

Heiner Müller. Scene from
Mauser, Compagnie
"Scènes," Vénissieux 1998.
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Actors/Agents: Bertolt Brecht and the Politics of Secrecy

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In modernity, political secrecy is something fishy. While for centuries circumspect rulers and skilled generals practiced the art of secrecy to implement and secure their power, the modern ideal of political transparency is suspicious of every state secret. Whatever governments keep secret, whatever is not exposed to public judgment, is seen as something that cannot be legitimated. State secrets are always potentially state crimes. Today, secret intelligence is accepted only as a necessary evil: At its best it is half-heartedly accepted as an instance of control and defense that cannot help but violate civil liberties and privacy. At its worst Secret Services are regarded as ruthless organizations executing the government's dirty work. In a democratic culture, secrecy is generally seen as a "pathology" of the political.¹

This view, however, in its overall dismissal of secrecy as a problematic, if somewhat subordinate and 'dirty' instrument of government and warfare overlooks the profound involvement of modern states in the politics of secrecy as well as the political and ethical dimensions of this involvement. Secrecy is a fundamental characteristic of modern power not only in its totalitarian variant. "Real power, as Hannah Arendt put it, "begins where secrecy begins."² Historically, the gigantic, highly professional intelligence administrations we know today are products of twentieth-century states. Modern democracy, as much as non-democratic regimes, uses espionage and covert operations, deception and disinformation as political techniques indispensable for waging war, gathering foreign information, and running an effective government. The twentieth century was not only, as Margret Boveri wrote, the "century of treason,"³ but more generally that of a new type of secretive politics alongside or underneath the proclaimed political values of transparency and participation, of rational jurisdiction and public debate. It saw the emergence of secret services as instruments both of war and of domestic surveillance; it is the century of covert operations as a mode of political intervention, the century of state paranoia, conspiracies, veiled propaganda, and psychological warfare.

European states only began to institutionalize secret service administrations as we know them today during and after World War I, the United States only after World War II.⁴ Whereas in premodern absolutism the *arcana imperii*—the art of political ruses and secrets—were a legitimate means of efficient government, in modernity these arcane sides of power pose a fundamental political paradox that needs to be analyzed in its legal and ethical dimension. The secrets of the state threaten from within the very values that modern democracy outwardly proclaims: the primacy of public debate, parliamentary deliberation, transparency, and legality. Secret services inevitably operate on a clandestine level withdrawn from public scrutiny and control. Simplifying this fundamental paradox, the rhetoric of legitimation for this underside of modern power has always emphasized the need for defense and preemption: defense against external and internal enemies threatening the stability of public order, pre-emption of future attacks. Secrecy, however, not only has a defensive but always an aggressive side; it is used not only to protect the state's security but also to spy upon, undermine, and take violent measures against whomever a political community defines as its enemies, very often its own citizens. Secrecy is never merely defensive, but rather a highly ambivalent instrument of politics; an ambivalence that is likewise neglected by dismissive and apologetic interpretations.

Faced with this dual nature, it is, however, too simple to reduce the sphere of political secrecy either to a realm of crime and brutal *raison d'état* (in other words to the famous and wholly fictitious “license to kill” given to James Bond), or—apologetically—to a necessary means of self-protection. The relationship between legal order and political secrecy in modern democracy is more complex than a wholesale criticism or an apologetic praise would have it. Contrary to totalitarian regimes state secrecy in democracies does not simply suspend or ignore laws, due process, and public control; instead it opens up an outside, an “exception” to the sphere of legality that is not to be confounded with a realm of mere crime or illegality. This exception is located outside both the public and the legal spheres. It is withheld from what can be known and thus withdrawn from legal judgment. This outside entertains a relationship to the law that forms an exception to its rule, both affirming and suspending that rule. In this sense, secrecy can be seen as an exception to the sovereign rule of law, a sphere in which acts are committed that are neither legal nor illegal but exempt from prosecution. Adopting Giorgio Agamben's theory of the necessary relation between the sphere of law and its exception, the realm of political secrecy could thus be called a “permanent state of exception” paradoxically coexisting with the legal order by defending and protecting it, while at the same time suspending and contradicting it.⁵

Carl Schmitt, to whom Agamben is profoundly indebted, related the theory of the state of exception (in which, as Schmitt famously claimed, sovereign power paradigmatically shows itself⁶) to the concept of *Maßnahme* (executive measure) as opposed to the concept of law. When, in a situation of extreme political crisis, law cannot be enforced, measures—*Maßnahmen*—have to be taken, measures or decisions tailored exclusively to the situation at hand.⁷ These measures, however, cannot and must never be justified by referring to general rules or norms; they are nothing but momentary, often violent acts aimed at stabilizing a situation of imminent danger or crisis. Secrecy and the acts committed under its veil can be conceived of as such an exceptional instrument: a political measure, morally and juridically highly questionable, but nevertheless necessary for exceptional situations or goals. And yet, if democracy protects itself by monitoring its citizens, if it wages war by using informers and traitors or if it takes covert action against foreign governments it takes exception to the values it proclaims in the very act of protecting them. This exception, much like the state of exception, is supposed, paradoxically, to prove the rule, stabilizing and protecting a given legal order by suspending it and thereby preserving the institution of the state as such. And therein lies the fundamental crux raised by the politics of secrecy.

