Conclusion

*The Old and the New*

Brecht stopped writing about America not only because the myth he had created lost its usefulness for him but also because America no longer represented "the new." If there is one single motif that unites all of Brecht's plays, it is his fascination with newness. The word *new* and its derivatives appear with astounding frequency in his critical and theoretical writings. At first he talks mainly about the need for a new theater, new kind of actor, new drama, and new audience, at a time when his rebellion against the old is mainly a rebellion against the older generation, especially in the theater. But although he later infuses the words *new* and *old* with different content, he never changes the values he assigns to the words: the new is always good, the old always bad. About 1928 he wrote a poem with the repeated refrain "Anything new / Is better than anything old" ("Alles Neue / Ist besser als alles Alte") (*GW* 8:314–16); and somewhere he wrote the aphorism "Rather the bad new than the good old" ("Lieber das schlechte Neue als das gute Alte").

As we have seen, for the first decade of Brecht's writing America embodied all that was new, for him as well as most of his friends and his generation. America was the land of technical progress, of confidence in the future, and of the triumph of capitalism over feudalism, or urban life over rural. In it, "the new age had come greater than any previous one" ("die neue zeit war gekommen größer als jede vorhergehende") (BBA 460, 63). As late as 1935 he wrote in a poem (in a more ironic vein) of America: "Whatever is brand new likes to stand in the light there" ("Gern steht das Allerneueste dort im Licht") (*GW* 9:560).

Brecht's changing conception of a "new age" inspired various types of "new people" as protagonists in his plays. He explains why an audience found his first American play, *In the Jungle*, difficult to
understand, by pointing to the "new type of person" portrayed there:

New was a human type who fought a battle without enmity, with heretofore unheard of, that is to say not yet portrayed, methods, as well as his position against the family, marriage, people in general and much more.

Neu war ein Typus Mensch, der einen Kampf ohne Feindschaft mit bisher unerhörten, das heisst noch nicht gestalteten Methoden führte, und seine Stellung gegen die Familie, zur Ehe, überhaupt zum Menschen und vieles mehr. (GW 15:67)

Brecht uses similar terminology in one of his forewords to A Man's a Man (1927). More important than all the great new buildings in New York, electricity, and the other achievements of this great age, he says, "a new human type is forming now, right now, and the collected interest of the world is focused on his development" ("bildet sich jetzt, eben jetzt, ein neuer Typus von Mensch heraus, und das gesamte Interesse der Welt ist auf seine Entwicklung gerichtet"). He continues by giving advice on how to look at Galy Gay:

it's better if you imagine that you're not hearing an old acquaintance of yours talk, or yourself, as has almost always been the case in the theater till now, but a new kind of type, perhaps in fact an ancestor of this new type of person that I've spoken of.

da ist es besser, Sie stellen sich vor, Sie hören nicht einen alten Bekannten von Ihnen reden oder sich selber, wie das bisher fast immer der Fall war im Theater, sondern eine neue Art von Typus, vielleicht eben einen Vorfahren dieses neuen Typus Mensch, von dem ich gesprochen habe. (GW 17:977)

This formula explains Brecht's dramatic method not only in those two plays but in all his early work. Every play takes a "new type of person," a person who lacks some normal traits or has some traits that will be characteristic of the future, places him in the context of normal contemporary society, and watches the progress of the sociological experiment as the new interacts with the old. With Baal, Brecht asks himself, What if I were to show a type "who is absolutely unsocializable and whose method of production is completely unutilizable" ("der absolut unsozialisierbar und dessen Produktionsweise ganz unverwertbar ist") (GW 15:140)? The result is
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destructive to all the people who expect Baal to have a normal conscience.

With Drums in the Night Brecht asks himself, What if I showed a type who was totally without idealism, who fought only for what he perceived as his immediate interest, surrounded by people who are committed to a struggle?

He is the mob. He has—one must admit it—he has no feeling for the tragic, for the pure line, he lacks every sense of duty, he doesn't do what you have to expect of him, he doesn't take the flight into higher realms that is made so easy for him, therein he is perverse.

