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Long Day's Journey Into Brecht: The Ambivalent Politics of *The Lives of Others*

PAUL A. CANTOR

Abstract: Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* has been widely praised as the first German film to confront the horrors of the East German communist regime. But the film's politics may be ambiguous. As critical as it is of East Germany, it does not offer a ringing endorsement of West Germany. For example, the film's playwright-hero seems to have artistic problems in the West, just as he did in the East. The film's equivocal attitude toward communism is epitomized by its apparently positive view of the Marxist author Bertolt Brecht. This essay compares *The Lives of Others* with Brecht's play *The Good Person of Szechwan* in an effort to understand Donnersmarck's attitude toward his East German predecessor and what it means for his larger view of communism and its relation to art.

Keywords: Brecht, communism, totalitarianism, East Germany, West Germany

i.

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's 2006 film *Das Leben der anderen* (*The Lives of Others*) was widely, and justifiably, praised as a cinematic masterpiece almost from its first release. The movie was especially celebrated as a political statement, as a scathing indictment of communist tyranny, specifically a long overdue exposé of the horrors of the East German regime, the so-called Deutsche Demokratische Republik (the DDR, the “German Democratic Republic”). Surprisingly, until *The Lives of Others*, no

German film had attempted to portray the brutal nature of the communist regime in East Germany. If anything, by the early twenty-first century, a sort of nostalgia had been developing in German popular culture for the days of the DDR, a tendency epitomized by the success of the film *Goodbye Lenin!* (2003). The cultural acceptance of tyrannies of the left but not of the right is always puzzling—one might legitimately wonder whether an equivalent film with the title *Goodbye Goebbels!* would have been tolerated in Germany, or any other country for that matter.

Thus *The Lives of Others* was hailed for its willingness to confront what many Germans seemed content to let slip down the memory hole of history. Using all the power and resources of cinema—above all, a remarkable set of performances from his first-rate cast—Donnersmarck has told a tale that deeply needed telling. With surgical precision, he anatomizes everything that was wrong with the DDR—the corruption of the regime, the bleakness, sterility, and regimentation of daily existence it brought about, its suppression of political dissent and artistic creativity, and, ultimately, the spiritual emptiness of life under communism. With the story opening in 1984, the movie inevitably calls to mind George Orwell's great novel, and indeed *The Lives of Others* already seems destined to stand with *1984* as one of the most chilling evocations of the nightmare of twentieth-century totalitarianism. As such, many conservative critics welcomed the film and hoped that it might herald the beginning of a new trend of anti-communism in popular culture. Reviewing the film in *The Weekly Standard*, John Podhoretz wrote: “Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck found a great story to tell with a great setting and he told it with peerless skill. . . . Maybe he will be followed by other young filmmakers and writers who can bring fresh eyes and a new perspective to the great struggle of the second half of the twentieth century.”¹

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But as is usually the case in cultural criticism, praise for *The Lives of Others* was not universal. A number of commentators raised serious doubts about the film. They questioned the historical accuracy of many of its details, and even of its basic take on the East German regime.² Given the left-wing political orientation of most cultural critics, it is surprising that the film has frequently been attacked for not being anti-communist enough. Given the enthusiasm of so many conservatives for the film, it comes as a bit of a shock to see *The Lives of Others* condemned for painting too rosy a picture of the DDR. Donnersmarck has been accused of glossing over the true horrors of communist tyranny and, in fact, creating a sentimental story out of what should have been a more systematic condemnation of East Germany. According to some critics of *The Lives of Others*, Donnersmarck fundamentally erred in supplying a happy ending to what should have been an unrelievedly bleak story. He is criticized for having given a Hollywood treatment—complete with a love story and a tale of personal redemption—to what should have been a chronicle of pure inhumanity and utter despair.

This kind of criticism of *The Lives of Others* focuses on the central figure of Gerd Wiesler (played so perfectly by Ulrich Mühe). Critics charge Donnersmarck with creating too sympathetic a portrait of this captain in the infamous Stasi, the East German secret police. At the beginning of the film, Wiesler seems to stand for everything that was wrong with the East German regime. He is a staunch and committed supporter of the DDR and a cold-blooded, implacable enforcer of its tyranny. Leading a soulless existence in his private life, devoid of love or any human connection, in his public role he is a ruthless interrogator of the enemies of the regime and an expert at surveillance into any subversive activities. His superiors in the Communist Party assign him to spy on a prominent East German playwright, Georg Dreyman, and his girlfriend, the actress Christa-Maria Sieland. At first pursuing his task with heartless efficiency, Wiesler is gradually seduced by what amounts to his voyeuristic glimpse into the emotionally rich “lives of others.” A whole new world of aesthetic experience opens up to him, as his spying involves him—perhaps for the first time in his life—in watching a play, reading lyric poetry, listening to classical music, and, more generally, sharing in the emotional experience of artistic people. Learning to sympathize with the couple he is spying upon, and perhaps falling in love with the actress himself, Wiesler becomes their protector. He does not report Dreyman’s subversive activity when he writes an article for a West German magazine on the high rate of suicide in East Germany, and, in a very complicated plot, he becomes involved in covering up the playwright’s act of dissent. In a remarkable reversal, the initially villainous Wiesler becomes the quiet hero of *The Lives of Others*, and in the end, he wins a tribute from Dreyman as “ein guter Mensch” (“a good man”).

Critics of the film condemn Donnersmarck for making a hero out of a Stasi agent and reject his portrait of Wiesler as unrealistic and untrue to history. Anna Funder, for example, writes:

No Stasi agent ever tried to save his victim, because it was impossible. (We’d know if one had, because the files are

so comprehensive.) Unlike Wiesler, who runs a nearly solo surveillance operation and can withhold the results from his superior, totalitarian systems rely on thoroughgoing internal surveillance (terror) and division of tasks. The film doesn’t accurately portray the way totalitarian systems work, because it needs to leave room for its hero to act humanely (something such systems are designed to prevent).³

In a more thoroughgoing indictment of the film, the well-known intellectual Slavoj Zizek argues that “*The Lives of Others* fails to capture the true horror of the GDR.” Zizek notes that the film seems to blame the evils of the East German regime on the self-interested actions of a few corrupt officials in the Communist hierarchy. “What’s lost is that the system would be no less terrifying without the minister’s personal corruption, even if it were run by only dedicated and ‘honest’ bureaucrats.”