This crux, not simply a “pathology” but an inherent paradox in the conception of modern power, has been pointed out not only by political theorists such as Schmitt and his closest reader, Agamben. The most penetrating analysis of the pitfalls and paradoxes of a politics of secrecy has been—surprisingly enough—presented by the playwright Bertolt Brecht. It might not be entirely coincidental that, while Schmitt in 1930 was writing on *Maßnahmen* and had, in 1922, published his theory of sovereignty and the state of exception⁸, Brecht brought out his most scandalous piece of experimental theater, topically titled *Die Maßnahme* (The Measure Taken).⁹ Brecht’s so-called *Lehrstück* (learning play) not only deals with the ethical and political aporias of a politics of secrecy but also proves that its author—the early Brecht of the end of the Weimar Republic—was surprisingly well-informed about the techniques and tactics of clandestine political activity.¹⁰ This is what links Brecht’s thought to Carl Schmitt’s theory of the state of exception and to his concept of *Maßnahme* as opposed to the concept of law. What makes Brecht so interesting for the analysis of the politics of secrecy is the fact that, unlike Schmitt who attends to the legal problem of *Maßnahme*, Brecht focuses on the position and the tactics of the subject in the jungle of secrecy. He not only presents the rules and tactics of covert agitation that the political activist must follow. Brecht also elucidates the ethical aporias that the subject faces once being involved in clandestine work and ultimately being forced to

execute “Maßnahmen”. Moreover, in *Die Maßnahme* as well as in his theory of experimental learning-play theater Brecht links his analysis of the tactics and ethics of secret agitation to a theory of theatricality as an aesthetic and political practice. Brecht’s idea of theatricality is not limited to the aesthetic realm of the stage but it exposes the dimension of play-acting and dissimulation in all political activity. Political work cannot dispense with techniques of acting, dissimulating and deception. Instead of naively criticizing this secretive side of politics in the name of authenticity and frankness, Brecht emphasizes the need for tactical clandestinity. Effective politics, Brecht claims, the politics of change and of justice, paradoxically cannot succeed without ruses, betrayal, secret subversion and tactical alliances with the enemy. Under the conditions of the politics of secrecy, the political (and aesthetic) subject is always already caught between truthfulness and play-acting, between self-effacement and heroic commitment, between the idealism of revolutionary change and the ruthlessness of clandestine activity. The paradox borne by a politics of secrecy thus always affects and taints the subject in its attempt to intervene and change the political order for the better.

Covert political activities are based on certain rules and standards of conspiratorial behavior. Secret agents or agitators need a social and rhetorical suppleness, such as the ability to defend positions without believing in them, to camouflage their identities or to blend invisibly into a crowd. In the opening poem of his *Lesebuch für Städtebewohner* (Ten Poems from a Reader for Those Who Live in the Cities) Brecht, with a surprising tactical savvy, outlines the rules for such clandestine behavior.¹¹ The poem is called “Verwisch die Spuren” (Cover Your Tracks) and was written in 1926. It has traditionally been read as the expression of urban coldness and voluntary social isolation, as an imperative of Weimar Republic “cool conduct,” as Helmut Lethen put it.¹² Only Brecht’s friend Walter Benjamin saw the political message encrypted in the poem, calling it “an instruction for the illegal agent.”¹³

Part from your comrades at the station
Enter the city in the morning with your jacket buttoned up
Look for a room, and when you comrade knocks:
Do not, o do not open the door
But
Cover your tracks!

If you meet your parents in Hamburg or elsewhere
Pass them like strangers, turn the corner, don’t recognize them
Pull the hat they gave you over your face, and

Do not, o do not show your face
But
Cover your tracks!

Eat the meat that's there. Don't stint yourself.
Go into any house when it rains and sit on any chair that is in it
But don't sit long. And don't forget your hat.
I tell you:
Cover your tracks!

Whatever you say, don't say it twice
If you find your ideas in anyone else, disown them.
The man who hasn't signed anything, who has left no picture
Who was not there, who said nothing:
How can they catch him?
Cover your tracks!

