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COMMUNIST REVIEW

- **Hans Hess** Art and Social Function
- **Phil Katz** William Morris – Useful Work Not Useless Toil
- **Kevin Donnelly** Subcultures and the Problem of 'Mass' Culture
- **Jimmy Jancovich** Ideology or Ideas?



Revolution and Culture



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COMMUNIST REVIEW

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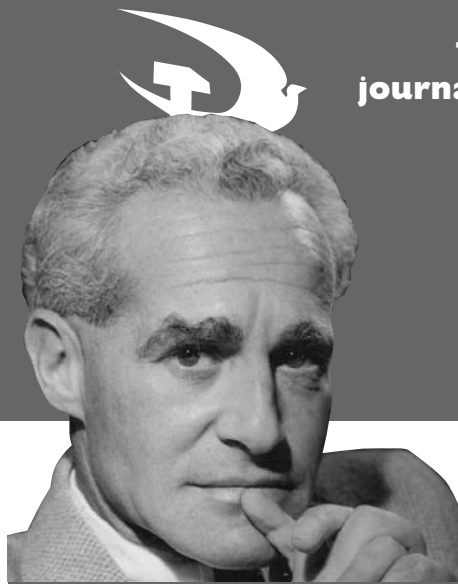
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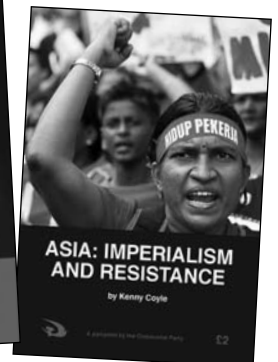
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editorial

By Martin Levy



REVOLUTION AND CULTURE

This issue of *Communist Review* focuses on the theme of ‘Revolution and Culture’, which provided one of the plenary sessions at the Communist University of the North held in September 2011. So, in lieu of a separate article – since this writer was one of the speakers – this editorial is going to be extended to explore the theme. And let us start with a question: what exactly do we mean by ‘culture’?

Most people conceive of culture as art, literature, poetry, music, dance, film, theatre That was certainly the context of the cultural front developed by the Communist Party in the early decades of its existence, which included Unity Theatre,¹ the Artists International Association,^{2,3} the flowering of literature from the likes of Lewis Jones and Lewis Grassic Gibbon,⁴ engaged classical and choral music from Rutland Boughton, Alan Bush, the Birmingham Clarion Singers and the Glasgow YCL choir, and the development of Marxist literary criticism by Christopher Caudwell, Ralph Fox, A L Morton and T A Jackson.

But this concept of culture is too narrow. Charles Woolfson, developing Engels’ pamphlet *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*, refers to the passing on through language of a “cultural inheritance of acquired skills and knowledge won through labour”;⁵ and Hans Heinz Holz has described culture as “the total system of reflection of the social organisation of human life, which is arranged into many part-systems (eg art, education, sport, sustenance, treatment of nature), which in turn are divided over and again and have a mutual influence upon each other.”⁶

Culture is therefore unconsciously integral to everything which people do. Language is crucial: as Gramsci wrote,⁷

“every language contains the elements of a conception of the world and of a culture”,

and

“Someone who only speaks dialect, or understands the standard language incompletely, necessarily has an intuition of the world which is more or less limited and provincial, which is fossilised and anachronistic in relation to the major currents of thought which dominate world history.”

In these days of universal education and mass communication, that might seem too severe. However, it remains true that whoever controls language, rules people’s consciousness.⁶ Just consider the tendentious nature of the following current expressions – a few examples of the way in which, through language, the ruling class imposes its values on society:

- ‘humanitarian intervention’
- ‘surgical strike’
- ‘bogus asylum seekers’
- ‘public sector pensions are untenable’.



Detail from the mural *Del porfirismo a la Revolución* (From the Dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz to the Revolution, 1957-66) by David Alfaro Siqueiros in the National Museum of History at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City



Two Elements in Every National Culture

In his *Critical Remarks on the National Question*, Lenin noted that every national culture in capitalist society has two elements – a dominant, bourgeois culture and a rudimentary democratic and socialist culture.⁸ In Britain, that dominant culture is racist, sexist, nationalist, imperialist, individualistic, consumerist. It is propagated directly through the mass media and institutions, and indirectly through advertising, traditions, elements of ‘high’ culture and a significant part of so-called ‘popular culture’ – the music business, fashion, ‘reality TV’ shows, films, pornography Much – though by no means all – of the latter could be regarded as a new “opium of the people”, the “spirit of a spiritless situation”, as Marx said of religion.⁹ It is a diversion from the use of critical faculties and from engagement to change society.

This dominant culture is the means by which, as Gramsci said, the capitalist class maintains its hegemony in society. If the working class is to rise to the position of ruling class, then it has to establish its own hegemony, making its own values, life expectations and norms of relations⁶ – cooperation, solidarity, opposition to discrimination, liberation, internationalism – those of society as a whole. But where to start? How can the Communist Party, the left and the labour movement intervene to change ‘popular’ culture?

In a particularly penetrating passage, Gramsci analysed the difficulty in arguing against culturally-entrenched views:

“Imagine the intellectual position of the man of the people: he has formed his opinions, convictions, criteria of discrimination, standards of conduct. Anyone with a superior intellectual formation with a point of view opposed to his can put forward arguments better than he and really tear him to pieces logically and so on. But should the man of the people change his opinions just because of this? ... In that case he might find himself having to change every day, or every time he meets an ideological adversary who is his intellectual superior. On what elements, therefore, can his philosophy be founded? And in particular his philosophy in the form which has the greatest importance for his standards of conduct?”

The most important element is undoubtedly one whose character is determined not by reason but by faith. But faith in whom, or in what? In particular in the social group to which he belongs, in so far as in a diffuse way it thinks as he does. The man of the people thinks that so many like-thinking people can’t be wrong, not so radically, as the man he is arguing against would like him to believe; he thinks that, while he himself, admittedly, is not able to uphold and develop his arguments as well as his opponent, in his group there is someone who could do this and could certainly argue better than the particular man he has against him; and he remembers, indeed, hearing expounded, discursively, coherently, in a way that left him convinced, the reasons behind his faith. ...

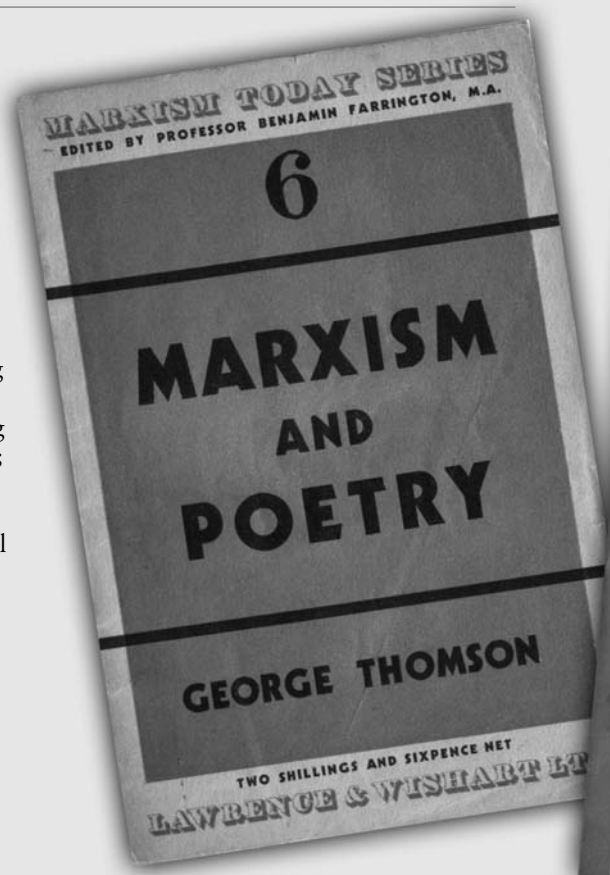
These considerations lead ... to the conclusion that new conceptions have an extremely unstable position among the popular masses; particularly when they are in contrast with orthodox convictions (which can themselves be new) conforming socially to the general interests of the ruling classes. ...

Specific necessities can be deduced from this for any cultural movement which aimed to replace common sense and old conceptions of the world in general:

1. Never to tire of repeating its own arguments (though offering literary variation of form): repetition is the best didactic means of working on the popular mentality.

2. To work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever-growing strata of the populace, in other words to give a personality to the amorphous mass element. This means working to produce *élites* of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them to become, as it were, the whalebone in the corset.”¹⁰

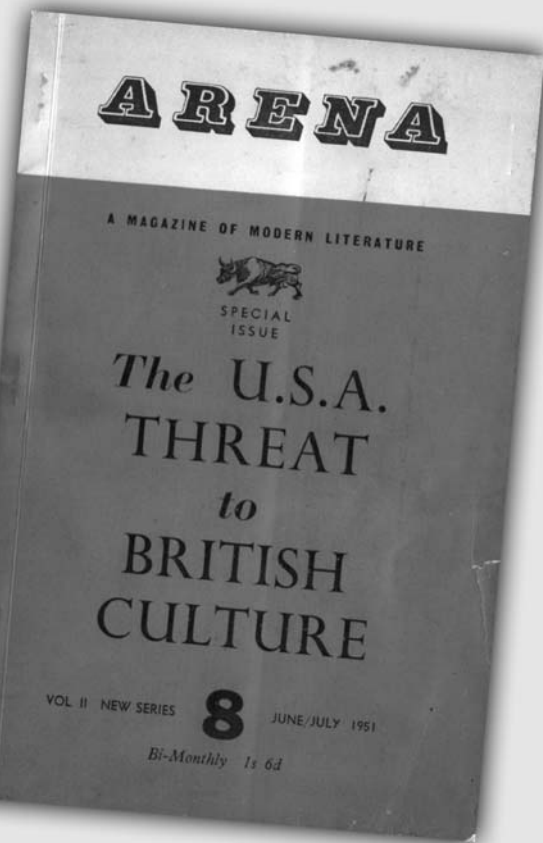
The first of these “specific necessities” is recognisable in the day-to-day work of political argument and propagandising; while the second refers to recruiting and developing cadres out of the popular



masses, people with roots in their communities but who can convincingly challenge the orthodox opinions. However, Gramsci also wrote of “a cultural front as necessary alongside the merely economic and political ones”,¹¹ “a struggle for a new culture” in which “new artists will be born from the movement,”¹² and in particular of “national-popular” literature and culture¹³ and the need for “intellectuals who are conscious of being linked to a national-popular mass”.¹⁴ The term *national-popular* has been considered to refer to the strategy of alliances “in which the notion of hegemony is extended from simple class domination to the securing of active consent in the form of a ‘collective will’.”¹⁵ Gramsci’s perspective was for the working class consciously to absorb the national cultural heritage, and to carry it on – building a *national-popular culture* – so that its world-view becomes that of the whole nation.

As Comrade Holz has pointed out,⁶ “it is a matter of activating elements of the existing conditions which point a way forward”, in particular those early bourgeois ideals such as ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’ which are unrealisable under capitalism but “endure as cultural identity and have entered the philosophy of the labour movement.”

‘High’ and ‘Popular’ Culture
But is there a necessary connection



between the arts – ‘high’ culture – and ‘popular’ culture? In one sense yes: as Holz says, literature, particularly the classics, has a political value because “they communicate a vocabulary which allows us to think in a different way.”⁶

In fact the separation between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ cultures is a consequence of society’s division into classes, and in particular the expropriation of ‘high’ culture by the bourgeoisie. In the case of art, this process was brilliantly expounded by Hans Hess in the article *Art and Social Function* which appeared posthumously in *Marxism Today* in 1976; and which we are pleased to be able to reproduce in this issue of *CR*, so that a new generation of readers can gain from the insights. Comrade Hess describes how, as works of art were transformed from being forces for mythology to commodities, the artist changed from being the most important member of the tribe – priest, painter and magician – to a guild craftsman in the Middle Ages and then a “spiritual manufacturer of high-sounding, empty claims of cosmic significance.” Depriving the bourgeoisie of its concept of art “as a great, profound unique spiritual experience for the spectator and an act of individual creation of the artist” is, Comrade Hess says, the precondition of a revolutionary argument. “The work of art as a weapon of the new ideological struggle has ... a very important place.”

Some 30 years earlier, George Thomson had come to similar conclusions in a different sphere.¹⁶ He found the origin of both poetry and music in ancient human society, in the vocal accompaniment to *collective* labour – in rhythm, melody and dance – a form of rehearsal or mime of the real task or outcome. It had an element of magic – to inspire people to bring about a desired outcome, or simply to make a task easier, as we see today in labour songs with a regular rhythm. The language of poetry, being rhythmical, is hypnotic, holding the mind suspended in a sort of trance, a world of fantasy. In this world, through the gift of language, poets can express unsatisfied longings which torture them and their fellow human beings. However,

“The poet speaks not for himself but for his fellow-men. His cry is their cry, which only he can utter. That is what gives it its depth. But if he is to speak for them, he must suffer with them, rejoice with them, work with them, fight with them. Otherwise what he says will not appeal to them and so will lack significance.”¹⁷

In his *Soul Food* column in this issue of *CR*, Mike Quille takes up the topic of poetry and class struggle, starting from the analysis of Thomson, Ernst Fischer and Christopher Caudwell; and, in places throughout the journal, you will also find poems related to the themes of some of the other articles.

The role of art and artists in building socialism was certainly recognised in the Soviet Union for much of its history. Lenin laid great stress on developing a new proletarian culture, but pointed out that it was essential to overcome illiteracy and that proletarian culture cannot be created from nothing. As he said in 1920, “only a precise knowledge of the culture created by the entire development of mankind will enable us to create a proletarian culture.”¹⁸ A year earlier Gramsci had commented that

“... communism will not obscure beauty and grace: one must understand the impetus by which workers feel drawn to the contemplation of art, to the creation of art, how deeply they feel offended in their humanity because the slavery of wages and work cuts them off from a world that integrates man’s life, makes it worth living. The struggle of the

Russian communists to multiply schools, theatres and opera houses, to make galleries accessible to the crowds, the fact that villages and factories which distinguish themselves in the sector of production are awarded with aesthetic and cultural entertainments show that, once in power, the proletariat tends to establish the reign of beauty and grace, to elevate the dignity and freedom of those who create beauty.”¹⁹

Under socialism, clearly, the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture becomes narrowed – and increasingly so as the distinction between mental and manual labour is abolished. The arts serve the development of the new society in which, as Marx and Engels said, “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”²⁰ This objective was also central to the speeches and writings of William Morris, as Phil Katz points out in his article in this issue of *CR*: *William Morris – the Search for Useful Work, Not Useless Toil*. Although Phil is mainly concerned with Morris’s special contribution on questions of work, skill and machinery, he notes that Morris “focused on winning space back from the exploiters”, to enable workers to be educated, and to develop skills and to work because they wanted to, striving for art in labour, since “All were potentially artists.”