Zizek extends his critique to Donnersmarck’s portrayal of the East German playwright, who is a sincere supporter of the communist regime and yet is treated very sympathetically in the movie:

One cannot but recall here a witty formula of life under a hard Communist regime: Of the three features—personal honesty, sincere support of the regime, and intelligence—it was possible to combine only two, never all three. If one was honest and supportive, one was not very bright; if one was bright and supportive, one was not honest; if one was honest and bright, one was not supportive. The problem with Dreyman is that he does combine all three features.⁴

Zizek raises a serious question: if *The Lives of Others* is such an anti-communist film, why is one of its heroes a pro-communist playwright and the other a reformed agent of the Communist Party? One could try to develop a reading of the movie that would claim that it criticizes, not communist ideals, but the failure of the East German regime to live up to its communist ideals. Dreyman and Wiesler are shown to be believers in communism, and yet they are also shown to be basically good men, and the problem with the DDR seems to be a few rotten apples in the Marxist barrel. Is the answer a reformed communism, some kind of socialism with a human face?

ii.

Despite the cogency of Zizek’s observations about *The Lives of Others*, I think that such a reading of the film would be wrong. One should not lose sight completely of surface impressions, and there can be no doubt that the overall impression of Donnersmarck’s movie remains strongly anti-communist. The critics of *The Lives of Others* have, to a large extent, judged it by the wrong standards. They are looking for a documentary, not a feature film. They want a work that would chronicle in great historical detail all the horrors of communist tyranny in East Germany. Such a film would be very valuable, but it is not the kind of work Donnersmarck set out to make. Critics object to the way Donnersmarck has personalized the story, choosing to focus on a few sympathetic, and even attractive, characters. But this is simply the logic of good drama. Setting his story in what is recognizably the historical East Germany, Donnersmarck created a personal

story designed to bring out certain larger truths about human nature. As he succinctly puts it in his DVD commentary: “It’s a truthful story, not a true story.”⁵ One could defend him in terms of Aristotle’s distinction in Chapter 9 of his *Poetics* between history and poetry (or fiction). History tells us what actually happened; fiction tells us what might have happened in accord with our understanding of human nature. Thus history shows us what human beings are; fiction shows us what they could be in some ideal sense. From that perspective, it does not matter if no actual Stasi agent did what Gerd Wiesler does in *The Lives of Others*. The way Donnersmarck shows him behaving is certainly not impossible and, arguably, not even implausible. If one believes in the basic decency of human nature, then one would certainly like to think that someone in Wiesler’s circumstances might for once do the decent thing, and work to save a fellow human being. Anna Funder quotes Donnersmarck as saying: “I didn’t want to tell a true story as much as explore how someone might have behaved. The film is more a basic expression of belief in humanity than an account of what actually happened.”⁶ That seems to be the basic point of *The Lives of Others*, a claim that transcends the details of economic and political history and says something about the permanent ethical potential of humanity.

Nevertheless, the critics of the film have raised some valid points about its meaning, and usefully complicated our understanding of its message. They have shown that the film’s political sympathies may be more complex than at first appears, and its politics may, in fact, be ambivalent. In particular, they have reminded us of an important point: just because *The Lives of Others* is anti-communist does not mean that the film is necessarily pro-capitalist. Paying careful attention to its texture reveals that Donnersmarck does not choose to participate in the triumphalism that generally greeted the demise of the East German regime in 1989 and the reunification of Germany under the aegis of the Bundesrepublik Deutschland (the BRD, the “Federal Republic of Germany”). To be sure, only a brief part of *The Lives of Others* deals with what happened in 1989 and after. Donnersmarck offers a series of codas or epilogues to show the aftermath of Wiesler’s decision to come to the aid of Dreyman. But Donnersmarck is a very efficient storyteller, and he manages to convey a great deal in the last fifteen minutes of the film.

Consider how Donnersmarck chose to portray what is arguably the most important historical event in his story and one of the greatest moments in German history—the fall of the Berlin Wall. Even on his tight budget, Donnersmarck could easily have used stock newsreel footage to convey a sense of the monumental character of this event—scenes of crowds rejoicing at the Brandenburg Gate or of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony being played to celebrate the return to freedom in the East. But instead of monumentalizing the event in cinematic terms, Donnersmarck chose to mute and minimize it. All we see is Wiesler and some other disgraced Stasi agents working away in the bowels of some building; one of them, listening through a miniature earphone, hears the news of the Wall coming down; they calmly stop working and walk out the door. Although we hear about the momentous event over the radio, we do not see it, and in movies,

seeing is everything. Donnersmarck turns what ought to be a climactic moment in his story into a visual anticlimax.

This emblematic moment reflects what appears to be Donnersmarck’s conscious decision to downplay the degree to which the “new” Germany has been genuinely transformed. Before the fall of the Wall, Wiesler is shown mechanically steaming open mail for the communists. After the fall, we see him mechanically delivering junk mail for the capitalists. The stage directions in the screenplay stress the parallel by noting that he now delivers commercial flyers with the same care with which he used to do his work as a Stasi officer.⁷ Donnersmarck does remarkably little to suggest that things have improved in the new Germany. The most sinister character in the film, Minister Hempf—the man who originally ordered the surveillance of Dreyman—has evidently survived the regime change, unpunished and unharmed. He has become a successful businessman in the reunified Germany and is still part of the in-crowd, attending theatrical premieres, just as we saw him doing in the DDR at the beginning of the film. The original screenplay elaborates upon this point and makes it stronger. Hempf says that he is now doing “richtiges, kapitalistisches Business” (“proper capitalist business”), and jokes that he is still dealing with the Russians. Although he himself is barred from politics, he has passed the baton to his son, who is already a Member of Parliament for the PDS, the Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (the “Party of Democratic Socialism”), the legal successor to the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland (the “German Socialist Unity Party”) that had governed East Germany (149).⁸

As for Dreyman, he is still living in the same apartment, and at the prompting of Hempf, he discovers that Wiesler’s bugs are still in place, even if they are no longer being used. In the last sequence in the film, we learn that Dreyman has managed to write a new book, *Die Sonate von guten Mensch* (“Sonata for a Good Man”), but it is evidently a work of prose, presumably a memoir about the very events we have seen chronicled in the film. What Dreyman has failed to do in the new Germany is to write a new play. When we see him going to a theatrical premiere, it is of a new production of one of his works, but definitely not of a new work. In fact, in what appears to be a pointed gesture, Donnersmarck shows Dreyman attending a staging of the same scene of the same work we saw him watching toward the beginning of the film (the stage directions in the screenplay make it clear that this is taking place in the very same theater, the Gerhart-Hauptmann-Bühne). Back in the DDR, Dreyman’s play was given a heavy-handed socialist realist staging that apparently displeased him. But now in the new Germany, the play is given a pretentious postmodernist staging that seems to displease Dreyman just as much—he walks out of the production. Whatever else the new Germany may have achieved, it has not restored Dreyman’s creativity as a playwright, and it has not allowed him to realize his artistic goals—he is still subject to the whims of directors who distort his intentions.