See when you come to think of dying
That no gravestone stands and betrays where you lie
With a clear inscription to denounce you
And the year of your death to give you away.
Once again:
Cover your tracks!
(That is what they taught me.)¹⁴

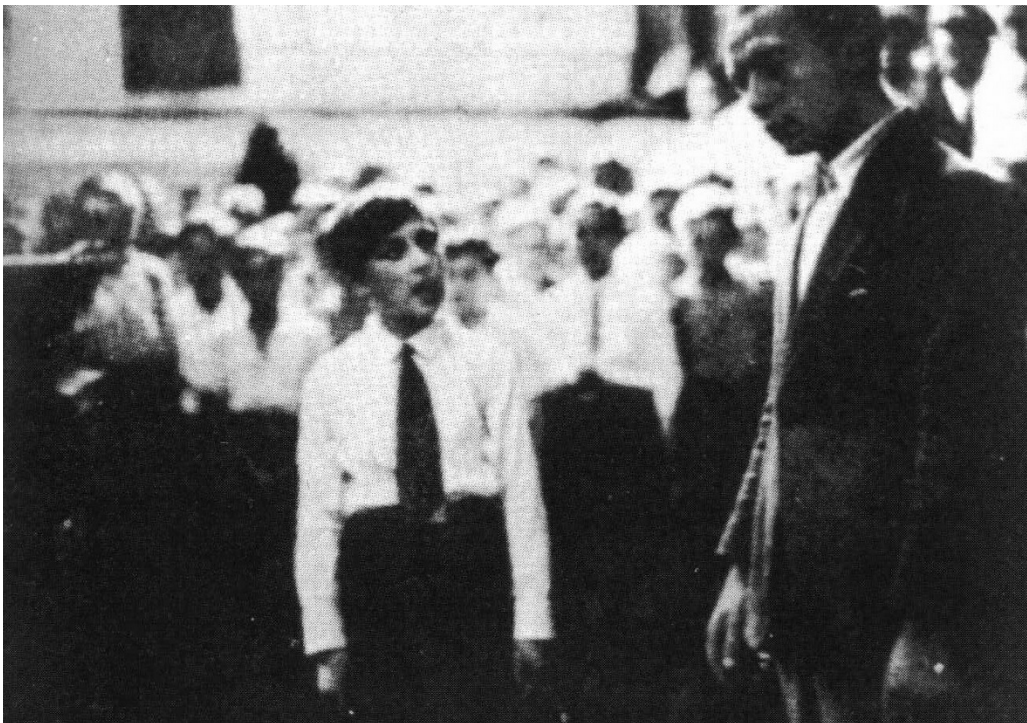
The poem describes a group of “comrades” who travel by night and who must immediately separate when they arrive at their destination. They are admonished not to contact one another, not to communicate with whatever relations they may have, even to avoid being recognized or even addressed by their relatives. This is more than an expression of coldness and *Sachlichkeit*; this is an instruction for those who must unconditionally conceal their identity, origins, network, and mission: secret agents. “Cover your tracks!” here means to cover up one’s past, social origin, friendships, and family bonds. The poem goes on to instruct the would-be agitator in the art of self-effacement: Seize opportunities, but never stay. Never leave anything personal behind. And never admit what your true position is. One must never know that it is the Communist who is speaking. What Brecht is suggesting here is the technique of *Zersetzung* (insinuation or manipulation), a kind of subversion that was a principal goal of Communist infiltration of the police and army during the Weimar Republic. As a rhetorical strategy, *Zersetzung* is based on *dissimulatio*, a figure of speech in which the position held by the speaker

is blurred or denied. Technically, *dissimulatio* means covering up one's position by saying the exact opposite, but *Zersetzung* is more than that; it is the rhetorical technique of political destabilization and insinuation. The subversive agent does not loudly preach the gospel of revolution but instead asks suggestive questions, sows doubts, and spreads critical thoughts. He will never openly foster any position but will seek to get others to form opinions and, ultimately, a "critical consciousness." The precept of self-effacement is meant to govern even the death of the secret agitator. Not even his mere existence can be commemorated, as this could betray his mission: "See, when you come to think of dying / That no gravestone stands and betrays where you lie." The agent is to die without a trace, without a memory, his death is to be a sacrifice without glory. At the end of the poem, the text itself ultimately enacts the very effacement of identity. The last line, within brackets, "(That is what they taught me.)," cunningly liquidates the lyrical subject, relativizing everything it has proclaimed so far as mere quotation, as a reference to instructions received from others. Thus, at the very moment when the poem assumes its—rhetorical and political—subject "I," this very subject withdraws and disappears. The poem fulfills its instruction in a final gesture, covering the tracks of its own discourse.