Cultural Strategy and the BRS

On this basis, therefore, the cultural front under capitalism involves several elements: continually combating orthodox ideology and conceptions; raising the intellectual level and skills of the people; developing *élites* of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, including artists who are close to the people and use their talents to promote a different form of society; and championing what is best in the cultural heritage.

The cultural efforts of Britain’s Communist Party in its early decades corresponded in part to this perspective. But the publication of the first edition of the *British Road to Socialism* in February 1951 fostered a significant step forward in the articulation and carrying through of a cultural strategy. A major focus of that *BRS* was on the threat to peace and national sovereignty from the aggressive policy of imperialism, particularly US imperialism:



“In the economic sphere, Britain has been turned into a satellite of America In the military sphere, Britain has been turned into an American base, and the American army of occupation is growing. The new arms race was decided on American instructions”²¹

Just two months after the publication of this new programme the National Cultural Committee of the Communist Party convened a conference on “The USA Threat to British Culture”, which was so successful that a whole issue of *Arena* (“a magazine of modern literature” initiated by Randall Swingler, Jack Lindsay and John Davenport) was given over to its proceedings.²² In his keynote address to the conference Sam Aaronovitch, the Party’s national cultural organiser, identified the threat to British culture from the dominant position of US imperialism and its attempts to subordinate the rest of the capitalist powers and their empires as part of its plan for world domination. To assist this, US imperialism was projecting the American way of life as the ideal:

- glorification of the unlimited rule of the dollar and private enterprise;
- national oppression of African Americans and extension of the inherent racism to promote the war in Korea;
- the cult of violence, up to the willingness to use nuclear weapons.

The outlook of American trusts had invaded Britain; American films, magazines, comics and dance music had taken over British markets, “swamping ... Britain with American products of the most degraded and reactionary kind”;²³ and American ideas had already penetrated deeply into British culture and institutions, perverting the social sciences, militarising the natural sciences and leading to witch-hunts and purges. Sam referred to this invasion as an attempt at “coca-colonisation” of the British people. Furthermore, he said, “British imperialist culture does not simply receive from America. It contributes, or shall we say, interpenetrates with American reaction.”²⁴

This was far from being xenophobic. In his presentation Sam talked about the two cultures in America and paid tribute to those Americans fighting against the McCarthyite witch-hunts. The conference included a contribution,

unfortunately not written up for publication, on the part played by progressive American intellectuals, though in lieu of that *Arena* published short articles by W E B Du Bois and Howard Fast.

In fighting back,” Sam said, “we must see first of all that what is threatened is our entire British cultural heritage and the possibility of advancing it.”²⁴ Paralleling Gramsci’s concept of a *national-popular culture*, he then went on to argue that there was indeed “a British cultural heritage which we communists should unite to defend, along with millions of people of the most varied political and social opinions”:²⁵

- in literature, the line from Chaucer to Shakespeare, Milton, Fielding, Blake, Robert Burns, Shelley, Byron, Dickens, William Morris, Thomas Hardy, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, George Bernard Shaw;
- in art, painters like Constable, Turner, Hogarth, Rowlandson and the whole school of illustrators;
- in music, Byrd, Purcell and our folk songs and dances, which he said were “still insufficiently known to the people”;
- in science and medicine, Francis Bacon, Robert Boyle, Newton, Harvey, Hunter, Darwin, T H Huxley, Faraday, Rutherford, Lord Kelvin;
- in political economy, William Petty, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Bray and Thompson.

This cultural heritage, he said, “is the enemy of the anti-human outlook of Anglo-American big business, and the dying culture they seek to foster.”

60 years on, it would be easy to suggest that Sam and the Party were tilting at windmills: after all, the British culture to which he referred has proved somewhat resilient; and arguably more people than ever can visit museums, theatres and art galleries and even enjoy traditional sports. Furthermore, no culture is ever static: the English language has been enriched by many expressions from abroad; and likewise British culture has been enriched by incorporating overseas influences, particularly in the music field.

However, it would be wrong to regard the Party’s approach then as quixotic. Today, we ignore too readily the degree to which, as Sam said, “the outlook of American trusts has invaded

Britain”, simply because so much of it has been here for so long. The corporate brands – Microsoft, Ford, Amazon, AOL, KFC and so on, many of them with distinctly anti-union practices – have become institutions in Britain; and one only has to go to the cinema or switch on the TV to find American mass cultural products.

Yet much of our national cultural heritage has indeed survived, and in some areas US cultural domination has even been rolled back. A number of factors contributed to this: sections of the British ruling class had their own agenda, for example in the music industry; and youth cultures and subcultures have proved difficult for the ruling class to control, as Kevin Donnelly points out in this issue of *CR*, in his article *Subcultures and the Problem of ‘Mass’ Culture*. But the primary reason for the retention of a cultural heritage has been the effect of mass struggles here and around the world – the fight for peace and nuclear disarmament, the Cuban and Vietnamese defeats of US imperialism, the US civil rights movement, the liberation of African colonies, the fight against discrimination in Britain, the establishment of comprehensive education, the defence of working class interests by an active trade union movement and the revitalisation of our own indigenous democratic and socialist culture.

The Folk Revival in Britain

In all of these struggles, communists have been to the fore; but their role in the last-mentioned development in particular should not be understated. Already in the late 1940s the Party was interested in helping to develop a national cultural identity for Scotland; and communists including Hamish Henderson took the initiative within the Scottish labour movement, to establish a People’s Festival ...

“... designed to bring the Edinburgh International Festival closer to the people as a whole and to make it serve more fully the cause of international understanding and good will; and also to initiate action such as will more generally make what is best in the cultural life of our country more accessible to working people, and will secure fuller facilities for the development of the cultural activities of working people.”²⁶

Performances and lectures at the Festival were

“designed to show how all forms of cultural activity, at their best, depend on ordinary working people and also how much the happiness of the people as a whole depends on the condition of science and the arts”;

and the Festival committee made a particular point of including “the incomparable treasure” of Scottish folk song and music, very little of which was known to the Scottish public at that time. With low prices and with the inclusion of children in the People’s Festival, it was, according to Henderson, “Gramsci in action”. He had learned about Gramsci while fighting with the Italian partisans, translated his prison letters,²⁷ and had been particularly struck by Gramsci’s comments on folk song in the *Prison Notebooks*:²⁸

“*Folklore*. A classification or division of popular songs formulated by Ermolao Rubieri: (1) songs composed by the people and for the people; (2) songs composed for the people but not by the people; (3) songs written neither by the people nor for the people, that the people have nevertheless adopted because they conform to their way of thinking and feeling.

It seems to me that all popular songs could and should be reduced to the third category, since what distinguishes popular song in the context of a nation and its culture, is not the artistic fact or its historical origin, but its way of conceiving the world and life, in contrast with ‘official’ society; here, and only here, should one look for the ‘collectivity’ of popular song and of the people themselves.”²⁹

The British folk revival, in which communists like Bert Lloyd and Ewan MacColl played a prominent role, followed on from the Edinburgh People’s Festival. In February 1951 MacColl, then with Theatre Workshop, had introduced Henderson to the American folk song collector Alan Lomax, and Lomax in turn brought MacColl and Lloyd together. The latter had been interested in working people’s songs since before the war and was already compiling a book of songs from coal miners. As Peter Cox has written:³⁰

“The combination of the two ideas of traditional and urban song was a potent mix for Ewan. Here was a form that was still living, and deeply imbued with the rhythms of working-class speech, a working man’s culture that was lying hidden and waiting to be dug up. A seam was there to be mined, and Ewan and Bert took pick and shovel to it.”

The big breakthrough came in 1958 with the broadcast of the first Radio Ballad, *The Ballad of John Axon*. A collaboration between Ewan MacColl and BBC Midlands senior features producer Charles Parker, this programme interwove songs composed in the folk idiom with train sounds and recordings of railwaymen speaking, in order to tell – without narrator or actors – the story of a rail crash in which driver John Axon had perished. Bert Lloyd and Peggy Seeger were among the musicians and singers. It was a stunning success, bringing the reality of working class life, speech and culture into the mainstream, and it was followed by 7 other Radio Ballads including, notably, *Song of a Road* (building the M1), *Singing the Fishing*, *The Big Hewer* and *Travelling People*.

Other communists were also involved in the folk revival. The London Youth Choir, financially assisted by the Workers’ Music Association and also linked to the Communist Party, initiated the bi-monthly *Sing* in May 1954, with editor Eric Winter and music editor John Hasted both Party members. The first folk clubs were opened and by 1956 *Sing* was presenting both British and American folk songs to a nationwide readership.³¹ *Via All Together Now: The Challenge Song Book* (including songs by Ewan MacColl, John Hasted and Fred (Karl) Dallas), the Young Communist League popularised the application of traditional melodies to contemporary political issues, which became particularly important as the peace movement developed, and which has resonated in industrial struggles as well. As singer-songwriter Leon Rosselson has said recently:³²

“There are obviously songs the purpose of which is to give hope and heart to those who share your actions. They’re solidarity songs. We need solidarity songs, don’t we?

We need songs you can sing on demonstrations and picket lines and blockades or whatever. Those songs are necessarily fairly simple in their messages and they have a fairly useful function.”

There were of course other cultural initiatives inspired by the Communist Party in this period. One was Plato Films (later ETV Films), founded by Stanley Forman in 1950 as a centre for distributing mostly documentary films from all over the world, particularly the socialist countries. Much later the *Artery* collective, which was founded by communist artists, played a significant role in promoting an alternative cultural approach, publishing a magazine which advocated Lenin’s concept of a second culture.³³ But I have focused on the Edinburgh People’s Festival and the folk song revival because both of these sought to build on deep elements of traditional ‘popular’ culture, encouraging mass participation in order to challenge the hegemony of the dominant culture.

A Strategy for Today

If there was a weakness in Sam Aaronovitch’s list of what “we communists should unite to defend”, it is that he hardly mentioned the broad spectrum of cultural activities already engaged in by working-class people, often closely linked to the labour movement. He did speak of “the need to give every support to those who, at this very moment, are helping to develop a popular, progressive culture based on our own traditions”,³⁴ but such activities as trade union banner production, brass bands, choral singing (like the Birmingham Clarion Singers and the Glasgow YCL Choir!), the activities of the Workers’ Educational Association and the Workers’ Music Association, and working-class sports did not get a look-in at all. Any cultural policy today would have to take such areas on board.

But the democratic and progressive element of our culture has also moved on since 1951. It is no longer just ‘British’ but enriched by the many cultures and nations which inhabit these islands – Welsh, Scottish, English, Irish, Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Caribbean ... not to mention the different regional and local cultures. Working class hegemony cannot be built without respect for, and involvement of, all these many cultures, nor without challenging the oppression of women and black people, and the discrimination against lesbians, gays and transgender people.

Is our national cultural heritage under threat today? Yes, but not just from US corporate interests. British and other monopoly capitalist combines, such as News International,



have moved in, adopting the same approach as their US counterparts. And if US imperialism is unable to achieve world domination alone, then the penetration of generally pro-imperialist ideas into our culture has been strengthened by the overthrow of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. This lack of a counter-balance makes the development of the democratic and socialist, working class culture much more essential.

At the same time, as Kevin Donnelly says in his article here, it “is clear that we cannot exist in splendid isolation – as a *counterculture* – and ignore the development of mass culture”, however much we may loathe and abhor *Big Brother* or the *X Factor*. We have to respond to “the challenges posed by mass communication, the increased ‘dumbing down’ and commercialisation of cultural industries” by sifting out what is progressive in contemporary mass culture.

So what does all this mean for a cultural policy for the Party? There need to be political, ideological, organisational, analytical and practical dimensions:

- Opposing all those measures of the present government which will lead to reduced access of working class people to literature, theatre, museums, art galleries, sporting and recreational facilities. It also means opposing the commodification of education, including the jacked-up student fees, the Higher Education White

Paper, academy schools and the expansion of private education providers.

- Building circulation of the *Morning Star* and *Communist Review*, with their cultural pages, allowing us to raise cultural awareness among working class people, promoting not only our cultural heritage but works and performers which challenge the existing social relations.
- Winning the trade union movement to take up inclusive cultural and artistic issues and to accept the importance of a cultural dimension to all rallies, demonstrations and so on – paying Musicians’ Union rates to performers.
- Championing the production and dissemination of cultural works which challenge reactionary policies and oppressive ideologies – like Banner Theatre productions, which, incidentally, arose out of Charles Parker’s folk club in Birmingham and build on the same sort of mix as the Radio Ballads.
- Seeking to develop a new alliance of cultural workers, broader and with deeper roots than the former *Artery* collective, producing its own agitational materials targeting the iniquities of monopoly capitalism.
- Analysing contemporary mass culture in order to sift out

and engage with what is progressive in it.

- Making effective use of graphic design in all our publicity and propaganda, and of new mass communications methods like Twitter and Facebook.
- Encouraging mass participation in cultural activities by working people – whether poetry, music (traditional, choral or otherwise), drama, dance or art.

Some readers may have seen the play *The Pitmen Painters* by Lee Hall. It describes how a group of miners in Ashington in the 1930s learned art appreciation by creating paintings themselves. Their style may have been naïve, but they produced works which reflected reality. None of the paintings was their own personal property to sell – they were not producing cultural commodities. This appears to me as the embryo of what we want to achieve – the breakdown of the bourgeois individualism in art and the building of a society in which the conditions are created for a genuine mass participatory culture to flourish, the sort that William Morris would have applauded.

This issue of *CR* also contains a short article *Ideology or Ideas*, by Jimmy Jancovich, dealing with what he sees as myths within our movement (part of our ‘culture?’), and book reviews by Kate Hudson and Ben Chacko.

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14 A Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p 204.

15 D Forgacs and G Nowell Smith, *op cit*, p 196.

16 G Thomson, *Marxism and Poetry*, *Marxism Today Series No 6*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1945.

17 *Ibid*, p 60.

18 V I Lenin, *Tasks of the Youth Leagues*, in *Collected Works*, Vol 31, pp 283-299; online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/oct/02.htm>.

19 A Gramsci, in *L’Ordine Nuovo*, 14 June 1919; reproduced in *Selections from the Cultural Writings*, p 38.

20 K Marx and F Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Collected Works*, Vol 6, p 506.

21 *British Road to Socialism*, 1st edition, Communist Party of Great Britain, 1951; online at <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/commintern/sections/britain/brs/1951/51.htm>.

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24 *Ibid*, p 15.

25 *Ibid*, p 16.

26 H Henderson, *The Edinburgh People’s Festival, 1951-54*, at <http://www.edinburghpeoplesfestival.org/Archives/background/hamish.html>.

27 *Gramsci’s Letters from Prison*, in *New Edinburgh Review*, Nos 25 and 26, 1974.

28 H Henderson, interview with Jennie Renton at <http://textualities.net/jennie-renton/hamish-henderson-interview/>.

29 A Gramsci, Q5 §156; in *Prison Notebooks*, Vol 2, J A Buttigieg Ed, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, pp 399-400, and *Selections from the Cultural Writings*, p 195.