When Dreyman runs into Hempf outside the auditorium, the ex-minister teases him with the fact that the playwright has not written anything since the end of the DDR. But Hempf says that he can understand Dreyman’s writer’s block: “What

should one write in this BRD? There's nothing more to believe in, nothing more to rebel against." In a semisinister way, Hempf points to a genuine truth: Dreyman had more motivation to write while living under a tyranny—it turned writing into a heroic act. Donnersmarck allows Hempf to sound the note of nostalgia for the old East Germany: "It was nice in our small republic. Many are beginning to understand that only now" (149). The fact that the villainous Hempf expresses these sentiments suggests that Donnersmarck does not himself share them. Still, he has called attention to a problematic aspect of the change of regime for writers. Dreyman was a hero in the DDR, and although the communist government spied upon him and manipulated his life, at the same time, it took him seriously, honored him, and, indeed, in the very act of harassing him, it showed that it understood his importance as a writer; in the BRD, Dreyman has become a mere celebrity, dressed, as the stage directions point out, in an Armani suit, "for which he is actually too heavy, and perhaps also a bit too old" (147).

We are so used to thinking of the fall of the Berlin Wall as a triumphal moment that we naturally assume that the coda of *The Lives of Others* must be presenting the new Germany in a positive light. Surely, Donnersmarck must prefer the new Germany to the old, but it is nevertheless remarkable how little he does to embody that preference in cinematic terms. He, in fact, maintains the deliberately drab color scheme of the film in the final scenes—no bright neon lights on Berlin's chic shopping street, the Kurfürstendamm, to illuminate the triumph of capitalism, but instead still the same dull brown, gray, green, and beige we saw characterizing the DDR. As a director, Donnersmarck seems to be doing as much as he can to minimize our sense that conditions have genuinely improved for his central characters with the fall of the Wall.

In sum, although *The Lives of Others* does satisfy the appetite of conservatives for an anti-communist film, it by no means offers them a parable of triumphant capitalism. Every cinematic choice Donnersmarck makes in the coda to his film suggests that he is somehow interested in the continuities between the communist and the capitalist regimes in Germany, not, as his conservative admirers might wish, the discontinuities. While exploring the factors that complicate any reading of Donnersmarck's film, it is high time that we confront the key figure in any attempt to interpret the politics of *The Lives of Others*—Bertolt Brecht. Anyone offering a straightforward anti-communist reading of the film, especially someone trying to present a pro-capitalist reading, must puzzle over its celebration of Brecht. Brecht is arguably the most famous and successful communist author of the twentieth century. He was about as Marxist and anti-capitalist as an author could be and, moreover, was an active partisan of the East German communist regime. He chose to work in East Berlin theater when he returned to Europe after his self-imposed exile from Germany during the Nazi era. His presence in East Germany contributed hugely to the cultural and, by extension, political legitimacy of the communist regime. Although Brecht expressed doubts about the DDR in private (in unpublished works),⁹ in all his time in East Berlin, he never once publicly defied the communist regime and, in fact, in what was far from his finest hour, he openly endorsed

the use of Soviet troops to put down the workers' uprising in 1953.¹⁰

And this is the man Donnersmarck apparently offers as a model of a genuinely great artist in *The Lives of Others*. Dreyman is loosely based on Brecht, who fit the criteria that make Dreyman valuable to his communist masters—a playwright who is loyal to the regime but is nevertheless read and admired in the West. More to the point, Brecht himself functions as a positive figure in the plot of *The Lives of Others*. Wiesler's conversion begins when he sneaks into Dreyman's apartment and steals a volume of Brecht's poetry. Soon we see Wiesler reading the book intently, while we hear Sebastian Koch, the actor who plays Dreyman, giving a moving voice-over reading of Brecht's lyric poem, "Errinnerung an die Marie A.," a poem about the kind of memorable love for a woman that is totally absent from Wiesler's own life. In *The Lives of Others*, Brecht seems to stand for everything that is good and genuine about art. Donnersmarck could easily have substituted any number of German poets for Brecht in the plot. Goethe comes immediately to mind; it would have been just as easy for Wiesler to pick up a volume of Germany's greatest lyric poet, who was still honored in the DDR. Why then did Donnersmarck deliberately choose a communist poet when he wanted to suggest the redemptive power of literature?

As a few commentators have noted, Brecht's presence in *The Lives of Others* actually extends beyond the single lyric poem that is quoted in its script. The film repeatedly echoes the title of one of Brecht's most famous plays, *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*.¹¹ This title has been variously translated into English, as *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *The Good Woman of Szechwan*, reflecting the ambiguity of the German word *Mensch*—just like the English word "man," *Mensch* can refer either to a "male" or to a "human being" of either sex (the fact that the play involves a woman masquerading as a man explains the different translations of the title). English speakers may easily miss the references to Brecht's title in *The Lives of Others*, but they are unmistakable to Germans (for which reason I will continue to refer to the play by its German title). At a key point in the plot, Dreyman is given the sheet music for a piano work called *Sonate vom guten Menschen* and that later becomes the title of the book he writes after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Early in the film, Minister Hempf says to Dreyman that what "we all love about your plays" is "die Liebe zum Menschen, die guten Menschen"—"your love of humanity, of good human beings" (34). After Wiesler sits down with Christa-Maria Sieland in the bar scene, she calls him "ein guter Mensch" (87). The way this phrase keeps reappearing in various forms throughout the film strongly suggests that Donnersmarck had Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* in mind when creating *The Lives of Others*. I do not claim to understand fully why Donnersmarck decided to present the communist playwright Brecht so positively in his ostensibly anti-communist film. But I believe that a detailed comparison of *The Lives of Others* with *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* may shed light on the role of Brecht in Donnersmarck's film. Donnersmarck may in fact be engaging with Brecht's play in a serious and meaningful way. *The Lives of Others* might even be regarded

as a kind of Brechtian attempt to rewrite and even unwrite Brecht's play. In that sense, *Donnersmarck* might be said to be using Brecht to undermine Brecht.

iii.