While "Verwisch die Spuren" addresses the tactics and techniques of clandestine agitation, the play *Die Maßnahme*, first performed in December 1930, enacts the drama, if not the tragedy of the secret agent. The plot was summarized—slightly misleadingly—in the original program notes as follows:

Four Communist agitators are facing a Party inquiry, represented by the mass chorus. They have been conducting Communist propaganda in China, and in the course of this they had to shoot their youngest comrade. In order to convince the court of the need for their decision to shoot him, they show how the Young Comrade behaved in a number of different political situations. They show him as a revolutionary in his feelings but inadequately disciplined and too reluctant to listen to his reason, so that in the end he became a real threat to the movement.¹⁵

For a long time, debate about *Die Maßnahme* revolved around the conflict, suggested in Brecht's summary, between "emotions" and "discipline." Yet perhaps this all-too-simple polarization was a ruse, itself a literary cover-up. Brecht dissimulated the conspiratorial subtext of "Verwisch die Spuren" by integrating it into a volume of poetry on urban life, and likewise he deliberately seems to obscure in his summary of *Die Maßnahme* the play's political content. This summary omits the decisive



fact that the propaganda work of the Soviet agitators among Chinese workers is illegal and therefore has to cloak itself in utter secrecy.

The first scenes of the play present how, on various occasions, the “young comrade” fails to observe the tactical rules of clandestine work, the chief imperative being to camouflage the agent’s origin (Moscow) and mission (to bring Communism to the Chinese). He is not a talented agent but rather a frank enthusiast. Instead of inciting overworked coolies to demand better working conditions, he simply helps them until he is chased away by the overseer (Sc. 3, “The Stone”). Instead of discretely distributing pamphlets to striking workers, he involves himself in a brawl with policemen, obliging his group to retreat underground for several days (Sc. 4, “Justice”). Instead of demurely dining with a cynical rice merchant who is to sell them munitions for an upheaval, he expresses his disgust for him, thus dooming the weapons deal (Sc. 5, “What Is a Man?”). Finally, he attempts to stage a poorly prepared and inadequately armed insurrection, thereby revealing the agitators’ identities (Sc. 6, “Betrayal”).

Under the strict imperative of clandestine activity, the agitators are prepared for their work in a scene called “Die Auslöschung” (Sc. 2, “The Effacement”). Before they cross the border for their secret mission in China, they are to assume Chinese identities, to behave as “Chinese, born of Chinese mothers, yellow-skinned, who in sleep and delirium speak only Chinese.”¹⁶ Hereupon the actors on the stage put on masks. In the end the young comrade’s major mistake is to have taken off his mask and revealed his identity. The obliteration of national and political identities—demanded by the politics of secrecy—is thus coded by the very gesture that indicates theatricality: the use of a mask. This gesture of assuming another identity—staging, as it were, a political conviction—relates the politics of secrecy in *Die Maßnahme* to Brecht’s idiosyncratic *Lehrstücktheorie*, the theory of the learning play. Brecht had developed his theory

of theatrical pedagogy in the late nineteen twenties as an explication for his own theatrical practice. The central idea of the *Lehrstück* and its pedagogy is not to instruct an audience but to enable the actors to explore and adopt the standpoint their roles suggest in the process of playing these. The actors are to speak their lines not as if presenting their own convictions but, in Brecht's words, "like a quotation." Brecht writes,

In principle the learning-play does not need an audience, though it may make use of one. The learning-play is based on the assumption that the actor can be politically influenced by enacting certain behavior, adopting certain attitudes, repeating certain utterances . . . The imitation of highly exemplary paradigms plays a great role therein, but equally the criticism of those paradigms which can be conveyed by intentionally re-playing the same part in different ways.¹⁷

For the early Brecht, acting itself is a form of political reflection that explores and criticizes political patterns by performing them like a role. It is also a form of indirect speech, an exercise in presenting a standpoint without really sharing it. Acting is thus one of the main arts of a cunning agent or agitator. Agents are actors, and actors become agents: the subject becomes a political subject to the extent that she/he is able to play-act, to present and perform a certain position and by this performance explore its consequences. Political agency is thus always linked to the ability to distance oneself from the position one affirms. In Brecht's *Lehrstücktheorie*, not only does theater become a fundamental exercise in the politics of secrecy, but also politics itself is seen as a form of play-acting, performing, and dissimulating.

In *Die Maßnahme* this crossover between play-acting and political activism is an essential element of the theatrical presentation itself. The four agitators are supposed to reenact what happened during their mission in China in order to have their executive measure, their *Maßnahme*, judged by the control chorus. The episodes concerning the young comrade's behavior are thus a play-within-a-play. The four agitators are to reenact his errors but also how they came to kill him—a theatrical setup that obliges the killers to replay and thus empathically identify themselves with the behavior and motivations of their victim. It is no wonder that Brecht called the *Lehrstück* a "a dialectician's exercise in suppleness"¹⁸—a particular dialectics, however, which does not culminate in any higher synthesis.