30 P Cox, *Set Into Song: Ewan MacColl, Charles Parker, Peggy Seeger and the Radio Ballads*, Labatie Books, 2008, p 44 ff.

31 M Brocken, *The British Folk Revival 1944-2002*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, 2003, p 47.

32 L Rosselson, interviewed by Karl Dallas in *Morning Star*, 10 October 2011.

33 J Sawtell, *The Fool of Second Culture*, at <http://johnyeaddon.com/JY%20TEXT/6%20The%20fool.htm>.

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The End o the World

BY RAB WILSON

Ye'll aa hae seen the tabloid fuss?
The 'News o the World' hus bit the dust!

Sunday's wull juist no be the same,
Syne Ruperts pit thaim oot the game!

Whaur can we fuin oot nou, fowk say,
Wha Ryan Giggs hus shagged the day!?

Or Gordon Ramsay's faither-in-law?
His secret wife, an weans, an aa!

Max Mosely photies, quite perverse!
As Nazi hookers skelpt his erse!

Corrie plots, or else Eastenders –
Tommy Sheridan in suspenders!

Stories that gang oan, an oan –
(They even 'papped' Jim Monaghan!)

But nou the 'World's' cam tae an end,
As Rupert tries tae mak amends,

Fir hackin intae Millie's phone,
(He didnae ken it wis gaun oan!)

Friends, it's a total bluidy disgrace;
He needs faur mair's a pie in his face!

But Rupert wis kept frae ony ill,
Bi the swift response o 'Shanghai Lil'!

An whit about Sir Paul, o the 'Met'?
Whit did his boys in blue aa get!?

Kickbacks, cheques, an fly backhaunders,
Greed an corruption walks among us,

A rael police-force, gin ye ask me boys,
Arrests mair crooks than it employs!

An that fly jouker Cameron,
He kens faur mair than he lets oan,

Coulson an him wir thick as thieves,
Sae nou he ducks an dives and weaves,

His 'weasel words' a puir disguise,
Refusin tae apologise.

Thon rid whin-bush, Rebekah Brooks,
A sleekit bitch, wid mak ye puke,

Gied oot twa hunner P45's,
Said 'Awfully sorry!'; then contrived,

Tae stey in post, an brazen it oot;
Within three days wis chippit oot!

Auld Rupert widnae tak the blame,
He shed her skin tae save his ain,

(Mind, these days, he's no quite sae chipper –
Luiks lik he cuidnae fin his slippers!!)

Cam Sunday she wis unner arrest –
Grilled aa day bi London's best,

Thae 'slumber-pairties' at Nummer Ten,
She isnae likely tae see agane,

Gin justice finally hus its day,
She'll 'slumber down' – in Holloway!

This 'little shop' o tabloid horrors,
A five year thing nou, fir the lawyers,

An Cameron howps he's saved his ass,
Bi kickin this intae the grass,

An as fir puir auld cynical me?
Ah think afore ower lang we'll see,

New laws bein passed tae gag the press,
Ensurin that ony future mess,

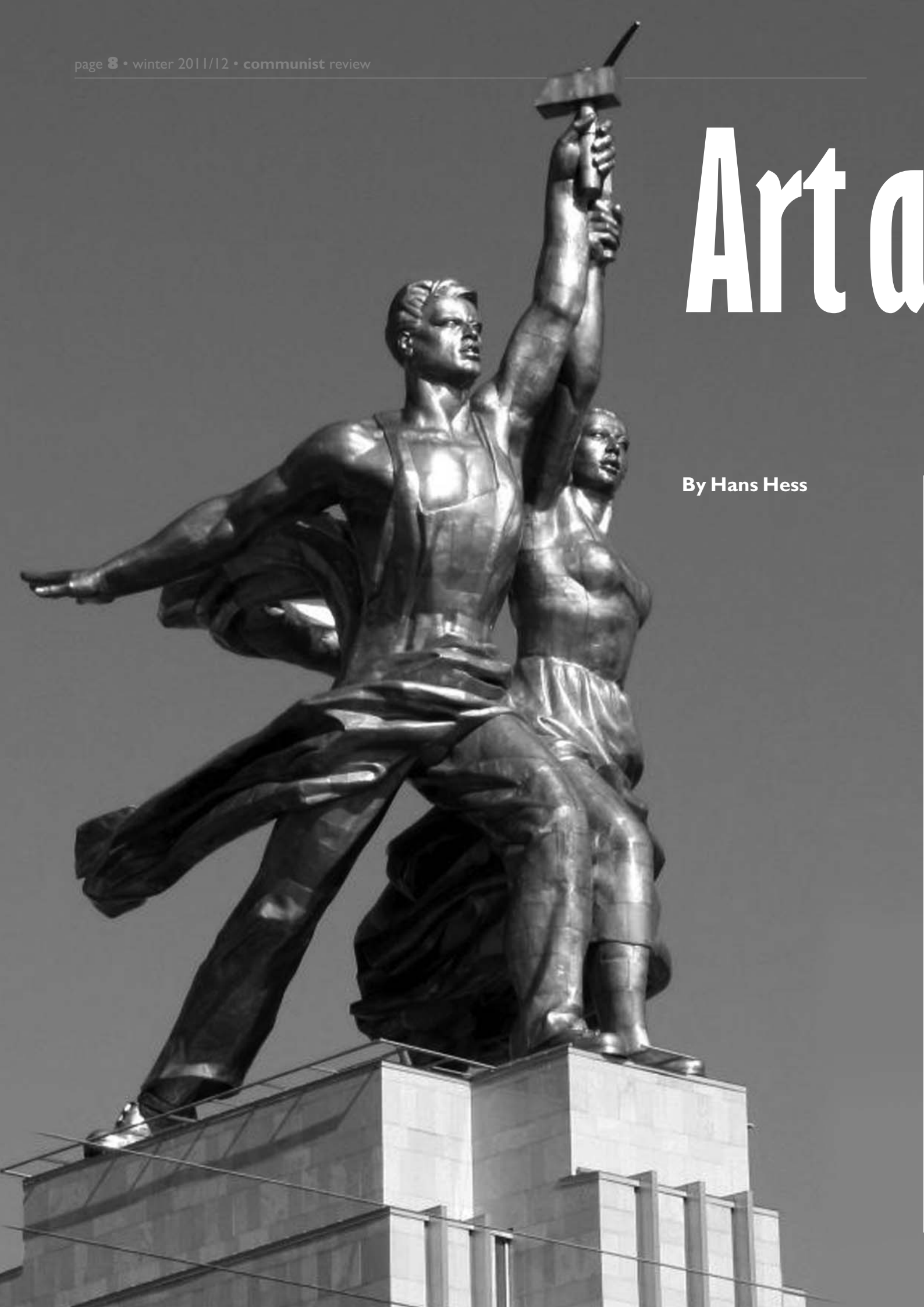
Suggestin Murdoch wis tae blame,
Wull no get publisht e'er agane!

'Freedom o the Press'? its race is run –
Read aa about it – in the 'Sunday Sun'!



Art a

By Hans Hess



nd Social Function

I: ART AND WORKS OF ART

What we call a ‘work of art’ has two entirely different histories: that of its life, which may be short, and that of its afterlife, which may be long. The ‘eternal’ values of the work of art and its eternal life are explained by its death and, if you forgive a Christian metaphor, resurrection.

The work of art, in its own day, was a useful piece of social labour: it was a tomb, a temple, a pyramid; it was a necessity of social and spiritual life; it was all sorts of things – but it was not art, nor did anybody call it that. The word ‘art’ has a shorter history than the art which that word presumes to define. The work of art was not made for pleasure, self-expression or any such modern anachronism. It not only had a place, but it was needed in the service of the ruling class. We must never forget that what we know as art was the art of the ruling class, and that the work of art was an instrument of power.

Before going any further, we have to be clear about the words we use. Let us begin with the words in the title:

artist – society (social)

We know that one can never, as a Marxist, deal in

comfortable generalities. If we use the word artist, we have to ask: when – where – and in whose employment? If we use the word society, we never mean a general human society, but we mean a feudal society, or a slave society, or a bourgeois society.

The word society, as such, only indicates that men, ever since they entered into social life, have lived in a social form, and that form is called a society. But they are all different and, as the central question of Marxism is the understanding and transformation of social relations, that is of society, we must be very precise.

Role of Artists in Previous Societies

I suggest that, before we talk about our artists in our society, we have a brief but necessary survey of the role of the man we call an artist in preceding forms of social life. Don’t be frightened if I start with Lascaux. I promise, it will take less than 30,000 years to get to Picasso.

The artist, to begin with, was the most important person in the tribe – he was priest, painter and magician in one. Every action was magically controlled – every object had magical powers.

It was the artist who had the knowledge of imitation, of making likenesses and fetishes, of drawing pictures as at Lascaux. He was in control of images and symbols which were in magical thought identical with the objects depicted.

Man thought of the world and every part of the world as he did of himself, as animated. In that system of thought called animism everything has a soul – anima – which can be good or bad and can be fooled, bribed, pleased, annoyed, just like people. It was important to propitiate the wind, the rain, the plants, the animals, the ancestors – the departed souls. All this was done by the artist for the tribe. He held power over life and death – and ever since, the artist and the work of art has held magical powers.

The work of art was functioning in a way in which we have never experienced it. Only in our very recent understanding of what we glibly call primitive art, which is neither primitive nor art but which we have learned to understand as ‘operative’ and active, can we still find living examples of the work in use.

From a recent paper by one of my own postgraduates – Emmanuel Ifeta – whose home is in Nigeria, I learned something which I had never

considered. For instance, that art does not only harness spiritual powers but that the spirits look at art. There is in Mr Ifeta’s culture a type of sculpture which can be described as a trap for spirits; the spirit recognises his own likeness in the sculpture and goes into it. Mr Ifeta refers to works of art as “social scarecrows” or “spiritual policemen”, and he replaces our word *objets d’art* by “social machines”.

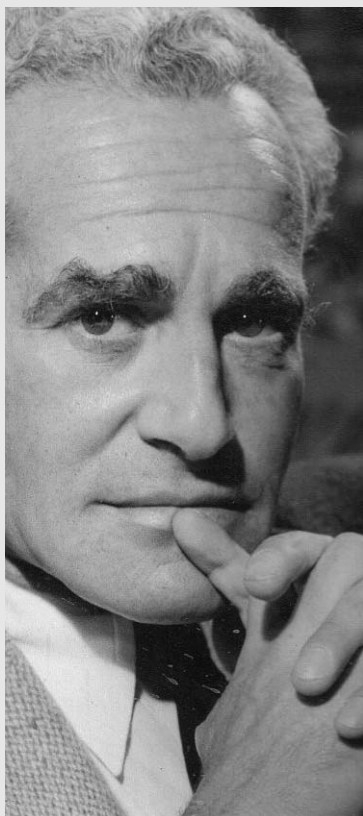
To understand how powerfully the work in its functional stage really operated, we need all the powers of historical empathy which we can muster.

A work of art was not being looked at, it was feared or loved, but nobody thought of it as a powerless object. It was a force, not a thing.

This is true for Egypt, where magic signs and pictures operate in a world of reality, not of decoration.

Every statue of the Pharaoh holds the life and power of the Pharaoh, every ritual scene in an Egyptian tomb beautifully painted by skilled artists becomes effective not as design or decoration (it was never to be seen by anybody) but as a magic reality; forty painted slaves were forty real slaves to serve the king in the future life.





HANS HESS

was born in Erfurt in 1908.

His father, Alfred, who owned Germany's second largest shoe factory, had a socialist outlook and the young Hess was educated in a series of independent progressive schools, in part because of the anti-semitism endemic in much of German state education.

Alfred was a patron of modern German art and was a founder sponsor of the Bauhaus and many of the young artists became friends of the family.

After studying in Geneva and the

Sorbonne, Hans went to the USA for a year (1928 to 1929) to learn about modern advertising and marketing, a skill he practised first in the family factory and then pursued in Paris after he had fled Nazi Germany in May 1933.

With war already looming he left Paris for London in late 1936 and, among other occasional jobs, was a Left Book Club lecturer and edited two publications – *Germany Today* and *Inside Nazi Germany* – which exposed the true nature of the fascist regime.

Interned in Canada as 'an enemy alien', he returned to England in 1943 and, after a short time as an agricultural labourer, became deputy keeper of art at the Leicester Museum moving to York as Curator of the Art Gallery in 1947.

He spent 20 years in York, where he was also artist director of the triennial Arts Festival. During this time he wrote his first monograph on Lyonel Feininger, one of the Bauhaus artists.

Having missed out on a full University education, Hess did an MA at Leeds as mature student. His subject was George Grosz, the satirical artist and a founder member of the German Communist Party, which was the basis for his second monograph.

An occasional lecturer at the newly-established University of York, he decided to change career and, in 1967, moved to Sussex as Reader in Art History. He published two volumes of collected lectures.

Art and Social Function was the last lecture that Hans Hess delivered before his death in 1975 and it was in the process of being revised for publication by his wife, Lillie Hess, when she too died, in 1976.

■ [Thanks to Anita Halpin for this biography –Ed.]

Even in classical Greece, we would make a mistake in regarding the surviving sculptures as *objets d'art*. They were gods and goddesses, or at least stood in their place. The early Christians understood this very well when they were destroying the pagan idols (those things we call now classical statuary). They knew that men feared them, because they were alive.

The prophet Jeremiah already had spoken about idols: "Be not afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither also is it in them to do good." The idol then was operative in the minds of the people, it had powers.

The concept of the function of the work of art becomes critical in Rome when, for the first time, rich Roman senators buy and collect Greek works of art as art; not as statues of gods but as status symbols and connoisseur's objects. But that was a sophisticated approach of the few.

Christianity and Art

When Christianity arose, it was faced with a problem which we can today hardly understand. The problem was how to abolish idol worship and the magic which is inherent in images, and yet create a visual art which would instruct the faithful.

At first there was no Christian art – and when it arose on the basis of classical art, it looked so much like the old idols, that a very serious section of Christendom abolished all icons.

The history of iconoclasm lies outside our subject today, but it is worth remembering that at that period a work of art still was believed to be identical with the idea.

The Christian art we know, was developed with a very subtle theological face-saving device. Each figure of a saint was not an idol any more but a symbol – true reality was spiritual – the material object was an illusion. This of course fits in well with the whole

Christian theology of otherworldliness – this life is but a shadow of the heavenly light.

The Christians wanted pictures to be instructive and revered, but not idolised. The danger was always close, and for a thousand years the Christian work of art found its idolators. A bishop of Turin, Claudius, complained: "Many folk worship images of saints. ... They have not left idols, but have changed their names."

The work of art certainly had not lost its powers, and the Church benefited from and tolerated picture worship. But in the end, the Christians, at least their theologians, achieved the separation of the message from the object and, whilst the message was decidedly not art and the object remained the sole container of the message, a separation of form and content began to dissolve the functional aspect of the work. Though in the Church the altarpiece was operative and not a work of art, some of the magic had been taken out.

