

Bertold Brecht: Collectivism and Dialectical Materialism in Practice



HELP ENLIGHTEN YOUR FELLOWS. BE SURE TO PASS THIS ON. WE MUST BREAK THE IMPERIAL DISINFORMATION MACHINE.



Bertold Brecht put into everyday practice Marxist collectivism and dialectical materialism in his art as few other Western writers have ever achieved. Despite accusations of avidness for money, the German poet and playwright belied any doubts about his ultimate goals: education of the people in Socialism. Moreover, the existence of some thirty volumes of Brecht's works will bewilder readers who may limit his art to *The Threepenny Opera* and images of Satchmo singing *Mack the Knife*.



Eugen Bertold Friedrich Brecht was born on February 10, 1898 in Augsburg in Bavaria near Munich and died in East Berlin on August 14, 1956. It was a surprise to me to learn only in these days that he was not a native Berliner at all, as I had long assumed. He studied medicine at Munich University (1917-21), where I too did part of my studies in the 1960s. Brecht's Munich was a revolutionary Munich, a dynamic city, part of Germany's November Revolution (1918-19), which led to the weak Weimar Republic. Munich was also the birth place of the Nazi movement led by Adolf Hitler and his Brown Shirts. The explosion of the arts in Brecht's Munich of the immediate

post-WWI resembled pre-war Munich when it was widely said that “everyone was painting, writing or composing” and the artistic movement, *Der Blaue Reiter*, reigned supreme and, headed by painters Vasily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, Paul Klee and Gabriele Münster, swept through Germany.

Most people will also be surprised to learn that although Brecht’s collaboration with the progressive Viennese composer Kurt Weill was important in his creative life, his major work was not *The Three Penny Opera* and the song *Mack the Knife*. Instead his chief contribution was his dramaturgy, his poetry, his own theater ensemble influenced by Meyerhold and Piscator, and his theoretical works.

In his late twenties, Brecht became an ardent Marxist which he remained all his too short life. In those revolutionary times it seemed natural to him that he apply dialectical materialism to his theatrical work: his major targets in all his work were European post-WWI culture, the German bourgeoisie and war, reflecting his generation’s disillusionment with the civilization that had crashed in the Great War. Above all, the better part of that generation, to which Brecht belonged, still aimed at the ultimate defeat of capitalism.

The editors of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* write extensively about Brecht’s creative work: “The essence of his theory of drama ... is that a truly Marxian drama must avoid the Aristotelian premise that the audience should be made to believe that what they are witnessing is happening here and now. For he saw that if the audience really felt that the emotions of heroes of the past—Oedipus, or Lear, or Hamlet—could equally have been their own reactions, then the Marxist idea that human nature is NOT (emphasis added by the author) constant but a result of changing historical conditions would automatically be invalidated. Brecht therefore argued that the theatre should not seek to make its audience believe in the presence of the characters on the stage—should not make it identify with them. But should rather

follow the epic poet's art, which is to make the audience realize that what it sees on the stage is merely an account of past events that it should watch with critical detachment. Hence, the "epic" (narrative, nondramatic) theatre is based on detachment, on the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect, or the more precise translation, defamiliarization, GS), achieved through a number of devices that remind the spectator that he is being presented with a demonstration of human behavior in (a) scientific spirit rather than with an illusion of reality, in short, that the theatre is only theatre and not the world itself."

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A reborn Brecht could have written that readers of my account here should not be made to identify with Brecht of the 1920s and 30s—and his generation's disappointment. We today however can see him as an "epic hero" of his times who faced a set of historical conditions much different from ours today. For a different set of reasons, we too are a disillusioned generation as was his. Some of us also aim at the end of capitalism as a solution of our problems: e.g. threats of nuclear war and man's path toward destruction of planet Earth. However, we must appreciate Brecht for his accomplishments in his own era as a result of his application of the dialectical process at work—the conditions we face are vastly different, though the underlying evil—capitalism—marked his times as it does ours. Although we see similarities between the conditions facing the Brechtian generation and ours today, there are major differences of degree: his generation had witnessed the destruction of a civilization and searched optimistically,

