

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956)

### Late lamented fame of the great city of New York

Who is there that still remembers the fame of the giant city of New York in the decade  
after the Great War?

What a melting pot America was in those days – celebrated by poets!

*God's own country!*

Invoked just by its initials: U.S.A.

Like an unmistakable childhood friend whom everyone knows.

This inexhaustible melting pot, so it was said, received everything that fell into it and  
converted it within twice two weeks into something identifiable!

All races which landed on this zestful continent eagerly abandoned themselves and  
forgot their profoundest characteristics like bad habits in order to become as quickly  
as possible like those who were so much at home there!

And they received them with careless generosity as if they were utterly different  
(Differing only through the difference of their miserable existence).

Like a good leaven they feared no

Mass of dough, however enormous: they knew

They would penetrate everything. What fame! What a century!

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Ah, those voices of their women coming from the sound-boxes!

Thus they sang (take good care of those records!) in the golden age!

Harmony of the evening waters at Miami!

Uncontainable gaiety of the generations driving fast over unending roads!

Mighty lamentations of women singing, faithfully mourning

Broad-chested men, but ever surrounded by broad-chested men!

They collected whole parks of rare human specimens, fed them scientifically, bathed  
them and weighed them so that their incomparable gestures might be perpetuated  
in photographs for all who came after.

They raised up their gigantic buildings with incomparable waste of the best human  
material.

Quite openly, before the whole world, they squeezed from their workers all that was in  
them,

Fired rifles into the coal mines and threw their used-up bones, and exhausted muscles  
on the streets with good-natured laughter.

But in sporting acknowledgement they reported the same rough obstinacy in workers  
on strike with homeric exaggeration.

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Poverty was considered despicable there!

In the films of this blessed nation, men down on their luck, seeing the homes of the poor  
(which included pianos and leather couches), killed themselves out of hand.

What fame! What a century!

O we too demanded such broad-gauge overcoats of rough material

With the padded shoulders which make men so broad

That three of them fill the entire sidewalk.  
We too sought to brake our gestures, 30  
Thrust our hands slowly into our pockets, and work ourselves slowly  
Out of the armchairs in which we had reclined (as for all eternity),  
Slowly working ourselves out  
Like a whole state of a country turning around,  
And we too stuffed our mouths full of chewing gum, which was supposed eventually to  
push forward the jawbone, and sat with jaws ruminating as in endless greed.  
To our faces, too, we wished to lend that feared impenetrability  
Of the *poker-faced man* who propounded himself to his fellow-citizens as an insoluble  
riddle.

We too perpetually smiled, as if before or after a good piece of business,  
Which is the proof of a well-ordered digestion.  
We too liked to slap our companions (all of them future customers) 40  
On arm and thigh and between the shoulder-blades,  
Testing how to get such fellows into our hands  
By the same caressing or grabbing motions as for dogs.  
So we imitated this renowned race of men who seemed destined  
To rule the world by helping it to progress.

What confidence! What an inspiration!  
Those machine rooms: the biggest in the world!  
The car factories campaigned for an increase in the birthrate: they had started making  
cars (on hire purchase)  
For the unborn. Whoever threw away practically unused clothing (but so that it rotted  
at once, preferably in quicklime) was paid a bonus.

Those bridges which linked flourishing land with flourishing land! 50  
Endless! The longest in the world!

Those skyscrapers – The men who piled their stones so high that they towered over all,  
anxiously watched from their summits the new buildings springing up from the  
ground, soon to overtower their own mammoth size. (Some were beginning to fear  
that the growth of such cities could no longer be stopped, that they would have to  
finish their days with twenty storeys of other cities above them and would be  
stacked in coffins which would be buried one on top of the other.)

But apart from that: what confidence! Even the dead  
Were given make up and a cosy smile  
(These are characteristics I am setting down from memory; others I have forgotten) for  
not even those who had gone away  
Were allowed to be without hope.

What people they were! Their boxers the strongest!  
Their inventors the most practical! Their trains the fastest!  
And also the most crowded! And it all looked like it would last a thousand years  
For the New Yorkers themselves had spread the news 60  
That their city was built on the rock and hence indestructible.  
Truly their whole system of communal life was beyond compare.

What fame! What a century!

Admittedly that century lasted  
A bare eight years.

For one day there ran through the world the rumor of strange collapses  
On a famous continent, and its banknotes, hoarded only yesterday, were rejected in  
disgust like rotten stinking fish.

Today, when the word has gone around that these people are bankrupt, we on the other  
continents (which are indeed bankrupt as well) we see many things differently and,  
so we think, more clearly.

What of the skyscrapers?

We observe them more coolly.

What contemptible hovels skyscrapers are when they no longer yield rents!

Rising so high, full of poverty? Touching the clouds, full of debt?

What of the railroad trains?

In the railroad trains, which roll like hotels on wheels, they say often nobody boards  
and travels nowhere with incomparable speed.

What of the bridges? The longest in the world, they now link scrapheap with  
scrapheap.

And what of the people?

They still keep up appearances, we hear, but now  
It's in order to find a job.

Twenty-two year old girls sniff cocaine now before setting out to get a job sitting behind  
a typewriter.

Whole families inject poison into their daughters' thighs to make them look red hot. 80

Gramophone records are still sold, not many of course,  
But what do they tell us, these things that haven't learned to sing?

What is the sense of these songs?

What have they really been singing to us all these years?

Why do we now dislike these once celebrated voices?

Why do these photos of cities no longer make the slightest impression on us?

Because word has gone around that this country, these people are bankrupt.

Their machines, it is said, lie in huge heaps (the biggest in the world)

And rust like the machines of the Old World (in smaller heaps).

World championships are still contested before a few spectators who have absent-  
mindedly stayed in their places: Each time the strongest competitor stands no chance  
against the mysterious law that drives people away from shops stocked to bursting! 90  
Clutching their smile (but nothing else now) the retired world champions stand in the

way of the last few streetcars left running.

Three of these broad-gauge fellows still fill the sidewalk, but

What will fill *them* before nightfall?

The padding warms only the shoulders of those who in interminable columns

Hurry day and night through empty canyons of lifeless stonepiles.

Their gestures are slow, like those of hungry and enfeebled beasts.

Like a whole state turning over, they work themselves slowly out of the gutters in  
which they seem to be lying as for eternity.

Their confidence, it is said, is still there; it is based on the hope that tomorrow the rain  
will fall upwards.

But some, we hear, can still find jobs: in those places where whole waggon-loads of  
wheat are being shovelled into the ocean called "pacific."

And those who spend their nights on benches are, we hear, apt to think quite impermissible  
thoughts as they see those empty skyscrapers before dropping off to sleep. 100

What a bankruptcy! How great a fame has departed!

What a discovery: that their system of communal life displays the same miserable flaw  
as that of more modest people.

[1930]