The art of this type of acting resides in a reflexive distance between the player and his lines. This reflexive distance links the *Lehrstücktheorie* to the rhetorics of subversion and *dissimulatio* exposed in "Verwisch die

Spuren.” The learning play’s theory and practice of play-acting is thus an essential part of the technique and tactics of clandestine operations and certainly the opposite of the zealous confessionism shown by the young comrade. Yet the *Lehrstück* adds a reflexive moment to the rhetoric of *dissimulatio*: the position to be presented is analyzed and reflected in the act of its enacting. In *Die Maßnahme* this reflection is twofold: First, the agitators reconstruct their actions as well as the young comrade’s; second, they reflect these actions and are observed doing so and commented upon by the control chorus.

The young comrade’s inability to adopt the conduct of self-obliteration and *dissimulatio* finally leads to his most catastrophic and fatal step. He takes off his mask, exposes his face, and confesses the agitator’s mission: “I have seen too much. Therefore I will stand before them / As no one but myself, and tell them the truth. [He takes off his mask and cries out.] We have come to help you. We have come from Moscow.”¹⁹ He thereby not only jeopardizes the lives of the group but also betrays the secrecy of their operation. Displaying his face, his beliefs, his truth, the young comrade assumes the pose of heroism. Stating his empathy, proclaiming his cause, he is ready to sacrifice himself for it. Unfortunately, illegal conspiratorial work is the opposite of heroism. The song “Lob der illegalen Arbeit” makes this explicit:

It is good to use the word
As a weapon in class warfare.
To call up the masses to battle
With loud and resounding voices.

...

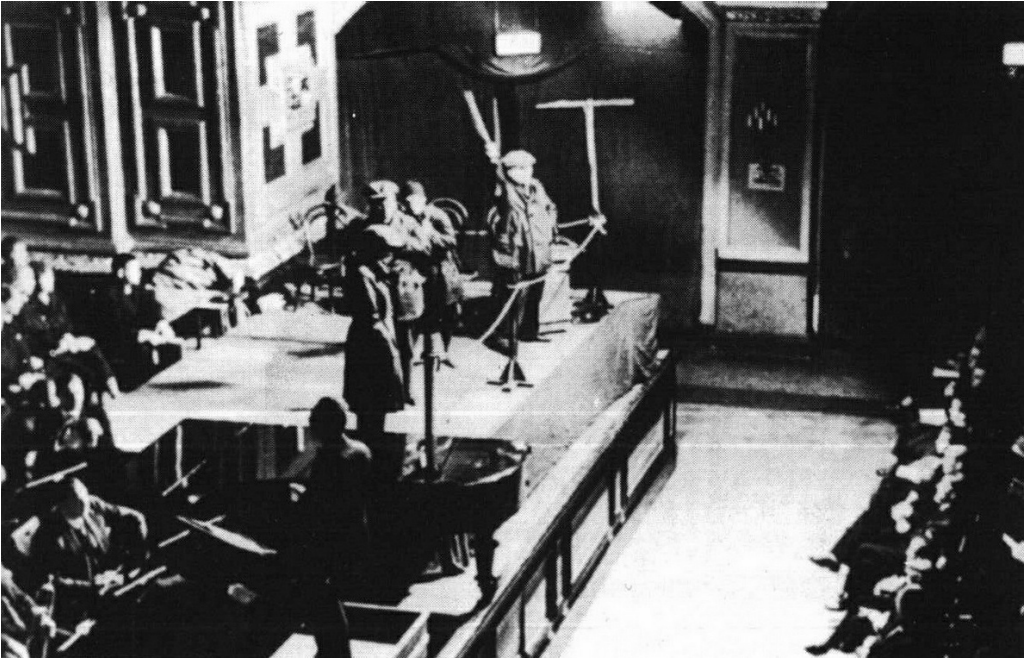
Our petty daily work, however, is difficult but useful.
Tenacity and secrecy are the links
That bind the Party network against the
Guns of the Capitalist world:
To speak, but
To conceal the speaker
To conquer, but
To conceal the conqueror
To die, but
To hide the dead.
Who would not do great things for glory; but who
Would do them for silence?²⁰

Secret agents, if they are good, can never be heroes. They can never be celebrated, never be remembered. “To speak, but / To conceal the speaker / To conquer, but / To conceal the conqueror”—the act obliterates its subject,

whether grammatical, discursive, or historical. Clandestine revolutionary politics has no subject but is an entirely impersonal, historical progression toward an almost transcendent goal: world revolution. The politics of secrecy paradoxically demands that the subject's dedication exceeds all subjective commitment. Its agents—in both senses of the term—are thought of as mere instruments or media to the historic-political process: “You are nameless and without a past, empty pages on which the revolution may write its instructions,” the head of the party house says to the agitators.²¹