feverishly for the regeneration of society; instead we are a demoralized generation, a placid generation, facing an Armageddon we perceive but since it is yet to arrive in full force many of us ignore. While his generation emerging from the abyss was filled with energy and hope, we in the West see all around us a largely hopeless and/or disinterested generation, the majority of which, to the dismay of a tiny minority, is largely ignorant of the reality of the dire situation the existence of which only few even recognize. We have in our face the super power USA led by psychopaths of the Dr. Strangelove genre, of "take it all" and "*après moi le déluge*". Brecht's generation faced traditional old regional power blocs; we face the rise of immense almost unimaginable geopolitical blocs covering the globe, by their very nature hostile one to the other, the Western one of which threatens daily to destroy not only the others but human life itself.

That wonderful Berlin writer, Walter Benjamin, noted that his friend Brecht considered the task of the epic theater less the development of actions than the representation of conditions. Brecht aimed at depriving the stage of sensations derived from the subject matter. Brecht recommended dwelling on "historical incidents and purging them of the sensational". Pure Marxism: Brecht's theater was conceived to speak didactically to the masses. For that he wanted a relaxed and receptive audience who could better follow familiar, easy to grasp situations. That concept is simple to receive and digest. The class struggle, always present in Marxist writing, "is a fight for the crude and materials things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist." (Walter Benjamin)

MAHAGONNY PRELUDE

In 1922 while still living in Munich, Brecht had already made his mark in German culture. "At age 24 Bert Brecht has changed Germany's literary complexion overnight," wrote the Berlin

critic Herbert Ihering in his review of Brecht's first produced play, *Drums in the Night* (*Trommeln in der Nacht*). "He has given our time a new tone, a new melody, a new vision ... a language you can feel on your tongue, in your gums, your ear, your spinal column." That same year Brecht won the prestigious Kleist Prize for his first three plays (*Baal*; *Drums in the Night*, and *In the Jungle*). The Kleist Prize was probably Germany's most significant literary award until abolished in 1932 as the Nazi rise to power became inexorable.

A fundamental key to Brecht's approach to Marxism was his enthusiastic emphasis on the collective while downplaying the individual. At the same time his poetry and his written plays seemed insufficient for his insatiable artistic thirst. His association with a new, post-Expressionist movement in German arts, *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) prompted him to develop his *Man Equals Man* (*Mann ist Mann*) project, a kind of Brecht collective—varying groups of collaborators with whom he henceforth worked—an approach mirroring the artistic climate of the middle 1920s and typical of Munich arts since *Der Blaue Reiter* movement in the early part of the century. Following the idea of the collective vs. the individual, two films, Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*, introduced Brecht to dialectical materialism and apparently prompted him to closer studies of Marxism and socialism. In 1964 he himself revealed in (BRECHT, pp 23-24): "When I read Marx's *Capital* I understood my own plays...Marx was the only spectator for my plays I'd ever come across:" He then praised Bolshevik collectivism (the replaceability of each member of the collective in his play *Man Equals Man* produced in Darmstadt) and the red terror in *The Decision* (*Die Massnahme*.)

The collective adaptation of John Gray's *The Beggar's Opera* with lyrics by Brecht and music by Kurt Weill, *The Three Penny Opera* (*Die Dreigroschenoper*), was the big hit in 1920s Berlin, influencing music worldwide. Hildegard Knef sang *Mackie Messer*

after WWII. Popular singers such as Frank Sinatra and Louis Armstrong made hit recordings of the song called in English, *Mack the Knife*. A famous line from the work underscored the hypocrisy of the conventional morality of the Church and the establishment in the face of working-class hunger and deprivation. *Erst kommt das Fressen, Dann kommt die Moral*. First the Grub, (literally: eating like animals). Then morality.

Both Brecht and Weill were keen to revolutionize the tired and bourgeois opera tradition. From that desire emerged the 1927 *Mahagonny Songspiel*, an operetta that took Brecht's Mahagonny poems which Weill set to music. It was a statement of radical theater, set in a boxing ring, a story relating the greed in the fictional godless pleasure seeking city of Mahagonny.