If I may summarise up to this point, art had never depicted *real* things, art had always been the servant of a mythology. The artist, under the guise of real flowers, real rocks, real people, gave always a different idea, namely that of an ideal mythical world. The artist then has always been the servant of an ideology, this is even true if we leave the purely religious mythical framework of thought and come to this very world of rulers and ruled.

Not only were the rulers originally conceived as supernatural beings, but well into the modern period the artist has always found his place near the seat of worldly and spiritual power. The might of kings, the unshakeable foundations of the God-given order were his subjects, his allegories, his histories; his triumphal arches, his pyramids, temples, minsters were symbols of power and they retained much of the magic awe which is the source of art.



An altarpiece, when it was first produced, was paid for at the going rate of labour and materials. No altarpiece had a surcharge for its artistic qualities.

In the Renaissance

In the Renaissance, the concept of a work of art becomes again critical – antique statues are collected as models for art. The object develops its own, now consciously applied, aesthetics. The artist is changing his social status from a craftsman in a guild to a member of the liberal professions. He becomes a poet, a thinker, more than a mere maker of images. And he has a name under which he trades in his own right.

The artist has arrived with art, and the function has gone – *not totally*, but now the operative function descends to a mere purpose: a picture for a palace is still needed and wanted, an altarpiece is still Church furniture, but it becomes more self-conscious than its purpose demands.

I have so far tried to indicate a development in which the work of art has slowly moved from its operative, functional phase to a level where much of its power has disappeared.

Art and the 'Work of Art'

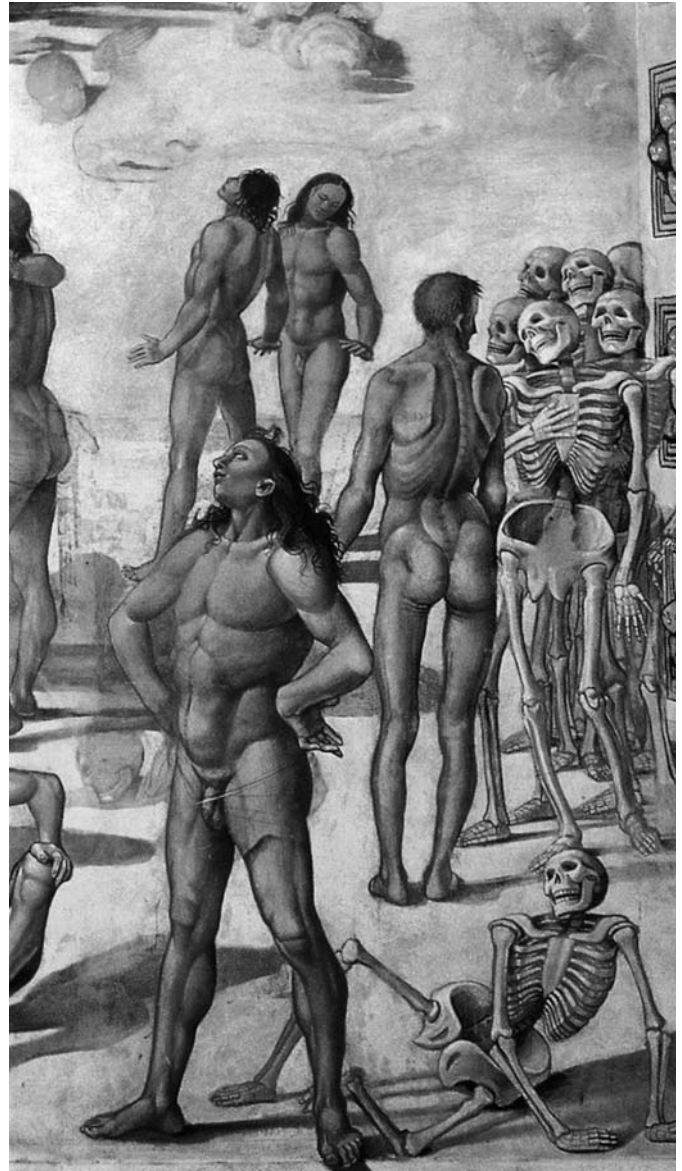
From now on we have to distinguish very clearly between the 'work of art' and Art with a capital 'A'. It is this latter assumption, that there is such a thing as Art as such, or eternal art, which has obscured the true understanding of the

'work of art'. Fortunately for the Marxist, the term 'work of art' contains the word 'work', and we all know what that is: it is labour. And in actual fact, ever since man began, every work of art was made by labour and skill. The maker was a skilled, often the most highly skilled, worker in a society and, until the Romantic bourgeois idolisation of art when the worker changes into the 'artist', he was paid according to the going rate. He charged no value added tax for his art. He got paid for his skilled work and, in truth, the word '*art*' at the time meant nothing else but skill or know-how – the sort of thing for which one still gets paid. Actually the Master got a bit more than his assistants.

Two documentary examples:

"Wednesday August 3, 1485:

"At the chapel at S Spirito seventy-eight florins fifteen soldi in payment of seventy-five gold florins in gold, paid to Sandro Botticelli on his reckoning, as follows – two florins for ultramarine, thirty-eight florins for gold and preparation of the panel, and thirty-five florins for his brush (pel suo pennello)."¹



Detail from *Resurrection of the Flesh* (1502) by Luca Signorelli, at Orvieto Cathedral

There is a precise and realistic clause in Signorelli's contract of 1499 for frescoes in Orvieto Cathedral:

"The said master Luca is bound and promises to paint (1) all the figures to be done on the said vault, and (2) especially *the faces and all the parts of the figures from the middle of each figure upwards*, and (3) that no painting should be done on it without Luca himself being present. ... And it is agreed (4) that all the mixing of colours should be done by the

said master Luca himself"²

So much then for the work of art, which fits totally with every assumption Marx ever made about social relations and the process of production. To make the distinction between the mythical concept of art and an actual work of art very clear, we must discover its inner contradictions.

A Constantly Changing Process

If we look at a coin of Hadrian or Constantine, we look at it as a work of art, a finely modeled portrait head, a very useful document for art historians, a



thing of rarity and beauty. If we look at a 50p piece, we do not think of it as a work of art because it is currency and still functions as money, but it is as much a work of art as the coin of Hadrian which was also used as money in its own day. If, however, our coin is taken out of circulation and goes to a numismatic collection in Japan, let us say, it loses its function and becomes an *objet d'art*.

The Marxist way of understanding the world is to see it as a constantly changing process. Thus a Marxist is more interested in the work of art as it operates or functions – and not in the work of art as an object. The most frequent source of the many, many false assumptions about art stems exactly from that non-Marxist approach of seeing a thing or an object in isolation. To look at a fine picture and admire it, is similar to looking at a 50p piece and meditating about the beauty of money.

Marx was interested in the circulation of money, its function in the social process, not in the beauty of a coin, though as a sensitive man he was not blind to the beauty of a coin – or any other piece of sculpture. But he did not deduce his theories of surplus value from the attractive design of a Bank of England note. He was concerned with money as it operated, with what it revealed and concealed.

The Work of Art as a Commodity

In its functional state, the work of art was produced as part of the social product of labour and not yet as a commodity – it was not for sale. The altarpiece, when it was first produced, was paid for at the going rate of labour and materials. No altarpiece had a surcharge for its artistic qualities. The Bishop paid and the contractor agreed to the type of timber and choice of colours (blue and gold being more expensive).

The point I wish to make is that when that labour was expended, the work of art

was not a commodity; it never came on to the market.

Capitalism is commodity production – that means that commodities are produced for an anonymous market – and that this new form of production is different from earlier forms when objects were made for use, when every pair of shoes was made for somebody and every picture was painted for someone or for some purpose. The maker knew what he was doing and for whom. Under capitalism, the purchaser is the last link in the chain, and the most important thing is the product, the merchandise; and Marx pointed out that in capitalism *merchandise would take on the character of a fetish*. This was truly prophetic.

Now imagine a commodity which in itself already has a fetish quality, such as a work of art – what a marvellous capitalist fetish it will make. When the work of art had finished with the function for which it had been made, it entered the market as a commodity: that new object, which had become the commodity, was 'Art'.

When we are now talking about a defunct object as 'art', we are talking about the work in its survival stage as 'art as such'.

When the work of art had lost its function and had long left the social relationship which had once determined its cost and price, its material value was nearly nil – but its 'aura' of art was enormous. The prices of pictures are determined by their prestige and status, what Walter Benjamin would call their 'aura'.³ In fact, the illusion of art is the surcharge the modern collector has to pay for. What he is buying is the myth of art. That the myth adheres to an object is coincidental; one can also buy myths totally devoid of any material substratum. I find nothing very surprising in the high prices of works of art. In a competitive society, scarcity and rarity create their own premium.

In fact, the work of art as a commodity behaves not in an extraordinary way but in a very ordinary way and, if there were as few houses as Rembrandts they would fetch even higher prices.

Everything else of scarcity is sold according to the rules – in times of famine the price of bread rises. The market of scarcity is known as the black market – a false distinction – the white market works on the same principles. But not every discarded cult object becomes later a work of art. Indeed, the assumption of what is art and what is considered art, and the way in which it is apprehended and valued, is changing and historical detritus.

Ownership of Art

We now have to consider a specifically new concept of the *ownership* of art which separates it even further from its original function. The individual collector possesses art – the National Gallery owns it for the Nation – all of which is a recognition of the most important aspect of a commodity, that it can be appropriated. This concept of ownership and appropriation includes now the vicarious participation in ownership by means of reproductions and, most personally, in the form of photographs.

The tourist has become a partial owner. He cannot acquire the object, he can only photograph it and take possession by proxy. That is what the sense of ownership in capitalism has achieved: it has made all of us vicarious co-proprietors of the work of art. This is an interesting subject to follow – the work of art in the form of its reproduction and the private ownership of the spiritual capital of the past. This has been suggested by Walter Benjamin and somewhat followed by John Berger,⁴ but a true analysis of the significance of the appropriation of the past in capitalism, in the form of a kind of material possession, still needs doing.

All of this brings us back to our starting point – the work of art had a function and, where it has lost its original function and operates as 'art' *per se*, it has adopted a function, though a changed one. It now functions as a lighthouse without any shipping to guide, but it still blinks and looks impressive in the dark.

Art for its own Sake

Apart from the problem of the work of art as a survivor, we have to think of the artist who has lost his social role but insists on going on living and painting. The moment had to come when the artist proclaimed art for its own sake, the purpose of his life. When the artist had lost his own social function, he had to invent the myth that the function of art was to be art.

What is important for our investigation is the statement, that only after the industrial revolution in England and the political revolution in France, do we find the modern artist, the artist in his role as genius.

The artist as a self-appointed genius arises exactly at the moment when society has no more demands to make on him – the whole world of spiritual values has broken down, a unified world picture held together by myths has been replaced by a rational scientific world picture, and though some artists go on painting nymphs and satyrs, Artemis and Diana, Venus, Aphrodites, Virgins and angels, they somehow do not look convincing. Yet the painting of plain, everyday reality has rarely been considered a fit subject for art. And here we have to observe a strange, one might say paradoxical, reversal. At the moment when society does not believe in myths any more, the artist, the old myth maker, invents his own, and his myth is *art* – Art with a capital 'A'. He honestly believes, and others believe it too, that Art itself can take the place of religion, and if you read the many autobiographical statements of nineteenth

century artists you will be struck by that high religious note: art as a mission, art as the salvation of mankind.

It is not surprising the artists themselves felt the need to revitalise art and give it an operational function again. We have to see the dialectics of the process contained in the work of art becoming its own contradiction. The work of art takes on a totally new character in the capitalist world we live in. In this world, 'art' is produced already in its survival stage: it is produced as 'art' and the dialectics of that process demand that the work of art looks for a function.

The Artist as Genius

We now have the total reversal of the old ideological dilemma: the artists now have to invent apologies and reasons for the continuing production of works of art and have to find an ideology which justifies the material existence of the objects. We can carry on the dialectics: the object, which once pretended to be the function, has become the function which pretends to be the object. The ideological concept of art, having made itself independent, is looking for its justification.

It lies in the view of the artist not as a maker or artisan, but as a spiritual manufacturer of high sounding, empty claims of cosmic significance. The very role he plays as a unique exponent of hidden, spiritual depths is exactly the counterpart of the capitalist entrepreneur. In the nineteenth century, the artist as genius becomes the justification for the capitalists' own claim to a superior humanity: a leader of men – the master of his destiny. The mystification of a Kandinsky declares him as a higher being, thus proving the existence of such beings with higher endowments, exactly as the owner of the means of production claims his right by his higher

endowments of a masterful personality. The artist as such becomes the paradigm of the capitalist who, in the artist, finds his own self mirrored as an apologia and justification of his own uniqueness.

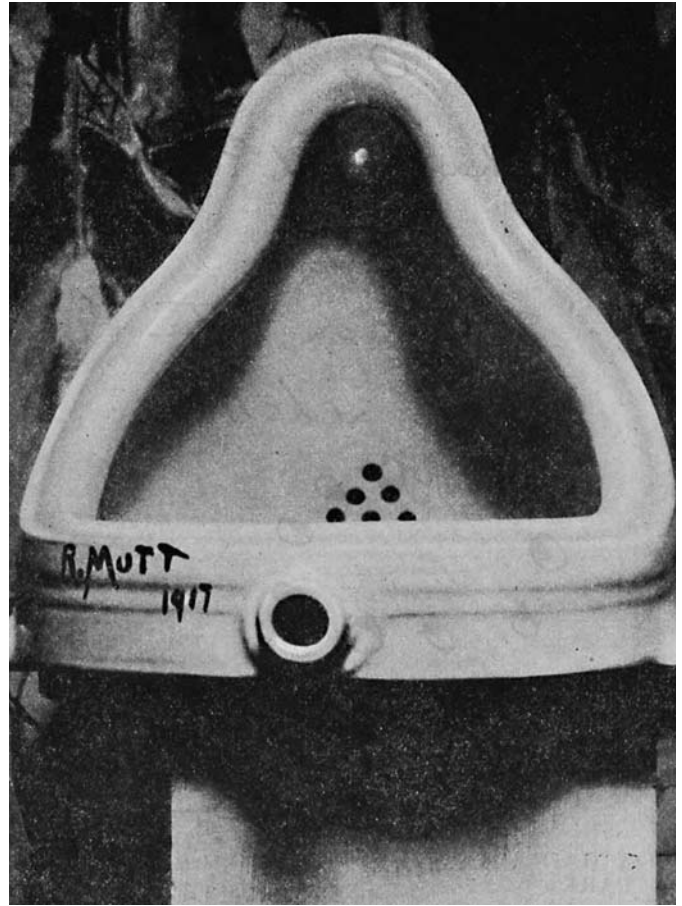
But the most radical approach comes from within the paradox. The more intelligent and 'revolutionary' artists intended the work of art itself to function in society as an operative element of controversy and action. This movement takes the work of art out of its existing artistic context and places it in confrontation with politics and prejudice, including artistic prejudice.