In the turmoil caused by the young comrade's betrayal, all five agitators are hunted by the police. The young comrade, wounded, slows down the group's escape. This is the moment when the four decide on the eponymous “measure” (Sc. 7, “The Limits of Persecution and Analysis”). They decide to kill their fellow agent and—in order to eliminate every trace of him—throw his body into a lime pit (Sc. 8, “The Burial”). Their “measure,” the killing of the young comrade, is decided upon under extreme pressure: the imminent danger of discovery and, worse, the knowledge that the police will massacre the raging workers if it becomes clear that they have been infiltrated by Communists. In this perilous situation, seemingly without resort and without time for deliberation, they find themselves in precisely the *Notstand* (the state of emergency) that calls for *Maßnahmen* (emergency measures). The measure taken, however, is not a judgment or punishment, it is not the application of any norm or law, and it cannot and must not be generalized. It has no legal form, since it is precisely an exception to legality and legal judgment taken in a state of emergency. Brecht made that clear in a later version of the play: “So it was no judgment?” the chorus asks. “No, a measure,” the agitators answer.²² The measure taken is a singular decision, dictated by the exigencies of a given situation, and thus it does not invoke law but temporarily usurps its rule in a realm where laws cannot be applied.

This is the realm of revolution—which, however, must not be seen as mere anarchy. Revolution, according to Brecht, has its proper legality, represented by the control chorus. But this revolutionary legality aims at a different, better justice than that of the capitalist order. The idea of a struggle between the classes implies that the capitalist legal system is class justice, a partial justice withheld from the proletarian class. Or to put it more generally, it recognizes the fact that poverty and economic dependency obstruct a person's access to the legal system and thus to justice—which is what Brecht points out in his learning-play *Die Ausnahme und die Regel* (The Exception and the Rule). Revolution, on its way to “true” justice and in its struggle for justice, has to take measures, it has to operate under cover, and—as a final paradox—it has to act unjustly.



This, I contend, is the meaning of the most often quoted, most scandalous lines of *Die Maßnahme*:

With whom would the just man not sit
To help justice?

...

If at last you could change the world, what
Could make you too good to do so?

Who are you?

Sink in filth

Embrace the butcher, but

Change the world: It needs it!²³

The paradox of doing evil for the sake of the good is not, as Brecht was often accused, the principle of ruthless opportunism laid bare in the Jesuit motto “the ends justify the means.” What Brecht presents in *Die Maßnahme* is rather the profoundly paradoxical program of an ethics appropriate to the politics of secrecy, an ethics that I call “tainted ethics.” It is, as Slavoj Žižek pointed out, “an inherent self-negation of ethics, that is: an ethical injunction which suspends ethical universality.”²⁴ Such an ethics rejects the universalism of humanistic ethics and its ultimate goal: the integrity of the human being conceived of as an individual, whose suffering should be alleviated immediately and individually. Humanist universalism simply generalizes individual welfare, while a dissenting (in Brecht’s terms, Communist) view argues that welfare and justice can only be those of a non-universal collective. When judged in conflict with this collective welfare, “individual” ethics might well be suspended. A “tainted ethics” aims for a justice beyond the given, beyond the immediate, even beyond the individual’s life itself; it strives for something that is “out of this world”, beyond history, just as the Communist idea of world revolution had, according to Karl Löwith, strong eschatological

undertones.²⁵ Brecht's imperative—"change the world, it needs it!"—must thus be conceived of only negatively as the desire for an entirely other world. The "filth" with which the political subject is inevitably tainted, his defilement through an unacceptable deed (such as the killing of a good-willed young comrade), constitutes a kind of moral self-laceration in which the most precious idea of the revolution is at stake—that of another, better justice. To do evil for the sake of the good is ultimately to compromise the good, to change the goal by the very act of approaching it. The imperative "Sink in filth!" thus creates a double bind in the relation between ethics and politics: the morality of the individual is in direct conflict with the necessities and the goals of the collective—and yet cannot be entirely detached from it. One man's desire to be "good" can cost the lives of many, as *Die Maßnahme* demonstrates. The suspension of ethics in the moment that it impinges upon the Political can therefore no longer be described in terms of sacrifice and tragedy and their reliance upon a classic conflict of values. The decision—the measure—although inevitable, cannot be justified. The agitators are not acquitted, only "assented to" by the Control Chorus: "We agree with you."²⁶ The Control Chorus points out the unsolvable conflict of contrary values in the revolutionary work. The last words of the Control Chorus, added in the second version of the play, state:

And yet your report shows us what is
Needed to change the world:
Anger and tenacity, knowledge and indignation
Swift action, utmost deliberation
Cold endurance, unending perseverance
Comprehension of the individual and comprehension of the whole:
Taught only by reality can
Reality be changed.²⁷

In two respects this is the heart of Brecht's political and theatrical mission, often misunderstood as plain socialist utopianism. First, Brecht points out the dialectical contradictoriness of all political action (framed in the polarities of perseverance and swiftness, anger and tenacity, the individual and the whole), and of the behavioral imperative implicit in the politics of secrecy: namely to act strategically, contrary to personal convictions, and in spite of individual suffering. Second, he emphasizes the possibility of changing the world. The world ought to be different; it ought to be understood as changeable: "to present the world as one changeable" is one of his most frequently repeated aesthetic aims. This does not mean that the world should be re-formed into a definite shape but that its possibilities for change must constantly be explored anew.