MAHAGONNY



The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny (Der Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny) is widely considered the masterpiece of the Brecht/Weill semi-collective. Its premier in Leipzig in 1930 caused an

uproar by Nazis in the audience but its Berlin premier in Berlin in 1931 was a triumphant sensation. The story of the operatic play is that three criminals create the city of

Mahagonny. Drinking, gambling,, prize-fights and such activities are the sole occupation of the inhabitants. Money rules. Mahagonny is threatened by a hurricane which after causing much distress simply bypasses the city. Following the hurricane nothing is forbidden and scenes of debauchery occur. Jenny and Jim want to leave but Jim cannot pay his debts and is arrested. Another character arraigned for murder, bribes his way out of it, but Jim has no money and is condemned to death for not paying for his whisky. The opera ends with discontent destroying the city, which burns as the inhabitants march away.

As background, see these excerpts from the article "The Opera Hitler Hated" by an apparent right-wing Rupert Christiansen published on March 10, 2015 in the conservative London *Telegraph*, which literally bombs *Mahagonny* on the eve of its surprising performance at Covent Garden.

"Does it belong in an opera house? And if not, where should it go? These are the twinned questions confronted by anyone addressing Bertold Brecht and Kurt Weill's vituperative musical satire Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, to which no clear answer to the conundrum has ever been provided. The text is barbed, ironic and challenging, the score richly textured and glitteringly seductive. But the great majority of attempts to give it theatrical life have fallen flat – in recent memory, it has bombed at both ENO (English National Opera) and the Salzburg Festival – and neither pukka opera singers nor actors with Broadway voices find it easy to inhabit both Weill's smokey sophistication and Brecht's bitter disillusion. The episodic plot doesn't build coherent momentum, and the finger-wagging sermonising seems irrelevant and patronising. So can a forthcoming production at Covent Garden lift the curse? Mahagonny's back history is complicated. Its origins lie in a half-hour concert cantata Mahagonny Songspiel ("sung play"), in which Weill set a selection of Brecht's poems about Mahagonny, a fictitious city

in North America presented as a modern Sodom and Gomorrah, destroyed by its worship of graft and fraud, whisky and dollars.

The first performance at the genteel Baden-Baden Festival in 1927 caused a booing-and-cheering sensation that inspired Brecht and Weill to develop the cantata into something full-blown. The field was wide open, as the Weimar Republic offered an ambience in which avant-garde experiment with operatic convention was rife....

Yet even if the Zeitgeist was favourable, the personal chemistry between Brecht and Weill was combustible. Both of them may have deplored the enveloping romanticism of the Wagnerian tradition and sought subject-matter relevant to 20th-century life, presented through demotic songs rather than high-falutin' arias – a style honed after Mahagonny Songspiel, when they shamelessly adapted The Beggar's Opera into their 1928 smash hit The Three Penny Opera. But they also tugged in different directions.

Brecht was a cynical opportunist, fascinated by moral corruption and enraged by the ruling classes and their crooked dealings. His hostile attitude to theatre that merely pleased or pandered gradually hardened, and he ended up disparaging Mahagonny as something "cooked up through and through", in which the sensuality of Weill's music dominated his urgent message of resistance to a social order rapidly descending from gangsterism into Nazism.

Weill was a liberal, and altogether less aggressive. He was happy with the idea that Mahagonny should be classified as an opera, albeit one that addressed audiences in a fresh, crisp and accessible style – as exemplified in the gravel voice of his wife Lotte Lenya. He wanted success, in other words, while Brecht wanted revolution.

In Germany, Mahagonny caused an even bigger scandal as an

opera than it had as a *Songspiel*, and the fact that Hitler's insurgent Brownshirts often disrupted performances chanting the hideous Nazi Horst Wessel anthem only added to its notoriety. The catchy Alabama Song became a popular hit, but Brecht was probably right in thinking that his insistence that capitalism rots the soul and screws us all was being swamped by the *éclat* of mere showbiz...."

After *Mahagonny*, Weill and Brecht's drifted apart. The Austrian Jew, Weill, and his wife Lenya emigrated to the USA where he found a place in the Broadway musical comedy. Brecht instead spent the last years of the Weimar era (1930-33) in Berlin working with his collective on plays driven by morals, music and his epic theater aimed at educating workers on Socialist issues, and in general illuminating the last years of German democracy prior to the Nazi takeover.