Der gute Mensch von Sezuan is set in a semimythical China, in what the stage directions describe as a "half-Europeanized city."¹² Three gods, who have evidently seen better days, have come to earth in search of good human beings. They believe that if they can find just one good person, who obeys their commandments, it will redeem humanity. Their request for lodging and hospitality is initially rejected by all the ostensibly good citizens of the city. The only one who will take them in for the night is a prostitute named Shen Te. In reward for her goodness, the gods give her the money to buy a little tobacco shop. But before she can get the business going, a crowd of moochers descends upon her, including the former owners of the shop and their many relatives, who proceed to sponge off her and otherwise exploit her good nature. She is too compassionate to refuse any request for a handout.

To make ends meet, Shen Te has to invent a masculine cousin named Shui Ta, who comes to her rescue at several crucial moments. Whenever Shen Te adopts the role of Shui Ta, she can do the prudent thing and manage her affairs properly, eventually building her small business up into a factory operation. But whenever Shen Te goes back to being a woman, she loses control of her finances and other aspects of her life. For example, she falls in love with a would-be aviator, named Yang Sun, whose unscrupulous dealings threaten to make her default on some loans. As the confusions involving the sexually ambiguous identity of the heroine/hero mount, Shui Ta is eventually accused of having murdered Shen Te. On trial before the three gods, Shen Te is forced to reveal to them the truth about her masquerade, delivering the kind of heavy-handed, didactic speech that is the stock-in-trade of Brecht's Marxist dramaturgy:

Your order long ago
 To be good and yet to live
 Tore me like lightning into two halves. I
 Don't know how it happened: I could not
 Be good at once to others and myself.
 To help myself and others was too hard for me.
 Ah, your world is hard. Too much poverty, too much despair!
 The hand that is held out to the wretched
 Is soon wrenched off! He who helps the lost
 Is himself lost! For who can
 Long refuse to be wicked when starvation kills?
 Where was I to take all that was needed? Only
 From myself! But then I would die. Good intentions
 Crushed me to the ground. But when I did wrong
 I strode in power and ate good meat!
 There must be something wrong with your world. Why
 Is wickedness so richly rewarded and why does such hard
 punishment
 Await the good? (100)

As often happens with Brecht, understanding the message of *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* seems very easy. He has nothing but contempt for the respectable and wealthy citizens of the city, whereas he offers the poor, the down-

trodden, and the outcast as the only possible candidates for true goodness. What makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the basically decent people to put their goodness into action is the capitalist order. Business is a zero-sum game for Brecht—one person can make a profit only if someone else suffers a loss. Thus Shen Te cannot successfully enter the business world without fundamentally changing her identity. She must repress her natural kindness and adopt the hard-headed, hard-hearted persona of her "cousin," Shui Ta. For Brecht, capitalism brings about a complete disjunction between moral goodness and financial success. One cannot be at one and the same time a good businessman and a good human being.

Brecht's clever theatrical trick for embodying this insight on stage is to split his main character as we have seen into two: Shen Te and Shui Ta. This procedure is typical of his dramaturgy; he would rather have two flat characters than a single complex one.¹³ Brecht's drama is never far from social satire, and he had no qualms about putting caricatures on stage. He did not feel compelled, as many other dramatists do, to explore the complexities of human motivation, or to suggest profound inner conflicts in his characters. Where another playwright would have shown a Shen Te with mixed feelings about her lover, Yang Sun—torn between her love for him and her realization that he is wrong for her—Brecht just divides her up into a Shen Te, who loves him absolutely, and a Shui Ta, who sees that Yang Sun intends to take her money and leave her in the lurch.

Brecht knew what he was doing; he was not simply incapable of creating fully rounded characters (for example, in *Mother Courage*, protagonist of one of his greatest plays, *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, he succeeded against his will in creating an emotionally complex figure).¹⁴ Brecht consciously rejected the realism of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century drama, which he regarded as complicit in the capitalist order and a product of it. For Brecht, dramatists such as Ibsen and Chekhov were too eager out of commercial motives to please their audience, to entertain them with plays about characters with whom they could identify and sympathize, characters placed in familiar settings and recognizably human situations with which the audience felt comfortable. According to Brecht, this kind of realistic drama makes its audience complacent. Even an Ibsen problem play, which seems to expose the contradictions in the social order, leaves its audience passive, accepting the existing state of society as inevitable, simply part of the human condition.

By contrast, Brecht sought to unsettle his audience by every theatrical means at his disposal, to prevent them from reacting emotionally to his dramas and rather to get them to *think* about each play. Rather than identifying with his characters, the spectators should feel distanced from them and hence more capable of judging them objectively. This is Brecht's famous *Verfremdungseffekt*, often translated as "alienation effect" but more properly rendered as "distancing" or "defamiliarization" or "estrangement effect."¹⁵ Everything about *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* is calculated to prevent the audience from feeling comfortable with the play, from the exotic setting to the unfamiliar names to the cardboard characters to the absurdity of the young woman

masquerading as a man so easily. The epilogue, when one of the actors steps out of character, breaks the dramatic illusion, and addresses the audience directly, is designed to send them home dissatisfied, still pondering the significance of what they have seen. Brecht openly admits that his play lacks a satisfactory and satisfying conclusion:

Ladies and gentlemen, don't be annoyed
 We know this ending leaves you in the void.
 A golden legend we set out to tell
 But then somehow the ending went to hell.
 We're disappointed too, struck with dismay
 All questions open though we've closed our play....
 But what's *your* answer to the situation?
 For love nor money we could find no out:
 Refashion man? Or change the world about?
 Or turn to different gods? Or don't we need
 Any? Our bewilderment is great indeed.
 There's only one solution comes to mind:
 That you yourselves should ponder till you find
 The ways and means and measures tending
 To help good people to a happy ending. (103–104)

In this typical Brecht ending, the ball is now in the audience's court; they must find a solution to the problems that baffled the playwright. If the function of drama is to provoke social change, Brecht has come up with an effective approach to writing plays. His theory of the *Verfremdungseffekt* is also very convenient for him as a playwright. If one accuses his characters of being flat, he can reply that he never intended them to be round. If one accuses his plot of being implausible, he can reply that he never intended it to be realistic. Basically, any fault in his play, from clichéd dialogue to stereotypical characters to abrupt plot turns to heavy-handed moralizing can be justified as a *Verfremdungseffekt*. "You don't like it?" Brecht seems to say: "Well, that was just my point; whoever said a play is for your *enjoyment*?" In the ultimate defense mechanism for Brecht, if the play fails to solve the complex social problems it portrays, it is the fault of the audience, not of the playwright.