Dada was one such step. The happening, the event, the total environment are other such steps where artistic activity, as opposed to the artistic *object*, is the exercise and the product itself becomes meaningless.

Dialectics in the History of Artistic Products

There is thus a dialectics in the history of the artistic product. When it was functioning, it was not art – when it had become art, it was not functioning – and now, the functioning of the object is intended to produce art as a function.

Duchamp is neither a fraud nor necessarily an artist. He is, however, a philosopher and what he has done is to answer the question: "Where is Art?" Duchamp has taken a useful object out of its functional setting and placed it on a pedestal in an art gallery, where the aesthetic expectation operates and not the functional. What was once a useful lavabo becomes an object in pure white with beautiful lines.⁷ It begins to operate as art thanks to Duchamp's joke, playing on the spectator's artistic expectations. Duchamp changed the terms of reference. He did not turn non-art into art – he only



Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*

proved that there is no art until you get someone looking for it. That joke has killed the idea of art as creation stone dead.

The complication of our enquiry lies, I think, in the fact that, on the one hand, the work of art had a function which never attached it solely to the world of production, and that, on the other hand, it has never wholly belonged to the world of self-enfranchised philosophers, poets and priests. In fact, the work of art has fulfilled a dual role, belonging neither wholly to one nor the other side in social life, but has mediated the thoughts of the ruling ideology to the productive multitudes, and has been received – like their gods and their rulers – as a symbol of truth and continuity. In fact, it has been an essential agent of ideological conservation.

But we must realise that the beauty of works of art was part of their armoury, that the

appeal to the eyes and all the senses made them attractive and compelling. They used their beauty as a weapon of seduction, and we still like being seduced.

What I hope I have made clear is that we ought neither to praise nor to admire all works of art because they are so well made or so beautiful: we ought also to judge the function and the purpose which they served. Of course, you can admire Versailles, but do not forget the cost. And by cost I mean other people's labour which made it possible.

The visual arts formalise and preserve forms of thought, and it is that symbolic representation of thought which gives to the work the power which, to us, appears eternal, though it is only human. But that exactly is its greatness – at least for a Marxist – that man alone, unaided by divinity, can achieve his own realisation in a work of his own making.



II: ARTISTS AND WORKERS IN ART

It has always been the aim of the bourgeoisie to generalise its own assumptions – that is exactly what Marx defined as ‘ideology’. In the field of art, the bourgeoisie has been singularly successful. The bourgeoisie’s own concept of art, as a great, profound, unique, spiritual experience for the spectator and an act of individual creation of the artist as genius, has been accepted almost without doubt or contradiction by the petty bourgeoisie and by large sections of the working class as well.

The Bourgeois Concept of Art

The concept of art as an act of creation – the very words arouse suspicions in the mind of a materialist – has of course been happily swallowed by artists and intellectuals. To them, it is the most flattering assumption that they are amongst the elect and unique – all the rest are the masses, or at best, the public.

The illusion of creativity out of nothing pleases the capitalist entrepreneur, and the concept of the uniquely endowed individual creator corresponds to his own claims and serves as a happy and hallowed model for his own masterful personality, which gives him not only the right to lead and exploit men, but strengthens his pretence that he is the true creator of wealth and prosperity.

This is one reason why a true understanding of the ideological concept of art as creation, as opposed to art as work, is of the greatest importance not just in the world of art and artists, but in the actual political struggle. To deprive the bourgeoisie not necessarily of its art, but of its *concept of art*, is the precondition of a revolutionary argument.

Since the Renaissance, the artist has quite deliberately set himself apart from the process of social production. He has

tried, successfully, to ‘advance’ socially into the separate class of priests, writers, poets, lawyers; people who sell their mental or spiritual abilities, for which the ruling class has always paid more than for manual labour. Why? Because the ruling class has always known that the mind – or consciousness – of the masses has to be directed, and that its writers and priests were worth their weight in gold.

The artist, when he had ceased to be a craftsman or worker, became a courtier or a high priest. He became, I regret to have to use a harsh word, ‘a lackey of the bourgeoisie’. He had no choice, because the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas and he, the writer, the artist, etc, was the maker of the ideas. The artist and his employer, then, were united in their interest to promote the idea of Art as an act of creation, and the work of art as the *result of divine* inspiration.

Poets were kissed by the Muses, artists saw visions, and eventually the artist took the place of the seer and priest. What went out of art was work, and the cult of inspiration was to lead as far as invisibility. The ultimate truth, Kandinsky claims, is that art is too refined to be seen by ordinary eyes. We thus have reached an odd point, you might call it a dialectical break, when the artist separates himself from the work and lives a fantasy life of pure inspiration.

Division of Labour

The idea of the division of labour plays a big part in Marx’s thinking. He understands the historical development and necessity for such a division of labour, but he deplors it not only because it has created that seemingly unbridgeable gulf between manual and mental labour – and the additional danger that mental labour makes itself

independent, or seemingly independent, from social productive reality – but also and mainly because it splits man’s potential unity into two separate parts: manual workers are deprived of mental activity and intellectuals are deprived of manual skills.

The man of the future is man in a new society which has overcome the alienation of man from his true essence – an old-fashioned word still used by the young Marx. What he means is man’s many potential powers; those of the whole man. Man of the future will not any more be a specialist, but a complete and conscious human being.

Marx’s unforgivable sin in the eyes of those charlatans who, under the name of priests or poets, lawyers and artists, had been propagating the concepts of eternal truths, was that he found that such eternal truths seemed always to correspond to the ideas of those for whose benefit they were hawked in the market place.

Myth-Making

In capitalist society, we live in a world of production for production’s and profit’s sake.

Open any glossy magazine and you will see merchandise as a fetish—and we can truly say that the product of the machine has become the cult image of our society. Where then should we expect to find the artist in our society? We would look for him, as before, where the myths are being made – and there in fact he is. The artist now lives in advertising agencies, in the dream factories of the industrial society. If I wanted to make a bad pun I could say, “*The goods have become the Gods*”, and the artist goes on serving them.

The question is not whether these are good artists or bad artists – the question is that *there* they are continuing in their traditional role, and there they are at home, useful, well paid, and no more esteemed than the traditional craftsman sculptor on a Gothic cathedral – and just as anonymous in their social function.

The copywriters, the layout-men, the depth-psychologists and public relations officer have taken over from the artist and the priest – they create the images in which men picture their aspirations, and the very words “we must project a new image” show how conscious they are of their function.

I would like to add that the mythical quality, not only of advertising but of the product itself in what is called industrial design, should not be underrated – even in the purely practical products a whole mythology is built in. A flat-iron consists of three essentials: the *flat-iron*, which is all that really matters, the electric wiring, which is the job one hopes of a competent electrical engineer, and the rest is pure mythology. Its aura of splendour, modernism, are all phoney – its streamlined quality matters not at all. I still remember an old story from the *New Yorker* about “streamlined” cinema seating with the editor’s comment that the seats would offer 34½ per cent less wind resistance if they were going anywhere. I need not enlarge on functional architecture, of which the main function is the old one of myth making – the power of the insurance companies is expressed with the same awe-inspiring pomposity as the power of the Pharaohs in their pyramids.

As Marx has said in *Capital*:

“This power of Asiatic and Egyptian kings, Etruscan theocrats, &c., has in modern society been transferred to the capitalist, whether he be an isolated, or as in joint-stock companies, a collective capitalist.”⁶

The true function of the artist as a mythmaker has been retained in advertising, architecture, and industrial design.

So far I have given one answer, that the artist has to a surprising degree retained his

old function in the industrial society. But I am afraid the modern self-conscious, self-styled artist would not agree with my definition of the part which I have ascribed to the artist. We then have to look at the artist himself – and here again we shall have first of all to separate the myth from the reality.

The modern artist lives in accordance with the myths which he himself has created, the myth of the autonomy of art – of the work of art as a unique and wholly personal creation of a unique individual. He has ever since the nineteenth century taken self-consciously a position outside the framework of organised bourgeois society, and if this position is not only self-elected but also socially imposed, he has consciously and proudly accepted it.

In this he reflects of course the great modern myth, that of the freedom and the uniqueness of the individual and the right of each person to do in freedom what he pleases. The modern creative artist actually despises those who sell their gifts and their personality to the demands of commercialism. But the independent artist fools himself about his own part in the game.

He thinks of himself as an independent genius, but he is only a tool in that greater social machinery which owns and controls him.

The painter still owns his means of production – paint, brushes and canvas are comparatively cheap – but writers, actors, film-makers, depend wholly on large capitalist organisations for the production and distribution of their work. If he does not know that, the artist lives in a fool's paradise. But not all of them are fools, and very few could mistake their condition for paradise.

But this very question of the ownership of the means of production brings us to the point that the artist as a person is really a survival from a pre-



capitalist mode of production. Actually, only those who still make their art by hand in the studio are called artists; all others – printers, film technicians – are called workers. We really call art only the original handcrafted work, and this should make us pause and think.

The philosophy of personal freedom in a highly organised social reality has created that peculiar conflict between self and society. This then explains the art and activity of responsible individual artists who assert – often in an incomprehensible way – their uniqueness. In fact, their very incomprehensibility is the cloak for that mystery of the unique self.

We then see that Marx was right when he stated that the modes of production determine man's ideas, and the famous paradox of capitalism is exactly the social nature of the work with the retention of the principle of individual appropriation – the conflict between private ownership and the highly social character of the forms of production.

Creativity

Marx frequently talks about "creativity", not in the modern somewhat phoney sense of 'self expression', but in a much more profound sense: that man's creativity is what has made the world of history; that man, not God, is the creator.

Creativity for Marx is the self-realisation of man. His accusation against class society is that there, a small minority

deprives the majority of realising their human potential.

Creativity for Marx is not just imagination and the creation of works of art. To him, it includes all the gifts of labour in every form of production. How those productive forces of labour are employed, whether they serve the interest of the actual producers or those of the exploiters of human labour and human creativity, are the questions Marx poses at every turn in his writing.

And at every turn, he poses the revolutionary question of the transformation of capitalist society into that future society where man will, for the first time in his long history, be in the full possession of his human powers.

To achieve this end, the work of art as a weapon of the new ideological struggle has its place, and a very important place. We may not always find the new forms for the new content, but that too is part of the struggle—and the power of the artistic form was never underrated by Marx himself.

There is a sentence by Marx which is often overlooked and may come as a surprise. When discussing the many possible forms of publishing *Capital*, he insisted that Volume 1 was in itself an artistic whole. The interesting thing is that Marx, who was not only a good writer in the literary sense, was fully aware that form is an essential expression of content and that the content, however correct and interesting, will not live

long if it is not shaped artistically.

Whilst it may not be easy to see the artistic form of *Capital*, I think it is very easy to see the artistic quality of the *Communist Manifesto*. Again, it is not only the forceful and beautiful language, it is the build and the shape which has made it a classic. Had it been only a dry and correct statement of Marx's and Engel's views, it could not have had the powerful life which it still holds. In fact, the aesthetic qualities of the *Manifesto*, its beauty as a full expression of its meaning, have given it its sweeping revolutionary force, as much as the correct analysis itself.

There is, I suggest, a great lesson to learn – a lesson for all writers, particularly those of quite ordinary placards, pamphlets and slogans – and that lesson is that it is not enough that our slogans be correct, they must also be expressed in a memorable and beautiful form, to give them life and make them active.⁷

If Party workers devote some time and thought, some taste and feeling to both the correct content and the best form, we shall have advanced not only artistically but politically as well.

■ Based on two papers given by Hans Hess to the specialist course in art and design at the sixth Communist University of London in July 1974, and first published, posthumously, in *Marxism Today*, August 1976, pp 245-252.

Notes and References

1 Quoted in M Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Oxford, 1972, pp 16-17.

2 *Ibid*, p 23.

3 See Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, London, 1970.

4 Benjamin *op cit*; J Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London, 1972.

5 In 1917, Duchamp submitted a urinal, entitled *Fountain* and signed "R Mutt", for exhibition in the first annual show of the Society of

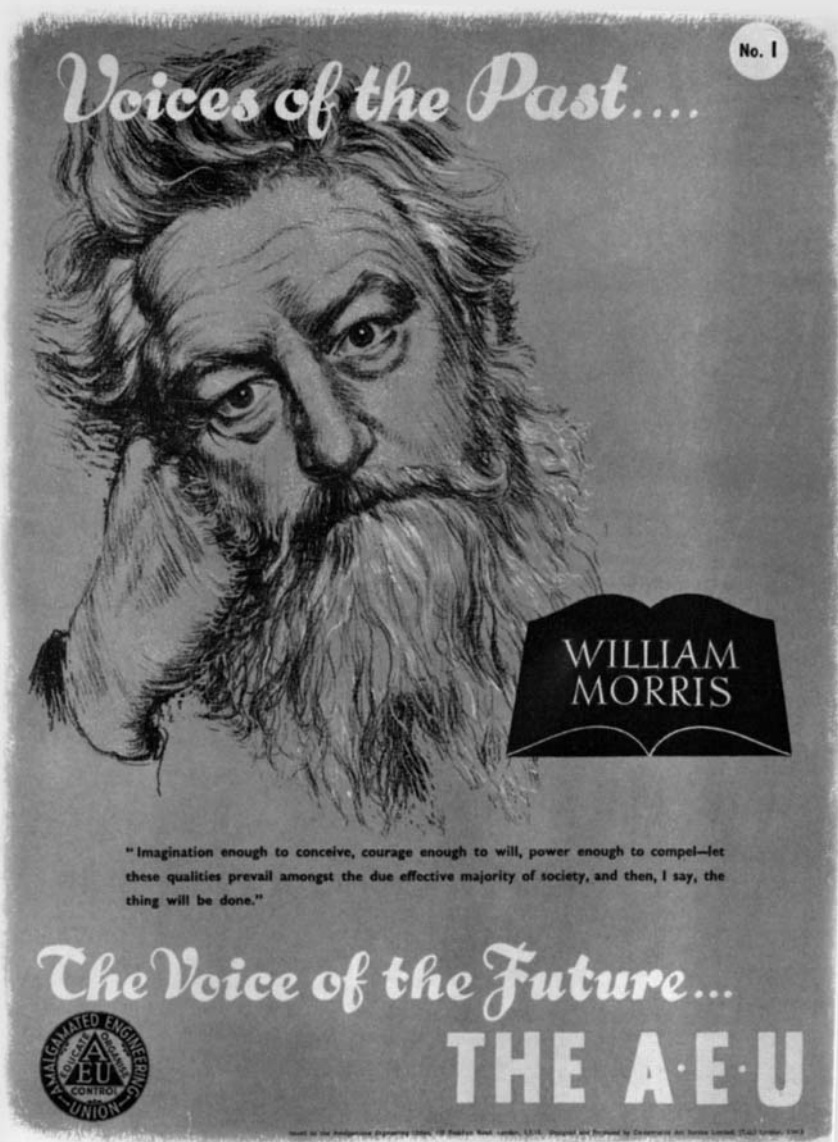
Independent Artists in New York. 6 K Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, Ch 13; in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 35, p 339, and online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch13.htm> –Ed.

