” to socialism, not from the beginning of the National Socialist regime and his exile. This decision became evident in 1929: after finishing Mahagonny, Brecht’s dramatic work was devoted exclusively to Lehrstücke and other variations on didactic plays.

Between 1926 and 1929 he had been studying socialism and the critique of capitalism diligently, but he had not really committed himself in his artistic work. Now suddenly came full engagement. Every word he wrote, and even the way he wrote it, was to serve the cause by making the nature of the two systems clear, by speaking to the class and generation to whom the future belonged, by being simple and comprehensible and containing nothing irrelevant to the class struggle.

What caused Brecht to break his silence and become totally committed in 1929?

Sources

From the principal plays written in this period, we can see that the entire development from student of Marx to totally engaged artist was very closely related to the development of ideas about America. The three works that took most of Brecht’s time from 1925 to 1931 were Joe Fleischhacker, Mahagonny, and St. Joan, all “American” plays. St. Joan, begun in 1929, is the most complete expression we have of Brecht’s theoretical study of Marxism; it is not only a concretization of many of the theories in Capital, it is also (both in
form and content) an absolute commitment to whatever means are necessary to make the socialist revolution.

But although the most important plays are about America, looking at the books Brecht read about America is no longer as much help in investigating the influences on his thinking as it was before. His readings served mainly to confirm what he already knew. His factual image of America did not change; he needed no new details to write another play about it. What changed was his evaluation of the image, and the conclusions for action that he drew from his conception of conditions there.

Reading a novel like *The Titan*, by Theodore Dreiser, for instance, hardly had much effect on him; it only repeats the basic themes of the other “Chicago novels”: success in the world of high finance, the fascination of the city, the irreversible growth of America into a great industrial power, congruence of financial and political power, and a wistful look back at the now-deserted fields of the rural era. In theme, plot, and style *The Titan* has many similarities to *The Pit*, and it did not provide Brecht with any new material; he listed it as one of the best books he read in 1928 but classified it only as “entertainment literature.” ("Unterhaltungsliteratur") (GW 18:66).

In 1928 Brecht must also have seen Piscator’s production of Upton Sinclair’s *Singing Jailbirds*. Frau Hauptmann remembered that Brecht by no means thought all Americans were bad, that he knew about and respected the IWW and Joe Hill, for instance. Sinclair’s play is one important source of that knowledge and respect, for it is a play about the Wobblies and the persecution they suffer under the criminal syndicalism law. Although Sinclair makes clear in the postscript that he is personally opposed to the program of the Wobblies, the play portrays them as courageous heroes. It also makes the nature of class justice very clear, both in serious scenes and in one of Sinclair’s few really funny scenes, a Wobbly’s vision of a trial run against him by the “master-class of the State of California.” The play is a strange mixture of sentimental banality and agitprop technique. It is without dialectic or theory, being merely an appeal to the emotions of the workers to stick together and win through martyrdom. Its artistic virtue lies in its constant use of IWW songs sung by choruses of strikers and prisoners; refrains
returning again and again make the play both rousing and stylized, like a ballad with a refrain that takes on new meaning with each verse. It is a veritable compendium of labor songs (mostly by Joe Hill, an immigrant), such as "Solidarity Forever," "They Go Wild, Simply Wild Over Me," "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," "You'll Have Pie in the Sky When You Die," and "The Rebel Girl."

About 1950 Brecht planned a play with the Berliner Ensemble on Joe Hill, perhaps Piscator's production of _Singing Jailbirds_ back in 1928 influenced that later plan. But none of the American works he knew in the late twenties had any direct influence on his writing at that time; at most, perhaps, the choruses in the Sinclair play helped give him the idea of using workers' choruses in _The Mother_. Except for _St. Joan_, Brecht's first direct use of an American source after starting to write in the service of communism was not until 1931, when he wrote the poem "Places to Sleep" on the basis of an incident in chapter 45 of Dreiser's _Sister Carrie_.

At least two other plays on American subjects were performed in Berlin in 1929: Erich Mühsam's _Sacco und Vanzetti_—in which the shockingly unjust court processes predominate—and _Reporter_, by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur—a light comedy with a background of political corruption, violence, and journalistic sensationalism in Chicago—but again they do not seem to have influenced Brecht. They could only help substantiate the picture he already had of the American system. He already knew of the Sacco-Vanzetti case in 1927 (GW 18:53), and he knew of corruption in Chicago at least since reading _The Jungle_.

So, although Brecht continued to read about America during the period between his discovery of Marxian economics and his dedication to communism, no new ideas from his reading are reflected in his work of that period. _Mahagonny_ reflects the early influence of Bret Harte and Jack London and the longtime preoccupation with cities and hurricanes; new is the economic doctrine, particularly the understanding of alienation, but not the picture of America. _Happy End_ is also a distillation of early stereotypes of America as a land of brutal but charming gangsters and commercial religion. _Flight over the Ocean_ focuses only on the positive content of American technical progress; _The Baden Learning Play_ presents an antithesis but is not specifically about America. The only two poems Brecht wrote about America in this
period (1927–29) also accept the familiar image of America: “Memorial Plaque for 12 World Champions” (1927) praises sports champions and “Song of the Machines” (also 1927) praises technical achievement.

According to James K. Lyon, in 1928 Brecht befriended his first real American, Ferdinand Reyher. Reyher had written a play, *Don’t Bet on Fights*, about a self-educated boxer who enters the highest social circles and abandons his own class. The play is likely based on the life story of Gene Tunney. Elisabeth Hauptmann translated it (under the title *Harte Bandagen* [*Hard Bandages*]), and Brecht used all his influence to get it produced in Berlin; it finally opened to great controversy on the last day of 1929. In 1928 Reyher was also working on what he called a “melodramatic and typically American” Frankie-and-Johnny play that was meant to show the history of the American West in microcosm; it later turned into a novel on the history of America as seen through the history of poker! It was never published, but it may well have influenced *Mahagonny*. The discovery of Reyher’s influence on Brecht’s developing image of America, both in these transitional days and during Brecht’s later stay in Los Angeles, is an important corrective to the notion that Brecht became totally anti-American. Reyher was a socialist, not an apologist for capitalism, but he continually strove to show Brecht the concrete little things that he loved about America and its people. He had a vast knowledge and experience of both high and low culture, and through him Brecht gained a more accurate picture of the richness of this country than is usually supposed. In fact, Brecht apparently had either real or fanciful plans to visit the United States about this time. According to Lyon, after Reyher returned to the States, Elisabeth Hauptmann wrote him in August 1929, saying she, Brecht, Weill, and unnamed others planned to come there the following year, and she wrote him again in 1930 expressing the vaguer hope that *The Threepenny Opera* would play there sometime so that they could all come over.

But it is not until *St. Joan of the Stockyards* that an American literary influence is directly apparent again. But even there the influence is only from sources Brecht had known for years: *St. Joan* is made up of almost all the plays and fragments he had already written on America and books he had already read. There is no image of America that does not come from sources he knew before
he started reading Marx; yet the play is very different from all his previous work. The difference all lies in the meaning given to phenomena that remain the same.

We have already noticed that Brecht's positive commitment to working for socialism did not come until the time when he wrote *St. Joan*. Something happened in 1929–30 besides his reading American literature and reading Marx: both of those were only the preparation.