Brecht's distinctive conception of drama was remarkably self-serving—he succeeded in erecting a theoretical firewall around his plays that makes them impervious to conventional criticism. If one applies any of the traditional criteria of good drama in evaluating Brecht's work, his answer is always that the problem is with traditional drama, not with his plays. This situation can be frustrating to would-be critics of Brecht—one damns oneself as hopelessly mired in the past if one questions his revolutionary drama. Nevertheless, the temptation to raise doubts about Brecht's plays is irresistible, and *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* is a case in point. It is very doubtful, for example, that feminists would be pleased by the play.¹⁶ For a revolutionary drama, it seems to buy into traditional sexual stereotypes. In splitting his central figure into male and female halves, Brecht parcels out the human qualities along conventional gender lines. Shen Te is the compassionate one: sensitive, emotional, and capable of deep love. But she is at the same time irrational, weak, incapable of dealing with the difficult issues of life—and, above all, she has no mind for business. In short, she is the stereotypical flighty and helpless female. Shui Ta is lacking in fellow-feeling, and he is tough-minded, if not cruel, in his

dealings with others. But he is also rational, clear-headed, and disciplined, fully capable of taking charge of any situation, and a sharp businessman—just the way men like to think of themselves. As a Marxist, Brecht may be progressive on political and economic issues, but on the issue of gender, he is a reactionary sexist. If one focuses on the issue of gender—which is difficult not to do, given the plot—what *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* teaches is that women are by nature unfit for business and need men to save them from their inherent folly as females.

But Brecht is also vulnerable on the political/economic front—the moment one steps outside of his Marxist framework. In an obvious way, *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* begs the question on the central issue it raises. If one parcels out all the morally good qualities to one character and all the business acumen to another, then of course one will conclude that it is impossible to be a good human being and a good businessman at the same time. But the real question is whether it is possible to combine the qualities of Shen Te and Shui Ta in a single person, and on that issue, history offers many examples of successful capitalists who behaved morally and compassionately in their dealings with their fellow human beings. One might even argue that decency is the norm in business, which is precisely why we are so struck by the phenomenon of business criminals. We need to check Brecht's portrayal of the capitalist world against historical reality. Although he rejected conventional dramatic realism, he always maintained that his plays were truer to social reality than traditional drama had been. Indeed, he claimed that he broke with the dramatic conventions of the past precisely in order to be able to represent social reality more accurately, to call attention to the hard facts of life that were covered up in traditional drama. It is odd, then, that Brecht chose to set *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* in the kind of orientalist never-never land one normally associates with German operetta, such as Lehar's *The Land of Smiles (Das Land des Lächelns)*. Can we really learn anything about the real world from a play that mixes oriental gods incongruously with modern airplanes?¹⁷ In fact, if one sets aside Brecht's ingrained anti-capitalist prejudices and looks carefully at what is going on in the play in economic terms, then it seems to teach lessons very different from what the playwright had in mind.

Much of what Shui Ta stands for is, in fact, simple economic common sense. Brecht wants us to think of the character as hard-hearted, but most of the time he is saying nothing crueler than that human beings need to work for a living: "From now on all this must be managed more sensibly. No more food will be distributed free of charge. Instead, everyone will be given an opportunity to improve his condition by honorable labor. Miss Shen Teh has decided to give you all work" (75–6).¹⁸ Even the parasites come to understand that if Shen Te's business goes under, they will be worse off, and hence they grudgingly welcome the return of the capable and efficient Shui Ta: "He's awfully stingy, but at least he'll save the shop, and then she'll help us" (75). Yang Sun's mother praises what Shui Ta has accomplished by imposing discipline on her son: "I must tell you how my son, thanks to the wisdom and severity of the universally respected Mr. Shui Ta, has been transformed from a depraved young man into a

useful citizen. As the whole neighborhood knows, Mr. Shui Ta has opened a small but already thriving tobacco factory near the cattle yard" (79). Mrs. Yang even compares Shui Ta favorably with Shen Te: "He didn't make all sorts of fantastic promises like his widely praised cousin, but forced [Yang Sun] to do honest work" (84).

No doubt Brecht expects us to think of Shui Ta as just another exploitative factory owner, operating a sweatshop, but even in terms of the plot Brecht created, Shui Ta is simply recognizing the facts of economic life. The characters he "mistreats" earn his displeasure only because they are all demanding to be supported at his "cousin's" expense, with no effort on their part. Only a self-styled Bohemian artist such as Brecht could make a moral principle out of the demand for a free lunch. Brecht himself shows that when Yang Sun refuses to work, he does so out of pride—he thinks that ordinary commerce is beneath his dignity as a potential aviator: "You want me to stand out in the street peddling tobacco to the cement workers, me, Yang Sun, the flier. I'd sooner run through the two hundred [dollars Shen Te gave me] in one night, I'd sooner throw them in the river!" (62). Yang Sun insists on maintaining his dignity, but he does so with Shen Te's borrowed money. Perhaps unwittingly, Brecht exposes the hypocrisy of those who complain about capitalist exploiters, while exploiting the generosity of capitalists themselves. As several critics have noted, including admirers such as W. H. Auden, in his last decade, Brecht himself led a kind of double life: he did his play producing in communist East Germany, but he did his banking in capitalist Switzerland.¹⁹ Indeed, ever since *The Threepenny Opera* Brecht had been preaching anti-capitalism all the way to the bank.

As an economic argument, *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* fails; it is riddled with fallacies and contradictions. Brecht is the kind of person who wants cigars, but he does not want the cigar factories needed to produce them. All his focus in *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* seems to be on the process of consumption, not of production, and he is evidently not aware that the two processes are connected. He seems to posit a sort of natural sufficiency of goods, and the only problem is that they are not distributed equally. The capitalist exploiters have grabbed all the wealth and deny goods to the starving masses. Hovering behind *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* is the Marxist ideal: "From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs." But ironically, in Shui Ta's wisdom, Brecht shows why this formula cannot work in the real world and why communism is always doomed to failure. If people can get what they need through handouts, they will refuse to work, and the result will soon be that nothing gets produced to hand out. Because of the problem of economic incentives, how goods are distributed has a profound effect on how—and even whether—they are produced in the first place. Brecht inadvertently illustrates this basic economic truth in *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*. Shen Te sets out to run her shop like a communist, but she needs the capitalist Shui Ta to save her from economic disaster—much as the Soviet Union continually needed economic aid and guidance from the capitalist West throughout its catastrophic experiments with communism. Despite all Brecht's efforts to prevent it,

economic truth ultimately shines through the Marxist fog of *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*. As so often happens in his work, Brecht the playwright ends up inadvertently refuting Brecht the Marxist ideologue. If one did not know who wrote *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, one might initially assume that it was designed to expose the folly of communism, not the evil of capitalism.²⁰

iv.