7 Hans Hess's son-in-law, Kevin Halpin, recalls that, in the last conversation he had with him – the night before he died – Hans had been very critical of the slogan used in the Common Market referendum at that time. A lesson for today? –Ed.

William Morris

The Search for Useful Work, Not Useless Toil

By Phil Katz



In his article in CR60, Jimmy Jancovich¹ effectively runs the rule back and forward between the 19th and 21st centuries, to analyse continuity and the all-important discontinuities in the development of capitalism in Britain. In particular he isolates the suffocating impact of finance capital and of reversion to authoritarianism, which he asserts, brings us full circle back to the early 19th century. At the beginning and end of his article, Jimmy refers to the important English Marxist William Morris. It is the thinking and special contribution made by Morris, on questions of work, skill and machinery, that I want to develop.

The Real Morris Revealed

Readers of *CR* may not be aware of the importance of Morris to pre-war British socialism. At the centenary of his birth in 1934, celebrated as far away as Tokyo and Chicago, the British Government established a committee under Stanley Baldwin, scourge of the miners, to celebrate all aspects of the life and achievement of Morris – whilst filleting out his avowed communism. The Communist Party responded by establishing its own committee and set about holding commemorative meetings and producing a book by Robin Page Arnot.² Morris remains a national treasure and the most ‘googled’ designer of the modern age. Because of the intervention of the likes of Page Arnot, all aficionados of Morris have to engage with his achievements, as a designer, in the context of his politics.

So to begin, let us set aside any notion of Morris as a designer of suburban living rooms and advocate of the ‘quaint’, ‘small is good’ or anti-industrialism. Of capitalism Morris wrote:³

“What shall I say concerning its mastery of and its waste of mechanical power, its commonwealth so poor, its enemies of commonwealth so rich, its stupendous organization – for the misery of life! Its contempt of simple pleasures which everyone could enjoy but for its folly? Its eyeless vulgarity, which has destroyed art, the one certain solace of labour?”

What is Really Happening to ‘Skill’?

In his article, Jimmy states that capitalism has led to “the trend of completely replacing and deskilling workers by automated processes, which has been an increasing feature of industrial development in the last half century.” And further on, he adds that “The whole trend for the last quarter-century has been towards deskilling labour, abandoning apprenticeship schemes, reducing educational standards”.

I think that this formulation is not right. Indeed in many ways the opposite is happening. Morris is often accused of holding a similar view – *de facto*, that capitalism leads to deskilling because of its fixation with machinery and automation. But in fact he held a quite different view. Morris had no fear of machinery *per se*. As we shall see later on, he advocated its extensive use

to do away with backbreaking work. Morris’s concern was with monopoly ownership and how this distorted the use to which machinery was put. He certainly used the best and most up to date machinery in his own Morris & Co workshops. He wrote, “Our epoch has invented machines that would have appeared wild dreams to the men of past ages, and of those machines we have as yet, *made no use*.”⁴

Machinery and the Workers

Marx said that machines were the power of knowledge objectified.⁵ If this is so, the question of ‘deskilling’ becomes more complex than the straight up-and-down route posed by Jimmy. How can machines be at once the product of knowledge and lead to its undoing? Morris answered this by demonstrating a dual character to machinery. On the one hand it embodies labour. Yet it replaced labour in a destructive and unplanned way. On the other it was capable of being used to free up time to expand the social dimension of work and beyond.

Morris concluded that the machine would only find a harmonious role in society when those who had no interest in exploiting it, or themselves, owned it. Yet, as the use of machinery expanded under capitalism, the class that benefited through ownership contracted.

Marx went further:

“Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electronic telegraphs, self-acting mules. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are organs of the human brain, created by the human hand.”⁵

The machine at once heralds a threat to the worker as well as illustrating “to what degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*”.⁵

Much of Morris’s analysis of capitalism ran parallel to that of Marx and bears uncanny similarities. Both drew on similar historical traditions and thought. Both were keen observers of detailed labour processes. And, of course, Morris emerged as a master of a broad variety of craft forms, from ink- and furniture-making to weaving, printing and writing poetry. So he was well placed to understand the interrelationship of theory and practice that goes into making things.

The Roots of Morris’s Critique of Capitalism

At first sight the reference points Morris used to analyse capitalism appear unorthodox. These included the Renaissance, the guilds, the life of workers in the Middle Ages, an understanding of alienation and his fact-finding visits to Iceland – which he visited twice, learning the language and becoming a master of the translation and interpretation of its sagas. In Iceland he found a land which, as late as the 1880s, was classless, still practicing primitive communism, and where the struggle for survival with nature was still paramount.

Morris included amongst his influences the French utopian socialist Fourier, Robert Owen and John Ruskin. He struggled to transcend each of these. He concluded that labour had to be “free from all compulsion except the compulsion of nature.”⁶ By the 1880s he had caught up with Marx and become a confidante of Engels. Indeed he was later one of the very few outside Germany to whom Engels entrusted sight of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.⁷

Morris shared with Marx a keen interest in the Renaissance, which led him to conceive of a new kind of human capable, through training, of practising a wide variety of skills and of shouldering the freedom brought about with the socialisation of production. Such people, once free of the pressure of capitalism, could carry the responsibility of building a society based on cooperation.

Morris’s study of worker life in the Middle Ages⁸ provided him with an insight into the life which predated the now seemingly omnipresent capitalist system. He looked upon the early guilds as combinations of skilled and independent workers – prototype unions, which sought control over skill and product and acted as a means of passing on ‘deep knowledge’ about crafts across the generations. Guilds used to control the numbers employed at a trade and used their power over training, and their definition of what constituted craft, to control the supply of skilled labour. They set the pace of labour and rates of pay and policed the price and quality of what the guild member produced. They provided welfare and security to members and, when independent liberty was threatened – as during the Peasant’s Revolt or in London during the Civil War – they took up arms to defend it. In Italy and in the Low Countries, guilds had



exercised sovereign and republican government, which was highly democratic for its time – indeed, it is likely that Morris's study of 13th century Florence led him to the conclusion that communism would be based on a "Federation of Independent Communities".⁶

The guilds tried to hold back time: for example, a merchant was disallowed from purchasing raw materials *and* employing labour. These controls became a fetter, and a group of the wealthy – capitalists – accelerated the growth of factory production so they could deploy labour power in a new way and outside the regimentation imposed by the guilds. By the time Morris was born this process was accelerating.

Morris revealed a different balance between humans and nature, different ways of working in common and a direct, local and historical democratic culture with supporting institutions. He saw more 'meat on the table', when prices of basic foodstuffs were fixed for a hundred years, and more for ordinary people. The craft worker of these times more or less controlled the pace and space of work and owned his own means of production. He was a master of craft rather than a master of men.

Alienation

Morris concluded that capitalism relied upon increased control over and regimentation of labour because it was alien to human nature and therefore had to be imposed. If humans could choose how to survive it would be based on cooperation, producing to meet needs with products of the highest quality that workers might be capable of turning out. He counterposed capitalism, which he called a "false" society, against socialism, which was a "true" society.⁹

Morris said that he hated the 'civilisation' of the Victorian period,³ by which he meant industrial capitalism. Workers then were being sucked into "the vortex of commercialism" and herded in factories he said were "soulless", when they should be "palaces of industry."¹⁰ This view was not new. Adam Ferguson in 1765 had written:¹¹

"Manufactures ... prosper where the mind is least consulted, and where the workshop may, without any great effort of imagination, be considered as an engine, the parts of which are men We make a nation of helots, and have no free citizens"

Marx, quoting Fourier, called factories "tempered bagnos."¹² A bagno was a thumbscrew used as a weapon of torture by the Inquisition.

Factory production was based on the alienation of workers, with each at once separated from controlling the means of production, and reduced to being a bit-part player in production processes. Mental and manual labour were divided, as were art and science, town and countryside, with worker set against worker in competition where the prize could be no more than mere survival. As Ruskin famously asked, "If labour is divided, how much more so is the worker divided within himself?"¹³

It was in alienation that Morris saw the deskilling of labour. He knew that the way to the liberation of workers was through the creation of alternative ways of organising work – in a way which put the worker back in charge of their own labour power and ownership of the means of production.

Machinery – Potential and Threat

In the early 19th century, first across Europe, and then in America, international standardisation of weights and measurement of distances ensured that machines could emerge to play a major role in manufacture and beyond. Machines began to be introduced in the mid-19th century with levels of accuracy and speed that were beyond the dreams of previous generations. And they were having an immediate impact. The mass media for example began in this period, when Koenig and Bauer introduced at *The Times* a steam-driven printing press, which could impose 1,100 pages an hour. Previously the norm was 100.¹⁴

The biggest impact came with the replacement of horse-drawn traffic by the train. As the century unfolded, the impact of the application of steam and then electricity to machines, from the smallest hand-held domestic implement such as the iron to the largest hammering or boring machine, changed the nature of production forever. Some machines advanced the quality of life, alongside others, such as power looms used in cotton production, which had a quite different impact. The power loom shifted production from home to factory – and in the process changed the demography and industrial landscape of Britain forever.

Morris looked upon machinery in much the same way as did Marx, who wrote in *Capital* that

"all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil".¹⁵

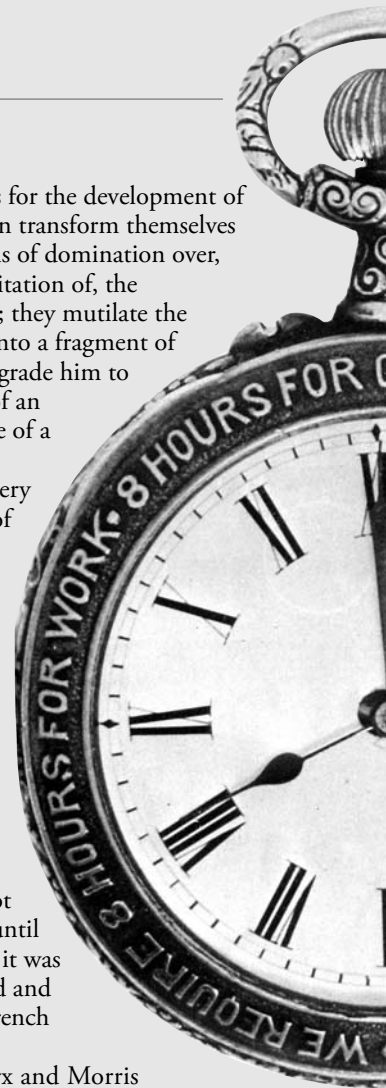
The similarity of outlook is all the more remarkable as Morris did not read *Capital* until 15 years after it was first published and then in the French edition.¹⁶

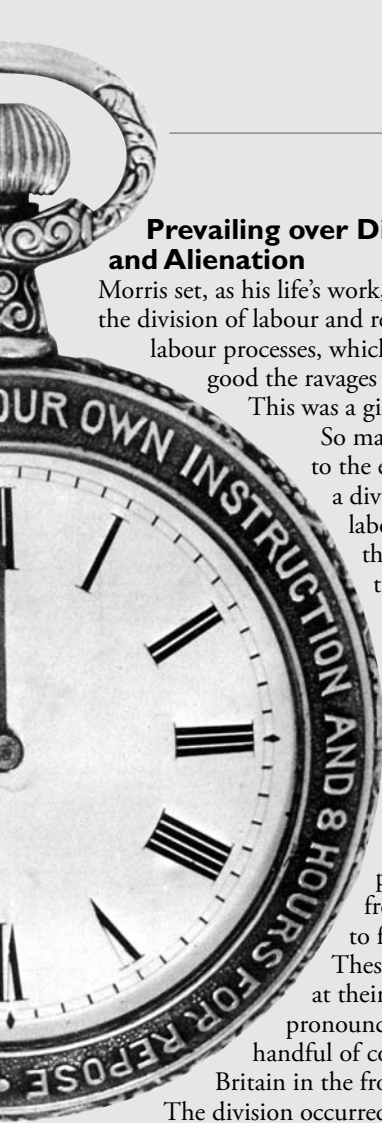
Both Marx and Morris acknowledged that the introduction of machinery led to a massive increase in the productiveness of labour. Machines went beyond human physical limitations and so ended up displacing workers. They also ended up lengthening the machine-minder's day. Machines were being invented on an extensive scale. But only those that led to greater profit for the owner were brought into production.

So much changed during Morris's lifetime. Even labour-replacing machines led to re-skilling and in many cases up-skilling and the creation of entire new productive categories of work.

All these factors together – the Renaissance, a detailed appreciation of the guilds, the Middle Ages, an understanding of the impact of the division of labour and machinery (theoretical and practical) and the study of Iceland – ensured that his critique of capitalism was not bound by it.

Morris was able to draw on non-capitalistic sources to describe a view of life beyond a world where profit invaded every aspect of life. Readers of his *News from Nowhere* – still in print after 121 years – will readily know what I am describing. If you have not read a copy, grab one. When these factors were allied to Marx's *Capital*, a richly mixed critique emerged.





Prevailing over Division and Alienation

Morris set, as his life's work, overcoming the division of labour and reconstructing labour processes, which would make good the ravages of alienation.

This was a giant task.

So many factors led to the emergence of a division of labour – from the extension of trade and production, for exchange rather than for use, to the introduction of steam energy and the shift of production from home to factory.

These factors were at their most pronounced in only a handful of countries, with Britain in the front rank.

The division occurred not just in manufacture but also in all aspects of productive life from seafaring to agriculture. It reshaped even the structure of families and communities. And to all it appeared as if the division of labour was the only way humans could become productive enough to satisfy ever-increasing wants.

Even those such as Adam Smith, who accepted the need for such division of labour, feared for its impact on the intellect. He argued for a compulsory and national state system of education to offset the effects.¹⁷ In the rush for profit, few stopped to ask if all that was being produced was necessary, or of the kind of quality required. Morris did both and asked very awkward questions about sustainability too.

Morris understood that there was little use exchanging the rule of capitalists with one by workers if the content of work remained the same. He sought ways of producing so that “we should be the masters of our machines and not their slaves, as we are now.”¹⁸

He thought that individuals could train to master a range of skills, which could be employed throughout a lifetime. Every worker would be encouraged to master not just a small part of a job but complete processes – perhaps as many as three crafts in a lifetime.

Each worker should be educated,

encouraged and given space to experiment. He thought people should be enabled to seek out work best suited to their talents, rather than let work define them.

One might choose to work in a factory in the winter, on the land in summer, doing ‘brain’ work one month, physical or manual work another. But capitalism could provide no such choice.