Er ist der Mob. Er hat, man muß es gestehen, er hat keinen Sinn für das Tragische, für die reine Linie, er ist ohne jedes Pflichtgefühl, er tut nicht, was man von ihm erwarten muß, er nimmt nicht den Aufschwung ins Höhere, der ihm so leicht gemacht wird, darin ist er pervers. (GW 17:957)

(Brecht later decided that although it was the character of Kragler he had viewed as the experiment, it was the real revolutionaries in the play who represented the “new type.”)

With In the Jungle Brecht asks himself, What if I invented a person who picks a fight to the death with another person for motives that no one else can understand, a person who fights for the sake of fighting and rejects all the traditional rewards?

Then you mustn’t be surprised if in the newer drama certain human types behave differently from your expectations, in certain situations, and also not if your suppositions about the motives of a certain kind of behavior are proved false.

So dürfen Sie nicht erstaunt sein, wenn in den neueren Dramen gewisse Menschentypen in gewissen Situationen anders handeln, als Sie erwartet haben, und auch nicht, wenn Ihre Mutmaßungen über die Motive einer bestimmten Handlungsweise sich als falsch erweisen. (GW 17:970)

With A Man’s a Man Brecht asks himself, What if I placed into the normal world a person who is exactly the opposite of Baal, “a man who can’t say no” (“ein Mann, der nicht nein sagen kann”), who has no sense of identity whatsoever and is totally “socializable”?

This experimental approach to human nature continues in Fleischhacker and Dan Drew, the stories of two men who are absolutely ruthless; in Mahagonny, the story of a man who is not
satisfied by the new age; in *St. Joan*, the story of a twentieth-century Faustian man (subjectively “good” but objectively bad) and a woman who insists on finding out the truth; in *The Mother*, the story of an old woman who is capable of learning—and so on.

Through all these early plays, Brecht tries out one kind of “new person” after another, all of them operating on new, unknown sets of values. They are almost dispassionate studies of behavior, experiments with commentary by the lecturer. Or they are like the invention of non-Euclidean geometry or even science fiction: all the normal relations of the world are retained, but one axiom is changed. Suppose parallel lines do not meet? Suppose Galy Gay willingly believes he is not Galy Gay?

It is his excitement about the ability to have a new perspective that causes Brecht to admire Americans for being untainted by the traditional values.

But it can be difficult to distinguish between the beginnings of a new age, with new people in it, and the dying gasps of an old age. Remember Brecht’s description, in the fragment *The Flood*, of the rapid biological changes that take place at the time of the Flood, which is the end of an age despite all the innovations:

that is the greatest age humanity has experienced (the types get stronger bigger darker they laugh . . .

in the final years epidemics of monstrous inventions proliferate flying people appear they achieve greater fame than people ever have they fall in the water laughter atheism increases

das ist die größte zeit die die menschheit erlebt hat (die typen werden stärker größer finsterer sie lachen . . .

in den letzten jahren verbreiten sich seuchen von ungeheuren erfindungen flugmenschen treten auf sie gelangen zu größerem ruhm als je zuvor menschen sie fallen ins wasser gelächter der atheismus nimmt zu (BBA 214, 17)

In the years 1926–29 America, which for Brecht had represented everything new, took on this quixotic character and became the old, as he discovered that many phenomena that had excited him there were really symptoms of decadence. It was as though the Flood had swept across the new continent, destroying what had been the new age and opening the way for a new new age. Brecht uses that precise image in 1953 to sum up his first five plays (including *Edward*):
All five plays together . . . greedy reminiscence of a happier dramatic era, show without regret how the great Flood sweeps over the bourgeois world.