Brecht insists on a politics of contingency, not of necessity or impossibility. The world in which *Die Maßnahme* is set is—by contrast—a world of sheer necessity, of inescapable exploitation and complete cynicism, as is evident in the songs of the coolies and the rice merchant. Even the agitators' measure is conditioned by the dangerous situation and the constraints of clandestine operation. The world of *Die Maßnahme* is a world of inevitability, the absence of contingency, which is why it so urgently “needs to be changed.”

This is why one can legitimately ask whether the measure taken by the agitators is really—as John Willett's translation of the title has it—a decision.²⁸ The agitators do not face a free choice but what Žižek calls a “forced choice.” This brings us to the play's most startling moment. For instead of summarily killing their young comrade, the agitators, after asking him whether he knows any other alternative, ask him to consent to their measure. And he does. How could he not agree? How can one fail to consent without the possibility of dissent? He chooses that which he cannot decline. So why ask for his consent (*Einverständnis*), a sanction that the agitators in turn demand of the Control Chorus? What is the meaning of this bewildering request? It is, first, an affirmation of common goals, of the very community that is about to exclude the young comrade. Even when being executed, even when being excluded from the community of fighters, even when disappearing without a trace—through his agreement the young comrade remains a member of the community, shares its vision, and leaves an epitaph in the play itself. His last words combine his affirmation of the revolution with his agreement to his physical obliteration: “And he said: In the interests of Communism / In agreement with the progress of the proletarian masses / Of all lands / Consenting to the revolutionizing of the world.”²⁹ Consent in a phrase interrupted by death, countersigned by it. Nonetheless, it is a forced consent. The young comrade does not have two sides to freely choose between, as in a classical dilemma, but only the freedom of either having or not having a choice. Had the young comrade disagreed, he would have abdicated even that last freedom. Žižek analyzes this situation as a form of meta-choice:

What is at stake in the situation of forced choice is that the subject freely chooses the community it always already is a member of. . . . [T]he paradox of the forced choice has nothing mad about it, . . . on the contrary the person is mad who behaves as though it was a free choice. . . . The structure of the choice is always such that it implies a meta-choice: if we take the wrong choice, we lose the very possibility of choosing at all.³⁰

The paradoxical nature of this ‘impossible’ choice or forced agreement

defines—in a purely negative way—the political program of change with which Brecht emphatically closes *Die Maßnahme*. What does it mean to change a world where one does not really have a choice? It would mean, first and foremost, to *choose to have other choices*. It would mean reflecting upon the very settings of the choice. The young comrade's agreement with revolutionary politics is at the same time a radical disagreement with the world as it is. His agreement affirms a revolutionary instance or subject whose essence is change or—more philosophically stated—contingency: the world's potential to differ from what it is. For these very reasons, one should not reduce Brecht's concept of Communism to a Marxist ideology preached by historical Communist parties. For Brecht, Communism is the very potential of contingency. Brecht's revolutionary subject is pure virtuality, an evocation of contingent acts, of choices not yet imaginable, of laws not yet applied.

What then is *Die Maßnahme* with respect to the revolutionary and secretive politics whose paradoxes I sketched in the beginning? Is it, as has often been argued, an apology—alternately solemn and cynical—for the ruthlessness of Communist agents? Ruth Fischer, sister of the play's co-author, Hanns Eisler, bitterly called Brecht the “minstrel of the GPU” (the Soviet secret police), and saw the play as an anticipation of the Stalinist purges.³¹ Is the work thus an instruction for aspiring secret agitators: to learn their brutal lessons well and to avoid repeating the mistakes of the young comrade? Or is it, to the contrary, a clear-sighted warning of the ethical and political pitfalls of any political enterprise compromised by secrecy and clandestine tactics? Does the play aim instead at an effect of deterrence, by showing how the murder of an innocent and zealous young activist is justified by a heartless and cynical logic? Perhaps the question cannot be decided in these terms. Actually, it is the wrong question. As a learning-play and thus an application of *Lehrstück* pedagogics, *Die Maßnahme* is, first and foremost, a training and an exercise in political reflection. It trains the subject's flexibility when confronted with contradictory political options and it is an exercise in taking even the wrong ones. This implies a critical distance—the actor's distance from himself, his standpoint, his role-text—and means reflecting on one's position as something contingent and subject to change and to criticism. Secret agitation, self-effacement, and the rhetorics of *Zersetzung* in “Verwisch die Spuren” imply the separation of the subject from its discourse by definitively abandoning any rhetoric of expression, vocation, and hence of heroism. The politics of secrecy liquidates the heroic individual as historical subject and presents the tactics of self-effacement and distancing as the only viable means of political action. The individual is reduced to being an instrument of history, a medium rather than a mover:

“empty pages on which the revolution writes its instructions.” Precisely by becoming the medium of historical change, the subject gains a new realm of agency and political impact that goes beyond all poses of heroism or self-sacrifice. The revolutionary politics of secrecy, as analyzed (not denounced or celebrated) by Brecht, is thus built on an ethical and political paradox that is marked by the tension of irreconcilable antagonisms: it links the ideal of justice with the necessity of *Maßnahmen*, the ethically unacceptable with the politically necessary, an ethos of enlightenment with a practice of dissimulation, the absence of choice with the choice of mere change. This paradox, Brecht claims, cannot be overcome; it is the inevitable burden of the Political. All we can do, according to Brecht, is play with it, in the very sense that the learning play gives to the term *play*. But if revolution is the name for the potentiality of radical change, it might be worth it.

Notes

1. Carl J. Friedrich, *The Pathology of Politics: Violence, Betrayal, Corruption, Secrecy, and Propaganda* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
2. Hannah Arendt, *The Burden of Our Time* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1951), 386.
3. Margret Boveri, *Treason in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Jonathan Steinberg (London: MacDonald, 1961).
4. For an outline of the theory of secret intelligence, see Eva Horn, "Knowing the Enemy: The Epistemology of Secret Intelligence," *Grey Room* 11 (May 2003): 59–85.
5. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
6. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (1922), trans. George Schwab (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).
7. Carl Schmitt, "Legalität und Legitimität" (1932), in Carl Schmitt, *Verfassungsrechtliche Aufsätze* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1985); and Carl Schmitt, "Die staatsrechtliche Bedeutung der Notverordnung" (1931), in Schmitt, *Verfassungsrechtliche Aufsätze*, 261.
8. Schmitt, *Political Theology*.
9. Bertolt Brecht, *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke*, trans. Carl R. Mueller (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001). Mueller translates the title "Die Maßnahme" as "The Measures Taken," converting the German singular to plural.
10. As for Brecht's contact with Komintern secret agents, see Eva Horn, "Die Regel der Ausnahme. Revolutionäre Souveränität und bloßes Leben in Brecht's *Maßnahme*," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift* (4/2001): 680–709.
11. Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Mannheim (London and New York: Methuen, 1987).
12. Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct. The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).
13. Walter Benjamin, "Kommentare zu Gedichten von Brecht," in *Gesammelte Schriften II*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp 1991), 556.
14. Bertolt Brecht, "Cover Your Tracks," in Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, ed. Willett and Mannheim, trans. Frank Jones. Translation modified.
15. Bertolt Brecht, *Die Maßnahme*, ed. Rainer Steinweg (Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1972), 237; trans. John Willett, in Bertolt Brecht, *The Collected Plays* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), vol. 3, part II, 232.
16. Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, 13.
17. Bertolt Brecht, "Zur Theorie des Lehrstücks," in Reiner Steinweg, *Das Lehrstück: Brechts Theorie einer politisch-ästhetischen Erziehung* (Stuttgart, Germany: Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1972), 51, my translation.
18. Reiner Steinweg, ed., *Brechts Modell der Lehrstücke: Zeugnisse, Diskussion, Erfahrungen* (Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1976), 198.
19. Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, 29–30.
20. Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, 13–14; translation slightly altered.
21. Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, 12.
22. Brecht, *Die Maßnahme*, 100; my translation. Brecht made the change for his fifth (and final) version of the play, produced in Moscow in 1934/1935.
23. Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, 25.
24. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New

York: Routledge, 1992), 177.

25. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

26. Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, 34.

27. Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, 34.

28. Bertolt Brecht, *The Decision*, trans. John Willett, in *Brecht: Collected Plays: Three*, ed. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1997).

29. Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, 34.

30. Slavoj Žižek, *Liebe dein Symptom wie dich selbst! Jacques Lacans Psychoanalyse und die Medien* (Berlin: Merve, 1991), 122-123; my translation. Žižek's *Liebe dein Symptom* is a collection of essays that is not identical with his *Enjoy Your Symptom*.

31. Ruth Fischer, *Stalin and German Communism: A Study in the Origins of the State Party* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948).