Putting Art Back in to Work

All of his public agitation (he spoke at hundreds of meetings a year in the 1880s) focused on winning space back from the exploiters so that workers could focus on producing ‘products’ to the highest level their skills would allow. The aim was to make work a pleasurable and rewarding pursuit. Workers would be working because they wanted to, at things they thought important, for the community. All were potentially artists. Producers of high quality goods could exchange products with others, directly and not through the medium of exchange for profit. Morris thought that such exchange could be organised between producers rather than through the state:

“Men have at all times more or less striven to beautify the familiar matters of everyday life”, he wrote. Without a quest for art in labour, he said, “our rest would be vacant and uninteresting, our labour mere endurance, mere wearing away of body and mind.”¹⁹

Marx went further. The division of labour “converts the labourer into a crippled monstrosity, by forcing his detailed dexterity at the expense of a world of productive capabilities and instincts.”²⁰ The great English architect and historian William Lethaby wrote provocatively, “Art is the humanity put into workmanship, the rest is slavery.”²¹

Under capitalism a worker is expected to work harder and faster to increase profit. Indeed this is the principal measure of his capability – whereas what society really needs are workers who can work *better*, turning out higher quality products for use. In a “true” society, Morris argued, that part of the ‘reward’ – of improved quality of life – would come through the labour itself rather than increased remuneration. Under socialism, workers would be better rewarded for effort by the allocation to them of greater space to think and build community, rather than by a thicker wage packet. In Victorian Britain

Morris’s schema caused a storm.

It challenged the country to think about what really constituted a useful job: which was more important – bridge builder or stock-jobber?

Ingredients Essential to Work

So, in opposition to alienation and the division of labour, Morris sought out new ways to produce. The aim was to overcome the division between mental and manual labour so that theory and practice could be united. He was much concerned that the differences between town and countryside were eroded in a way that redefined the relationship between humans and nature. He asserted that the use of machinery would play a major role in this.

He sought to introduce into a schema of useful work:

- time so that the worker and community set the pace of labour;
- space to experiment and grow knowledge to allow art back in to production;
- a sense of history, combination and purpose;
- an understanding of nature;
- education, which was much more than ‘training on the job’;
- no fear of using initiative or expressing creativity;
- freedom from undue pressure and compulsion.

He thought that workers were being dealt automation when they were mature enough to handle autonomy. If the above could be achieved, freedom would be restored and “false” society would be made “true”. We have much to learn from his approach.

No Unbroken Path of Decline

Morris saw not a single or unbroken descent to deskilling but a constant process of breaking and remaking skill. This process exists in a destructive way under capitalism; unplanned and focused solely on making profit, with little care for the impact on communities. But skills would be broken and remade under socialism too, only in a planned way, with the contribution of each skill judged according to its value to society.

He noted too the struggle of workers, through their unions, to lay hold of skill and – wherever they emerged strong enough – to wrest some control of it away from capitalism. The struggle over skill was one of the hardy perennials of the class war. For this reason Morris became a strong public supporter of the



struggle for an eight-hour day (eight hours work, eight hours rest and eight hours for the pursuit of knowledge), which rescued worker time from exploitation. He was a supporter of protective legislation even though the impact of laws – in his time, to restrict child labour in mines and cotton mills or night work for females – resulted in a mass culling of jobs and its replacement by machines. Machines could be worked to death without fear of Factory Inspector investigation.

Morris saw the importance of trade unions in defining and protecting skill and in passing it on through the generations. For this reason he was a great advocate of apprenticeship. He employed apprentices at his own company, where they were given real responsibility; and in March 1882, at a Government Commission on Technical Education, Morris emerged as an authority on the transmission of knowledge between generations. In his submission he advocated the extension of regional technical instruction supported by free evening classes and the establishment of a network of museums where students could learn drawing based on an appreciation of the masters of Greece, Rome and the Renaissance.

Set Industry the Right Way Up

Morris developed a significant body of work, which some on the left and all on the right pillory as ‘utopian’. Yet his works such as *Monopoly – How Labour is Robbed*, *A Factory As It Might Be* and the brilliant *Useful Work Versus Useless Toil* contain detailed and searing criticism of the labour process, relations of production and the condition in which people were being forced to work under capitalism. Morris did not want to do away with industrialism – he simply wanted it to develop in a different direction outside the distorting clutches of capital.

Morris was no enemy of the machine. Nor did he see in them *de facto* a force for deskilling. He argued they should be used to free up labour time for other pursuits rather than displace labour. He thought they would take the ‘backbreaking’ out of work and therefore extend a workers’ lifespan. He thought that they could multiply the physical power of the labourer and greatly increase output, thus saving human energy and increasing leisure time.²²

But he was clear that, in the hands of capitalism, the extensive use of machinery would result in overproduction of substandard

commodities that people would have to be seduced into buying because they were cheap, or forced into buying because there was no alternative superior quality product on offer at a price that could be deemed affordable. That is why he went to war against ‘civilisation’.

Does Capitalism Simply Deskill?

Nowadays commentators often associate deskilling with the introduction of machinery. But this is a one-dimensional view. Morris looked upon machines as an opportunity as well as a threat. On the one hand, they were used to shake out and discipline labour. For example, in the period covered in Jimmy’s article the steam-powered thresher was replacing the hand flail and reducing the time required to harvest an acre of wheat by over 80%. Each water-driven thresher replaced 40 labourers and did not stop for tea breaks. Between 1790 and 1890, the numbers employed in agriculture (which accounted for 45% of Gross National Product) dropped from 55% of the population to single figures.

The 19th century was in many ways the century of engineering. Mass production based on automated machinery became a force in metalworking after 1900. Before then the metal trades were a mass of small, differentiated and localised companies – in some cases, like chain-making, still based in the home – with a few giant companies in industries such as shipbuilding. There emerged machines that could pull, cut, grind or turn mechanically (usually mimicking human hand movement) and they could be combined to produce vast quantities of commodities.

But the repetition and predictability of machines also allowed workers to organise along common lines of identity and to establish benchmark terms, conditions and rates of pay throughout Britain. Because of this they were strengthened in relation to the employer. Out of this, many local craft societies could come together to form a single national and united union.

For the rising industrial capitalists, the lathe became the machine of first resort. But in turn, their operators became the core of an engineering union, which for a hundred years was consistently at the forefront of labour movement thinking, action and organisational innovation. This is the union, which took the slogan “Educate, Agitate and Organise” and turned it to one of “Educate, Agitate and Control”.

Supplementing or Supplanting Skill?

Were these lathe workers simply deskilled blacksmiths or agricultural metal workers from a left-behind age? Did the introduction of machine skills to replace, but in many instances also to supplement, hand-skills make brainwork any less? Jimmy states, “There is ... a fundamental difference between increasing labour productivity and skill or product quality by introducing machinery, and the trend of completely replacing and deskilling workers by automated processes, which has been an increasing feature of industrial developments in the last half century.”

But this too is only part of the story. There are now more skilled workers than ever in Britain. And there are entire new sectors of skill that have emerged in the period to which Jimmy refers – and since – which require the application of machinery. The health service comes to mind, as do digital electronics, energy production and food processing. Indeed current predictions are that there will be as few as 600,000 unskilled jobs in Britain by 2020. This may or may not be so, we shall see. But it is true that it is the proportion within the workforce of unskilled jobs which is declining, not the number of skilled.

Few jobs today do not require the computer. This is just another machine, and in the modern age machines have become essential. It is difficult to conceive of engineering metals or plastics, to the levels of precision required, by human hand and eye – it is impossible. So our socialist perspective has to embrace machinery and use it rather than seek to stop the clock. In the 1880s and 1980s and again now, it is capitalists that put workers out of work, not machines.

Yes, precision surgical instrument making, clockmaking, bookbinding and letterpress printing have all but disappeared over the last 50 years in Britain, and the numbers involved in car making or heavy engineering have declined. But the educational level of most workers is the highest yet attained; and most of us in employment use machinery in the everyday process of making and doing things. This is true of construction, civil engineering, energy and utilities, textiles, chemicals, printing and papermaking, agriculture, food production and general engineering.

Steelmaking and glassmaking employ fewer workers than 100 years ago; but those remaining utilise greater skill, greater responsibility, more complex team

working and collaboration; and use much more complex and accurate machinery, turning out a wider variety of products, than even a quarter century ago. Numbers may decline but those left, if so minded, can be an even more potent force in the class struggle.

Facts on the Ground

A while ago I visited a papermaking plant in Kent, which had won the contract to make tracing paper for architects in the Chinese construction sector – a really big order. The machine to make this paper, costing many millions of pounds, was operated by a team of just a dozen highly skilled paper workers with no senior managers and certainly no capitalists present on site. This – indeed so much of industry throughout Britain today – illustrates what Marxists always said: that capitalists need workers more than workers need capitalists.

Is papermaking or print work less skilled than 50 years ago? I believe the answer has to be no. In the case of printing, there has been more change in the last 25 years than in the past 500. The workforce is smaller but it has adapted by staying ahead of the technology rather than succumbing to it. And whilst it is true that there are

pockets of educational underachievement – which the government does nothing about – it is simply wrong to talk of a general decline in education standards. In so many ways workers are more intelligent, more combative and more than ever are turning out discoveries that potentially revolutionise our lives. Yet unless such breakthroughs produce profit they are all too often blocked from use.

Socialism Requires Skill and Education

The nature and character of ‘skill’ and ‘work’ will be amongst the big issues of the 21st Century, right up there with ‘food’ and ‘water’ and ‘sustainability’ and there is much we can gain from Morris to help us shape a socialist approach to these fundamentals. The fact that Morris located skill, work and art so close to a concern for nature and the environment is a big plus. Prophetically, Morris wrote of the need “to impress on workers the fact that they are a class, whereas they ought to be Society”.²³ His objective was that “it is not the dissolution of society for which we strive, but its reintegration.”²⁴

Since the Thatcher years, our labour movement has struggled to come to terms with the relative shift from

membership based in private manufacture to public sector services and to find a common and unifying goal. Yet that common aim is staring us in the face. The workers’ movement is at its best when it campaigns for jobs. The communists should lead the campaign for more work and not at all be embarrassed to argue that our skills and our young educated workers (and the not so young!) be allowed the freedom to make high quality and sustainable products that are of use to the people rather than profit of the few.

“Intelligence enough to conceive, courage enough to will, power enough to compel. If our ideas of a new society are anything more than a dream, these three qualities must animate the due effective majority of the working people: and then, I say, the thing will be done”²⁵

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Subcultures and the Problem of 'Mass' Culture

Towards a Communist Cultural Policy

By Kevin Donnelly



In a previous edition of *CR*¹ I touched on aspects of *subcultural* theory and how this related to revolt, resistance and the potential for young people to engage in revolutionary practice. It would be tempting to explore these issues further and in the specific context of the recent riots or in relation to gang culture – the latter issue seeming to be an obsession with the media and this government at present.

However I am not going to do this – for one thing, the whole issue of gangs has been massively amplified in media and government discourses and has therefore taken on a significance out of all proportion to the actual problem. Unlike in the USA, gangs are, thankfully, an extremely rare subcultural phenomenon in Britain.

Instead, I would like to take this opportunity to pick up on some of the debates from the ‘Revolution and Culture’ plenary at the recent Communist University of the North and focus on culture in a broader context: still initially in terms of youth subcultures but also then opening this out. As a consequence, I am also going to try to articulate this towards issues of *class* and *class conflict* and also to draw lessons from all of this for us as communists in relation to our – often problematic – relationship with *mass* culture and modernity.

Culture and Class Conflict

As a starting point, we could do with coming up with a brief definition of what we mean by *culture*. I would like to utilise E P Thompson’s formulation which critiqued Raymond Williams’ theory of culture, which he defined as the relationships between elements in a given society or a way of life.² To this, Thompson added the important ingredient that these relationships are mediated in capitalist society

by *conflict*.³ The emphasis on conflict – or *class conflict* to be more precise – is incredibly important for us as Marxists: for example, ideology plays a more central role in this way of looking at culture. It is also important because we are increasingly seeing working-class young people – those who took part in the recent riots for example – being defined not only as members of gangs but also in ideological terms: as an *underclass*.

The Problem of Underclass

The concept of *underclass* – as it is utilised by politicians, media pundits and social scientists – is highly problematic. In a similar way to the term *lumpenproletariat* – the “refuse of all classes”⁴ – it effectively functions to place people outside or beneath class, therefore outside class struggle and conflict and also, as a consequence, vulnerable to reactionary ideologies and movements. Now you might be thinking at the moment: doesn’t referring to young people in terms of *subcultures* also end up doing the same thing? *Sub* after all means below – as something less, beneath or outside.

I would argue that there is a great deal of difference. *Underclass* is a theory invoked to patronise, demonise and ultimately demoralise the working class. Owen Jones’s recent book *Chavs: the Demonization of the Working Class*⁵ perfectly illustrates this and the way in which working class people are systematically being demonised by academics, politicians and in the media.

Subcultures

Subcultures on the other hand are more ambiguous and complex, with many progressive elements to the phenomenon. There is not the space here to go into a lengthy definition of what a subculture is but, put simplistically, it is the bringing together of individuals or

groups who share the same values and views as each other but who feel neglected by the mainstream culture. This allows them to develop a sense of collective identity which in turn challenges and subverts that mainstream. As Dick Hebdige has written in his seminal work *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, subcultures function in a way which “challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus”.⁶

The trend most closely associated in people’s minds with subcultures is arguably Punk, although others have emerged before and since this. While mainly associated with the post-war era and up to the present day, subcultures also have a long history dating back to at least the 19th century. They can therefore signal resistance to the hegemonic order. True, this resistance is often only symbolic and ideological and is therefore, often as not, an exercise in power with clear limitations. However, hegemony – and the consensus manufactured through hegemony – can be fractured and challenged, and resistance by subcultures to groups in dominance cannot always be automatically neutralised or easily incorporated.

And young people – by defining themselves in terms of subcultures and through their refusal of the banalities of ordinary life and the mainstream – are also actively involved in this resistance.

Culture as Capital

I would like now to illustrate this through focusing on the concept of *cultural capital*, which has been developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In *Distinctions*⁷ Bourdieu refers to cultural knowledge accrued through upbringing and education and which confers social status as a consequence of this. Cultural capital is therefore a system which equates the cultural to

the social; and in turn these become class distinctions. For example, in Britain, accent has long been a key indicator of cultural capital. Similarly, going to a public school or getting a degree from Oxbridge confers cultural capital in an institutionalised form.

It is important to say at this point that cultural capital is different from the more traditional view of capital as an economic category: however, there is also an obvious correlation between high levels of economic and cultural capital – hence its definition as a ‘capital’. But the two can also diverge – for example, some sections of society, such as artists or the *nouveau riche*, can be high in one aspect (economic) but low in another (cultural).

Subcultures and Cultural Capital

From this, Sarah Thornton⁸ has developed the concept of *subcultural capital*. This confers status on those who identify with a particular subculture and therefore in a way that goes against the grain of the mainstream or dominant culture. Just as owning a work of art, for example, can objectify cultural capital, similarly sub-cultural capital is objectified through accruing cultural knowledge: in dress codes or through association with territory and social space (the ‘street’, the ‘hood’, the club, etc), rather than property.