Alle fünf Stücke zusammen . . . gierige Reminiszenz an eine glücklichere dramatische Ära, zeigen ohne Bedauern, wie die große Sintflut über die bürgerliche Welt hereinbricht. \(GW\ 17:952\)

The new new age was of course socialism, and the Soviet Union became for Brecht the country that symbolized newness, though he was never as rhapsodic about it as he had been about America. Capitalism became "the old." This is clear in a prose poem called "Parade of the Old New" (1938), which makes no sense at all unless one substitutes "capitalism" for "the old" and "socialism" for "the new." It is a vision of fascism, which calls itself national socialism but is really capitalism disguised:

I stood on a hill, there I saw the old coming toward me, but it was the new coming. . . . Round about stood some of those that instilled terror and cried: here comes the new, all this is new, greet the new, be new like us! . . . So the old strode in, disguised as the new, but in its triumphal procession it carried the new with it and it was presented as the old.

Ich stand auf einem Hügel, da sah ich das Alte herankommen, aber es kam das Neue. . . . Ringsum standen solche, die Schrecken einflößten und schrien: Hier kommt das Neue, das ist alles neu, begrüßt das Neue, seid neu wie wir! . . . So schritt das Alte einher, verkleidet als das Neue, aber in seinem Triumphzug führte es das Neue mit sich und es wurde vorgeführt als das Alte. \(GW\ 9:729\)

A similar use of the abstract words "old" and "new" forms the conceit of a poem from as late as 1950, spoken as advice to the actors of the Berliner Ensemble—"Search for the New and Old":

When you read your roles  
Searching, ready to wonder  
Look for the new and old, because our age  
And our children's age is the age of conflict  
Of the new with the old.

Wenn ihr eure Rollen lest  
Forschend, bereit zu staunen  
Sucht nach dem Neuen und Alten, denn unsere Zeit  
Und die Zeit unserer Kinder ist die Zeit der Kämpfe  
Des Neuen mit dem Alten.

Here Brecht refers not to the entire social systems of socialism and
capitalism but to characters imbued with the values of the two systems. Kattrin is new, Mother Courage is old; and in *The Mother*,

The cunning of the old woman worker  
Who takes the teacher’s knowledge from him  
... is new.  
... And old  
Is the fear of workers during the war  
To take the leaflets with that knowledge in them.

Die List der alten Arbeiterin  
Die dem Lehrer sein Wissen abnimmt  
... ist neu.  
... Und alt  
Ist die Angst der Arbeiter im Krieg  
Die Flugblätter mit dem Wissen zu nehmen.

After all the experimenting with different “new types of people,” Brecht settled on the socialist concept of a new person. He had been using the term without knowing where it would lead him. The poem advises the actors to look for qualities of the socialist person and show how these new qualities grew out of the old relations:

As the people say: when the moon changes  
The young moon holds the old  
A night long in its arms.

Wie das Volk sagt: zur Zeit des Mondwechsels  
Hält der junge Mond den Alten  
Eine Nacht lang im Arme.

(BW 9:793)

Brecht was able to see this same dialectic of the simultaneity of new and old in the earlier phenomenon of Americanism and in his own fascination with America. In 1927 he looks at his previous belief that America was the embodiment of the new age, and sees this belief as a mistake, but a sign of a healthy interest in seeking real change and progress. In speaking of the need for a total change in the theater, he says signs of that change have until now been taken simply for symptoms of disease, which is partially justified since one always sees the decay of the old before the birth of the new; that, however, phenomena such as Americanism appear because of the changes that the truly new influences are bringing about in the diseased body (GW 15:131–32). In other words, interest in America was after all a last gasp of “the old,” but it was caused by the upheavals accompanying the approach of “the new.”
CONCLUSION

For a while it looked to Brecht as though it was America itself that was new, but a theoretical understanding of the way socialism grows out of capitalism, together with wide reading on the effects of American capitalism on the poor, and finally the firsthand experience of the worldwide effects of the depression, all convinced him that the American system was really "the old." Interest in America had been of paramount importance to him because it led him to most of his discoveries about society, but

What a discovery:
That their system of living together showed
The same lamentable flaw as that of
More modest people!

Welch eine Entdeckung:
Daß ihr System des Gemeinlebens denselben
Jämmerlichen Fehler aufwies wie das
Bescheidenerer Leute!

(GW 9:483)