To my knowledge, Donnersmarck has never commented on *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, nor discussed its relation to *The Lives of Others*. We can, therefore, only guess why he chose to make the phrase "guter Mensch" so prominent in his film. There does seem to be a basic similarity between the two works, one that suggests that Donnersmarck may be trying to turn the tables on Brecht. *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* chronicles the search for a single good human being in the world of capitalism; *The Lives of Others* chronicles the search for a single good human being in the world of socialism. Donnersmarck seems to be saying, in effect, to Brecht: "You made it seem so difficult to find a good human being under capitalism; now you have your socialist paradise in the DDR; let's see if it's any easier to find a good human being there?" In short, if Donnersmarck goes out of his way to evoke *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* in *The Lives of Others*, it may be precisely as a challenge to Brecht. Brecht claims that capitalism is incompatible with moral goodness; Donnersmarck counters by showing that socialism is even more incompatible with behaving decently as a human being. His hero, Wiesler, can become "ein guter Mensch" only by turning traitor to the communist regime in East Germany.

Donnersmarck also demonstrates his superiority to Brecht as a dramatist, at least according to traditional aesthetic criteria. Gerd Wiesler is the kind of complex, sympathetic character Brecht claimed not to want to create (although he did so on numerous occasions). In a Brechtian treatment of *The Lives of Others*, I suppose Wiesler would have to divide into two characters, one working for the Stasi and one working against it. Where Brecht typically goes for broad strokes of characterization and sharp contrasts, Donnersmarck seeks out subtle effects. Where Brecht paints in blacks and whites, Donnersmarck employs a palette of grays. Brecht puts a label on a character—"cruel factory owner"—and that is all we need to know about him. Donnersmarck does deal with stereotypes such as "Communist Party hack," but his characters are more interesting precisely because they do not always act according to type. Critics of *The Lives of Others* complain that Wiesler's protecting Dreyman is not sufficiently motivated. But that may be exactly Donnersmarck's point. We never know how a particular human being is going to react in a particular set of circumstances. If one believes in human freedom, then human action is always potentially a mystery, and fictional characters may well surprise us with a seemingly unmotivated change of heart, or at least an enigmatic one.

Much of the criticism of *The Lives of Others* might be characterized as Brechtian in spirit. The critics of the film are asking for greater ideological purity from Donnersmarck,

even if they want his film to be more fully anti-communist, rather than anti-capitalist as Brecht would have it. Some critics want Wiesler to be the prototypical—perhaps even the stereotypical—Stasi agent, and hence incapable of being the “good man” of Donnersmarck’s script. Donnersmarck would answer his critics that he is not interested in being ideologically pure. He is concerned with being true to his vision of human nature, rather than to any ideological position on the historical East Germany. Perhaps in anticipation of his critics, Donnersmarck built this defense of his approach into the movie itself. When Dreyman meets with Hessenstein, the representative of the Western magazine that wants to publish the article on suicide in East Germany, the editor presses the writer for more detail and historical background—for example, a clearer explanation of the differences between the circumstances in the DDR in 1967 and those in 1977. Dreyman balks at these instructions: “*Es soll ein literarisches Text bleiben. Keine journalistische Hetzschrift*”—“It should remain a literary text. Not a piece of journalistic agitation” (100). As a playwright, Dreyman refuses to focus his writing on documentary facts and figures; he wants to keep the spotlight on the human element in the story, the sad tale of the suicide of the director Jerska.

That, of course, is exactly what Donnersmarck does in the film himself. *The Lives of Others* is at its core an *ethical* drama; it focuses on the possibility of acting humanely in the most inhumane of worlds. Funder quotes Donnersmarck making just this point: “More than anything else, *The Lives of Others* is a human drama about the ability of human beings to do the right thing, no matter how far they have gone down the wrong path.”²¹ By contrast, in Brecht’s dramas, politics/economics trumps ethics. He is, first and foremost, concerned with the political/economic system under which his characters live, and he believes that it sets inescapable limits upon their ability to act ethically. Donnersmarck’s position is just the opposite—in *The Lives of Others*, ethics trumps politics/economics. Donnersmarck’s central point is that a human being can act ethically under any circumstances, even in a communist tyranny. Instead of talking about the ambivalence in Donnersmarck’s politics, we should probably speak of his ambivalence about politics. He seems by no means certain that any one political system is the simple answer to human problems, and he is interested in the way acting ethically can transcend any political setting.

Thus Donnersmarck remains within the broad outlines of the Western dramatic tradition, which is basically humanistic in nature. From Sophocles to Shakespeare to Ibsen, the premise of traditional drama is that human beings are free to act ethically, to make difficult choices even in the most difficult of circumstances, and thus they can be held responsible for their deeds—even in tragic situations. This is the tradition of drama with which Brecht chose to break. His dramaturgy is designed to deflect interest from character to circumstances. He did not want his audience to become so obsessed with complexities of character that they would lose sight of the underlying political/economic circumstances that force his characters to act the way they do and eliminate their capacity to make free choices. For Brecht, the problem is not whether human beings want to act ethically, but whether so-

cial circumstances allow them to do so. In the famous words of *The Threepenny Opera*:

*Wir wären gut—anstatt so roh
Doch die Verhältnisse, sie sind nicht so.*²²

“We as human beings want to be good, instead of rough (brutal, coarse), but circumstances (conditions) are not that way [and don’t permit it].”