Both writer and composer were keen to revolutionise what they saw as a tired and bourgeois tradition of opera. Their first collaboration in 1927 was *Mahagonny Songspiel*, an operetta ...Staged in a boxing ring, it was a statement of radical theatre, a story of greed set in a money-mad fictional city of pleasure seekers, immigrants and the godless. A mostly favourable reception encouraged them to develop it into a full-blown opera, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, which was meant to premiere in 1928 – but a new project stopped Weill and Brecht in their tracks. That project was *The Threepenny Opera*, based on a ballad opera called *The Beggar's Opera*, written by John Gay in 1728. One of the earliest-known satirical "anti-operas", *The Beggar's Opera* lampooned the serious Italian opera style and thumbed its nose at the English public's fascination with it. Socialists Weill and Brecht saw the source material as a way to smuggle their polemic to the masses. They kept much of the original plot and characters but added a new libretto and mostly new music and, in doing so, created a soundtrack for a disgruntled generation. With its expressionistic satirising of capitalism,

prostitution, militarism and the middle classes, The Threepenny Opera turned traditional opera on its head, serving not only as a sharp political critique of capitalism but as a showcase for Brecht and Weill's avant-garde approach to theatre."

CONCLUSION

Walter Benjamin, in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History VII*, quotes again his friend, Bertold Brecht, from *The Threepenny Opera*:

Consider the darkness and the great cold

In this vale which resounds with mystery.

Although such words are not exactly Socialist Realism, I believe Bertold Brecht who visited the Soviet Union was partial to the Soviet form of Socialist Realism. Even if he earlier recommended familiar old themes, historical themes, for his epic theater, he did not mean that the "good old days" of bourgeois culture were good. "Better to start with bad new ones," he wrote, "rather than those good old ones." Even though he included Kafka (despite the latter's mystification) among the documents of despair, he believed Socialist writers may learn from them because of their innovating techniques. Brechtian theater as a rule was clearly representative of his theory, *also* I think because of his remarkable unbounded imagination for creating unusual and intriguing situations for holding the attention of his audiences and for educating them ... as in *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*.

Here are two songs from the Brecht-Weill creation which reflect the style of their era as well as the commercial appeal of their productions. For me personally Lotte Lenya's grating voice and staccato delivery is representative of

the1920-30s Berlin.

[Lotte Lenya in Alabama Song by Kurt Weill recording 1930 - YouTube](#)

▶ [3:04](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGUjGPrfA6U>

KURT WEILL *Alabama Song* (aus *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*) singt/sings/canta : Lotte ...

[Mack the Knife Sung by Lotte Lenya - YouTube](#)

The song "*Mack the Knife*" was written by Kurt Weill for his wife Lotte Lenya. Here Ms Lenya sings.

About the Author



GAITHER STEWART Senior Editor, European Correspondent } Gaither Stewart serves as The Greanville Post European correspondent, Special Editor for Eastern European developments, and general literary and cultural affairs correspondent. A retired journalist, his latest book is the essay anthology BABYLON FALLING (Punto Press, 2017). He's

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News

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Parting shot—a word from the editors

The Best Definition of Donald Trump We Have Found



In his zeal to prove to his antagonists in the War Party that he is as bloodthirsty as their champion, Hillary Clinton, and more manly than Barack Obama, Trump seems to have gone “play-crazy” -- acting like an unpredictable maniac in order to terrorize the Russians into forcing some kind of dramatic concessions from their Syrian allies, or risk *Armageddon*. However, the “play-crazy” gambit can only work when the leader is, in real life, a disciplined and intelligent actor, who knows precisely what actual boundaries must not be crossed. That ain’t Donald Trump -- a pitifully shallow and ill-disciplined man, emotionally handicapped by obscene privilege and cognitively crippled by white American chauvinism. By pushing Trump into a corner and demanding that he display his most bellicose self, or be ceaselessly mocked as a “puppet” and minion of Russia, a lesser power, the War Party and its media and clandestine services have created a perfect storm of mayhem that may consume us all.— **Glen Ford, Editor in Chief, Black Agenda Report**