For Brecht, ethical questions are comparatively simple and easily answered: human beings just need to be kind to each other. The real problem is how to reconstitute the social order to make that possible. In Brecht’s view, the need to raise ethical issues is already a sign of a defect in the social order. If society were properly ordered, virtue would no longer be necessary. He has Mother Courage make this argument in the course of condemning an army commander:

If his plan of campaign was any good, why would he need *brave* soldiers, wouldn’t plain, ordinary soldiers do? Whenever there are great virtues, it’s a sure sign something’s wrong. . . . When a general or a king is stupid and leads his soldiers into a trap, they need the virtue of courage. When he’s tightfisted and hasn’t enough soldiers, the few he does have need the heroism of Hercules—another virtue. . . . All virtues which a well-regulated country with a good king or a good general wouldn’t need. In a good country, virtues wouldn’t be necessary. Everybody could be quite ordinary, middling, and, for all I care, cowards.²³

This attempt to downplay the importance of virtue and to elevate political questions over ethical questions is reminiscent of Zizek’s criticism of *The Lives of Others*—his objection that Donnersmarck focuses too much on the moral status of the rulers of the DDR—whether they are corrupt or not—when the real issue is the underlying political system, which would be oppressive even if administered by dedicated public servants. There is a good deal of truth to this argument, and, in defense of Donnersmarck, it is unfair to accuse him of ignoring, or even downplaying, the systemic problems of the East German regime. No one can come away from viewing *The Lives of Others* without thinking that there was something fundamentally wrong with political arrangements in the DDR.

Nevertheless, in his quest to create a compelling drama in *The Lives of Others*, Donnersmarck is justified in focusing on ethical issues. Some of his critics seem to wish that he had created a political treatise or a historical analysis instead of the sort of human story audiences expect. Brecht did want to break with the humanistic conception of drama and, in effect, to turn his plays into political treatises. But to the extent he actually succeeded in doing so, he often made his plays insufferably didactic and barely watchable on stage. In fact, in the Brecht plays that have been theatrically successful, his instincts as a dramatist overrode his agenda as an ideologue, and the human element in the drama survived his attempts to suppress it. By far his most popular work, *The Threepenny Opera*, has enchanted audiences over the years, not because of its ham-fisted anti-capitalist message, but because of its charming and delightful characters, brought to life unforgettable by Kurt Weill’s music.

In the history of drama, Brecht is truly the exception that proves the rule. He made every effort to eliminate the

traditional emphasis on character in drama, and yet his own plays have succeeded largely because of the incredible rogues' gallery of characters he created—from Mack the Knife to Mother Courage. At their best, Brecht's morally dubious protagonists win our sympathy even as they send chills down our spines with their villainy. Critics have complained that Donnersmarck sentimentalized *The Lives of Others* by focusing on romance elements in the plot at the expense of ideology. But how would *The Threepenny Opera* play with audiences without Macheath's romances with Polly, Jenny, and assorted other women in the plot? As much as Brecht scorned the romantic sentimentality of traditional drama, he could not do without love scenes in his own works. Even *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* would be much less dramatic without the romantic involvement of Shen Te and Yang Sun. Contrary to Brecht's theory of drama, the love of Shen Te and Yang Sun gives the audience something to identify with on stage, something to sympathize with.

The issue of sympathy takes us to the heart of the difference between Brecht and Donnersmarck as dramatists. As we have seen, Brecht wanted his audience to feel distanced or alienated or estranged from his characters (even though in practice he often created genuinely sympathetic figures). By contrast, sympathy is at the very center of Donnersmarck's conception of drama and of *The Lives of Others*. That, in fact, is what the title points to—Wiesler must learn to sympathize with “the lives of others.” The film is about observation in all its many meanings: interrogation, viewing a play, espionage, empathizing with others. *The Lives of Others* is reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock or Fritz Lang in its obsession with spectatorship, the way it invites us to watch people watching other people. At the beginning of the film, Wiesler is the cold, objective observer, wholly distanced from his subjects—the ideal Brechtian spectator. Whether he is interrogating a suspect or watching a play, he keeps his emotions in check because he is trying to spy something out. To become a “good man,” he must bridge the gap between himself and “the lives of others” and learn to sympathize with them. He must become the kind of spectator most dramatists crave for their work.

It is perhaps Donnersmarck's joke on Brecht that he gives the prophet of alienation a central role in this plot development. Before the hitherto emotionless Wiesler can shed a tear just listening to a piece of music, he must read a Brecht poem, “Errinerung an die Marie A.” (“Memory of Marie A.”). Note that he reads a Brecht lyric, not one of his dramas (which, according to Brecht, would have reinforced his commitment to communism). This nostalgic lament for a lost love is as sentimental as Brecht ever gets, which may be why Donnersmarck chose it. He shows Wiesler turning into a good man not by virtue of any Brechtian alienation effect—after all, the captain is alienated enough already. On the contrary, it is Brecht at his most sentimental who proves to be the force behind Wiesler's conversion to moral goodness. In general, Donnersmarck uses Brecht in a very non-Brechtian manner and for a very non-Brechtian goal—to produce sympathy, not to eliminate it. In *The Lives of Others*, Brecht provides a de-alienation effect, leading Wiesler back into the fold of humanity, breaking down his ruthless objectivity and awak-

ening his fellow feeling. For Donnersmarck to incorporate Brecht into his movie is, then, just the opposite of an endorsement of his theory of drama, and it does not involve an endorsement of the communist playwright's politics either. Contrary to everything Brecht himself stood for, he functions in *The Lives of Others* as an emblem of the power of art to evoke sympathy.

I do not claim to have solved the riddle of why Donnersmarck gives such a prominent role to the communist playwright Brecht in his ostensibly anti-communist film *The Lives of Others*. But by exploring the movie's subtextual use of Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, we begin to see that there is at least some irony in Donnersmarck's invocation of his German predecessor. If only by example, *The Lives of Others* refutes Brecht's conception of drama. And by quoting a Brecht romantic lyric, rather than one of his political dramas, Donnersmarck deflects attention from his anti-capitalist agenda and reveals the sentimental element that remained a part of Brecht's art, despite all his conscious efforts to suppress it. Thus, in the very process of evoking Brecht, Donnersmarck manages to question his predecessor and establish his difference from Brecht's art and his politics. Above all, Donnersmark forcefully rejects Brecht's efforts as a dramatist to shift attention from character to circumstances. Donnersmarck understands the anti-humanistic implications of Brecht's dramaturgy. By contrast, in his film he works very hard to keep ethical concerns at the center.

At the time and in the circumstances in which *The Lives of Others* was released, it was impossible not to view the film as a political statement, and in what it shows about the East German communist regime, it will always remain a great political film. And yet politics is *not* what is most important in the film—not because of some failure on Donnersmarck's part, but because of what he set out to accomplish. *The Lives of Others* takes its place in an older dramatic tradition, by trying to make a statement about human nature. While remaining firmly rooted in a specific historical and political moment, *The Lives of Others* is ultimately about the human capacity to transcend the limitations and constraints of such a moment. It may be historically true that “a good man” was impossible to find in the communist apparatus of East Germany. But it is nevertheless important to Donnersmarck to remind us that it was at least possible that one such man existed—that, contrary to Brecht, human nature is not simply the product of political and economic circumstances. And Donnersmarck has the last laugh on Brecht by choosing his adopted homeland, the socialist paradise of East Germany, as the ultimate test case of whether it is possible to be a good man in an evil state.

NOTES

1. John Podhoretz, “Nightmare Come True: Love and distrust in the East German police state,” *The Weekly Standard* (March 12, 2007): 38.
2. See, for example, Timothy Garton Ash, “The Stasi in Our Minds,” *The New York Review of Books*, 54:9 (May 31, 2007): 3.
3. Anna Funder, “Tyranny of terror,” *The Guardian* (May 5, 2007), <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,2072454,00.html>, 2.
4. All three quotations are taken from Slavoj Zizek, “The Dreams of Others,” *In These Times* (May 18, 2007), http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/3183/the_dreams_of_others/, 1.

5. I cite the director's commentary from the Sony Pictures Classics 2007 DVD of *The Lives of Others*.
6. Funder, "Tyranny of Terror," 3.
7. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der anderen: Filmbuch* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkampf, 2007), 157. All citations to stage directions are to this screenplay, and I also quote the film's dialogue from the screenplay, making it clear when the screenplay differs from the final filmed version; hereinafter page numbers will be incorporated into the body of the essay in parentheses. The translations from the German are my own, sometimes guided by the subtitles on the film.
8. Much, although not all, of this additional dialogue is included as a deleted scene on the DVD of the film. In his DVD commentary, Donnersmarck emphasizes Hempf's links to capitalism: "If this guy had lived in the 1980s, he would have become a big shot on Wall Street or in one of the large corporations."
9. For Brecht's private criticism of the DDR, see Edward Mendelson, "The Caucasian Chalk Circle and Endgame" in *Homer to Brecht: The European Epic and Dramatic Traditions*, eds. Michael Seidel and Edward Mendelson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 341: "Around the time of the Berlin riots of 1953 he wrote (but did not publish) an ironic poem saying that the government had lost the support of the people—it would perhaps be best to dissolve the people and elect a new one."
10. For an account of Brecht's behavior during the workers' uprising of 1953, see Ronald Hayman, *Brecht: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 368–9. Here is an excerpt from a letter Brecht published in the official party organ *Neues Deutschland* on June 23, 1953: "Organized fascist elements tried to abuse [the workers'] dissatisfaction for their bloody purpose. . . . It is only thanks to the swift and accurate intervention of Soviet troops that these attempts were frustrated. It was obvious that the intervention of the Soviet troops was in no way directed against the workers' demonstrations. It was perfectly evident that it was directed exclusively against the attempt to start a new holocaust. . . . I now hope that the agitators have been isolated and their network of contacts destroyed" (quoted in Hayman, 369).
11. See, for example, Anthony Grenville, "A Good Man in East Germany," *AJR* (Association of Jewish Refugees) (September 2007), http://www.ajr.org.uk/journal/issue.Sep07/article.917_1 and Michael Wood, "At the Movies," *London Review of Books* (March 22, 2007), http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n06/wood01_.html, 1.
12. I cite the English translation by Ralph Manheim, *The Good Person of Szechwan in Brecht: Collected Plays* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 6:2. All future citations to this text are incorporated into the body of the essay, with page numbers in parentheses.
13. On Brecht's tendency to split his characters, see Walter H. Sokel, "Brecht's Split Characters and His Sense of the Tragic," in *Brecht: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Demetz (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 127–37.
14. See Peter Demetz, "Introduction," in *Brecht*, 14 and H. F. Garten, *Modern German Drama* (New York: Grove, 1962), 213.
15. Most of Brecht's theoretical writings about drama and the theater are conveniently available in English in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964). Probably the best overview of his theory is to be found in "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre" (33–42). Of particular relevance to *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* is "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" (91–9), which, according to Willett, contains the first reference to the *Verfremdungseffekt* in Brecht's writings.
16. See, for example, Elizabeth Wright, "The Good Person of Szechwan: Discourse of a masquerade," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, eds. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 117, 122–3. For the contrary view that "Brecht's deconstruction of character is consistent with recent feminist theory of gendered identity," see William E. Gruber, *Missing Persons: Character and Characterization in Modern Drama* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 73.
17. Brecht himself was uncertain about the setting of *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*. When he first got the idea for the play, he planned on setting it in Berlin. Even after he decided upon a Chinese setting, he worried over how oriental the setting should be: "We are still mulling over the problem; bread and milk or rice and tea for the Szechwan parable? Of course, there are already airmen and still gods in this Szechwan. I have sedulously avoided any kind of folklore. On the other hand the yellow race eating white French bread is not intended as a joke." Brecht was troubled by the unreality of his Chinese setting and sought to counter it: "The city must be a big, dusty uninhabitable place . . . some attention must be paid to countering the risk of Chinoiserie. The vision is of a Chinese city's outskirts with cement works and so on. There are still gods around but aeroplanes have come in." Both quotations are taken from Stephen Unwin, *A Guide to the Plays of Bertolt Brecht* (London: Methuen, 2005), 202–3. These comments suggest that Brecht never satisfactorily resolved in his own mind how real and how unreal he wanted the setting of the play to be.
18. The translation I am quoting uses the name "Shen Teh" for some reason; I have retained the "Shen Te" of Brecht's original German version in my own prose.
19. A. R. Braunmiller reports in his introduction to *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, trans. W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman (Boston: David R. Godine, 1976), 12, that Auden said of Brecht: "You must admire the logic of a man who lives in a Communist country, takes out Austrian citizenship, does his banking in Switzerland, and, like a gambler hedging his bets, sends for the pastor at the end in the event there could be something in that, too."
20. On the way Brecht's practice as a dramatist often contradicts his theories as a Marxist, see Sokel, "Split Characters," 133 and Demetz, "Introduction," 8, 13.
21. Funder, "Tyranny of Terror," 3.
22. *Die Dreigroschenoper*, *Bertolt Brecht: Werke*, Berliner and Frankfurter Ausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkampf, 1988), 2:263 (Erstes Dreigroschen-Finale).
23. Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, trans. Eric Bentley (New York: Grove, 1966), 39.