The media can also play an important – although highly ambiguous – role in transmitting, amplifying and ultimately incorporating into the mainstream subcultural capital: both demonising and celebrating deviancy and difference, sometimes in the same discursive analysis! But I am not going to focus now on the role of the media, since that could take up a whole article in itself. Instead, I would like to turn to another aspect in our analysis of subcultures: the problematic of class.



The Problem of Class in Subcultural Theory

On the one hand, it could be argued that the emergence of subcultures has signalled – in a spectacular fashion – the breakdown of the post-war consensus and the emergence of more overt class conflict in Britain. On the other hand, the challenge that subcultures present to the hegemonic order is an oblique one. Unlike cultural capital – which is inherently linked to class structures – there is no straight correlation between class and subcultural capital. In some ways, subcultures thrive on the delusion that they are not class-conscious, that they do not conform to traditional class definitions or have a negative or ambivalent relation to class.

This is not to say that class is irrelevant: it is just that struggles tend to play out in more ambiguous, complex ways or in the realm of the symbolic rather than being viewed in terms of direct class conflict – displaced into ‘rituals of resistance’,⁹ in other words. As Marxists, this in turn presents us with a particular challenge, if we are to analyse and comprehend how class conflict plays out within the framework of a consistent theory and in terms of the diverse structural and historical conditions presented to us today by modernity, and in which subcultures play only

a small part. Further, the work and research which has attempted to ‘map out’ the contours of the social structures of ‘youth’ – much of it by Marxists such as Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School – has also been highly contradictory. For example, what is viewed as the *mainstream* has been defined in some research as (mainly bourgeois) *dominant* culture and in others as (mainly working class) *mass* culture.

The Problematic for Communists of Mass Culture

The question of *mass* culture also raises the issue, for us as communists, of our own often difficult relationship with this aspect of modernity:

specifically, how do we deal with preserving the alternative values generated within the communist tradition whilst at the same time responding to the challenges posed by mass communication, the increased ‘dumbing down’ and commercialisation of cultural industries, cultural colonisation and rampant consumerism – in other words, all the ingredients of mass culture as it presents itself today?

Possibly this question could be posed in another way, in relation to how these issues have been dealt with in the past – for this is not by any means a new problem.

To illustrate this I would like to draw on the work of Stephen Gundle and specifically his book *Between Hollywood and Moscow: the Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture 1943-1991*.¹⁰

Firstly, Gundle makes the interesting point that communists have themselves responded to the development of mass culture by creating their own subcultures. However, Gundle also argues that these

developments are mostly reactive and often in compensation for a loss of political power. For example, the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano), out of government from 1947, created alongside more traditional workplace structures a formal and informal network of leisure and social organisations and practices, each with its own symbols, publications and events and which in turn informed and enriched the cultural life of the communities from which the PCI drew its main membership and support.

More importantly, Gundle points to the need for a coherent cultural policy which allows communists to extend the scope of their influence beyond the more familiar terrain associated with their political and industrial power bases.

Towards a Communist Cultural Theory

What is clear is that we cannot exist in splendid isolation – as a *counterculture* – and ignore the development of mass culture. However much we may loathe and abhor *Big Brother* or the *X Factor*, we need to be in a position to grasp contemporary social, economic, political *and* cultural realities in order to keep our analyses fresh and relevant to our revolutionary practice – in other words, we need the cultural dimension to inform our praxis. We must therefore in turn identify and sift out what is progressive in contemporary mass culture and utilise this to inform this praxis.

Of course, there are inherent dangers in all of this. For one thing, the line between reactionary and progressive ideas is less clearly demarcated in the cultural context than in the political: a possible reason why we communists are often wary of getting involved in debates on cultural issues in the first place. Another danger comes from our own history: the

‘*Marxism Today* effect’, for want of a better way of putting it. As PCI general secretary Palmiro Togliatti stated – and he recognised at an early stage the crucial role cultural policy could play in shaping communist theory and practice (and the dangers) – we need to avoid a “strange tendency toward a sort of encyclopaedic ‘culture’ in which an abstract search for the new, the different, and the surprising” takes the place of “coherent choice and meaningful enquiry” and as a consequence, leads to the danger of “engaging in or giving credit to fundamental errors of ideological approach”.¹¹

Towards a New, Collective, Popular Culture

What a cultural policy may look like in detail is beyond the scope of this article and we

THE REAL READ

We write flags to rally around, but the battles are the real read,

yeah we are the rattle of sabres demanding new steel,

but the youth are the real read the real bleeding to be free

and our poems our comfort and courage and love made thinkable

and the roar of our hearts pulling on their chains.

BY
JOHN G HALL



are probably not in a position to supply much of this detail at the present moment anyway. As I have argued above, discussions around youth subcultures can help to kick-start this process and open up space for debate, and it is important that these debates continue to grow as they are long overdue:

“Conditions of struggle for a long time kept Marx and then his most faithful followers from developing Marxism in all its dimensions – for example, the dimension of subjectivity or that of artistic creation – whereas Marxist thought contains the seed for such development”.¹²

We could also briefly hazard a guess as regards the form and content of what would constitute our policy on culture.

Firstly, it should be informed by our values, ideas, experiences and traditions of community, solidarity and collective action.

Secondly, in promulgating our cultural policy, we must ensure that we do not practise the self-deception that our job is to simply impute from a given situation what the correct strategy for the working class should be – although, as Marxist-Leninists, there is obviously an important role for us to play here in shaping class consciousness. Our practices must also directly involve and be shaped by ordinary working-class people – who are also *intellectuals* in Antonio Gramsci’s meaning of the term¹³ – and in turn reflect their experiences of political and economic struggle.

Further, questions of culture should not be reduced to being an appendage of political concerns and strategies. The political is of

course our prime consideration, but cultural practices can inform and enrich the political dimensions of our work.

Lastly, we must face up to the challenges presented to us by mass culture and, by presenting our own challenges to this, transmit our own cultural values and practices, seeking in turn to expose and hopefully alter its noxious and pervasive effect:

“No political party that seeks to win or maintain power today can ignore popular culture or mass communications”.¹⁴

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Ideology or Ideas?

By Jimmy Jancovich

AT A CONFERENCE I recently attended in France, one of the participants criticised the current myth that France was a ‘land of asylum’, in view of current immigration policy. I then very briefly spoke to say that there were a number of other myths that needed to be killed, and mentioned a couple, adding that I would put it in writing as the subject was too wide for a four-minute intervention.

Having done so in French, I thought it appropriate to do something similar in English, omitting the specifically French myths but dealing with myths that are very common in left-wing and communist circles everywhere.

Let us be clear: myths are an important part of all human cultures, just as the subconscious is an important part of the nature of all individuals. But just as a person, whose conscious self is unable to control his or her subconscious impulses, will be on the road to disaster, so a society or group of people unable to distinguish between myth and reality may face the same fate.

Myth No 1

Many people, including many communists, think that the words ideology and ideas are synonyms, and that the first is merely a more pompous or learned word for the second. This leaves many thinking that communism and socialism are ideologies, whereas they are – or should be – a series of ideas or projects developed in a reasoned and rational manner.

Until about the middle of the 20th century, and certainly in Marx’s use of the term, ideology meant something very different from just ideas. Marx considered it an attempt to understand the world, a reflection of reality that could change depending on the viewpoint of the person – in other words a subjective rather than objective view.

This, of course covers all attempts to understand the world, from prehistoric myths, via religious and philosophical ideas to scientific analyses.

Marx’s criticism of religion, which is in fact more positive than suggested by the out-of-context phrase “opium of the people”,¹ is that religion, while faithfully expressing people’s reaction to the oppressive world in which they live, does not offer them a means of *overcoming their circumstances* with objective understanding.

The objective that Marx and Engels set themselves was, on the contrary, to help people *understand reality in order to change it*. As they were trying to raise people’s social consciousness and develop the *class consciousness* of the workers, Engels defined ideology as a “*false consciousness*”.² If the word “sub-consciousness” had existed in his time, he might have used it rather than “false consciousness”. Today, however, we should be more aware of this difference between ideology, ideas and objective analyses (or attempts at them ...).

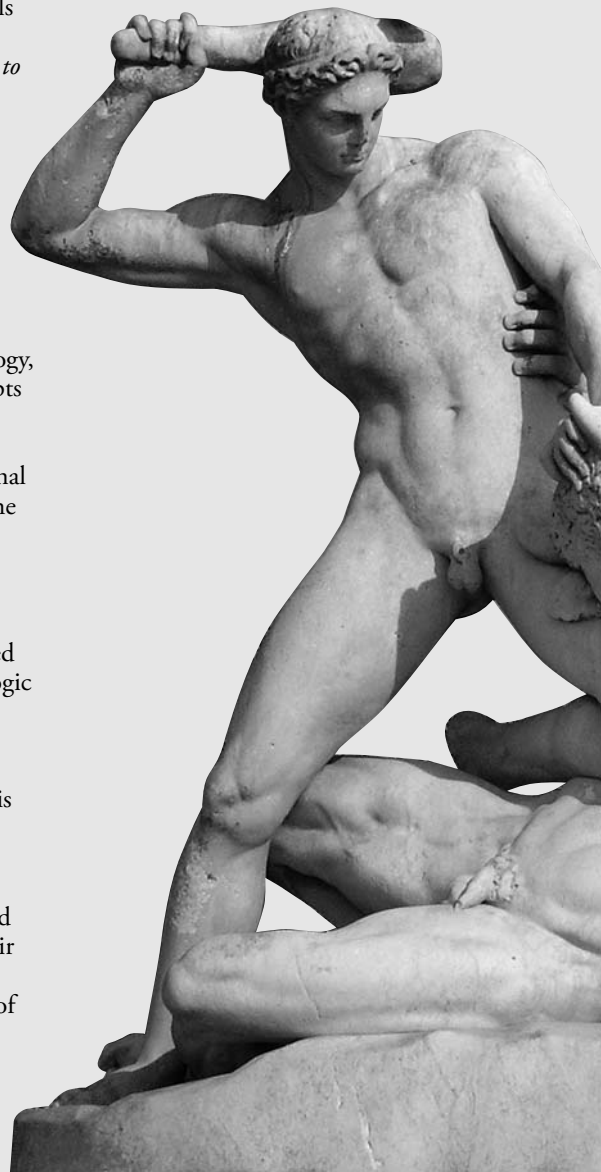
This is not completely to decry ideology, since it is a powerful emotional incentive to collective action, just as the subconscious, at individual level, gives life much of its impetus and pleasure. Neither at individual nor at collective social level are people cold calculating machines. They are as much motivated and mobilised by feelings as by cold logic – as they should be.

Nevertheless, just as at individual level someone who is completely dominated by his subjective impulses is heading for failure or even disaster, so, at social level, ideological attitudes, if uncorrected by objective analyses can give rise to all sorts of mistakes and even divert movements away from their real aims.

We have seen too many examples of this in the 20th century.

Myth No 2

One of the secondary effects of this is the widespread idea that we must always choose our allies on ‘ideological grounds’. In practice this means on the basis of written or spoken declarations, which usually are appeals to people’s feelings – good or bad. *However, politics is not a literary exercise — it is above all a struggle*. The only allies you can count upon are those *struggling alongside you*, whatever may be their ideas or philosophical concepts.

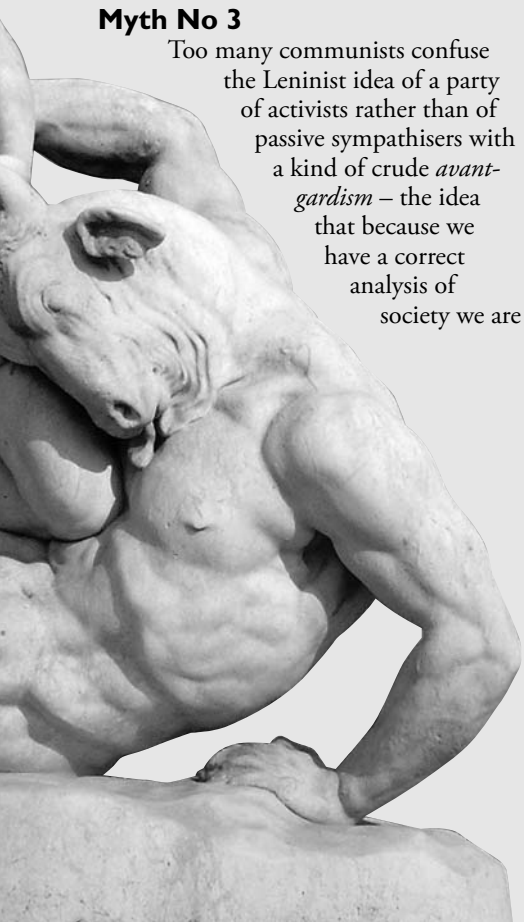


In the struggle against fascism not all antifascists were left-wing – nor, indeed, were all left-wingers anti-fascists! Indeed many allegedly left-wing people and groups either remained neutral or collaborated with the enemy. These latter may well have been ‘ideologically’ close to the communists but they were certainly not allies!

After the war a drift to electoralism led the French CP, at least, to forget this lesson and make some disastrous alliances. However, I am not going to deal with the specifically French examples of the above, not only because they are irrelevant to the British situation but also because the French CP is correcting the most serious of them. It is now emphasising mass struggle around concrete objectives rather than electoral opportunism.

Myth No 3

Too many communists confuse the Leninist idea of a party of activists rather than of passive sympathisers with a kind of crude *avant-gardism* – the idea that because we have a correct analysis of society we are



therefore always right and can expect people to follow us automatically. This ignores two fundamental facts:

Firstly the circumstances in which Lenin was working, that is, of violent repression and total illegality, which clearly required a tightly organised and disciplined party.

Secondly, the insistence in the *Communist Manifesto* and Marx’s other writings that the revolution will be the work of the working class itself, not of a vanguard party on its behalf:

“The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.”³

(Unfortunately, many people don’t read more than Chapter 1 of the *Communist Manifesto*. Chapters 2 and 4 should be made compulsory reading.)

Lenin himself was well aware of this point – nor was the 1917 revolution carried out by the Bolshevik Party alone. It was in fact carried out by the Petrograd Soviet, in which the Bolsheviks were in the majority; and the power gained was handed straight over to the all-Russian Congress of Soviets, in which they were not.

The British CP has, traditionally, placed the emphasis on hard-slogging grassroots work, rather than electoralism. To misquote a famous motto, it “agitates, educates and mobilises” the broad

movement – quite rightly leaving the “organising” to the unions, without pretending to replace them.

Consequently, it has also always applied democratic centralism in a democratic manner, avoiding the top-down centralism characteristic of too many continental parties⁴. The CPB has, fortunately, maintained this interpretation of democratic centralism (at the price of some internal conflict) and returned to the more traditional position – as exemplified by the way the CPGB resolved a very real and fundamental difference of opinion in the first year of the World War II.⁵

I hope that it will continue to work in this way. But for this to be effective, *it must also raise the political and theoretical level of its members*. Clear thinking is *needed at all levels* – which is not, unfortunately, always the case.

Notes and References

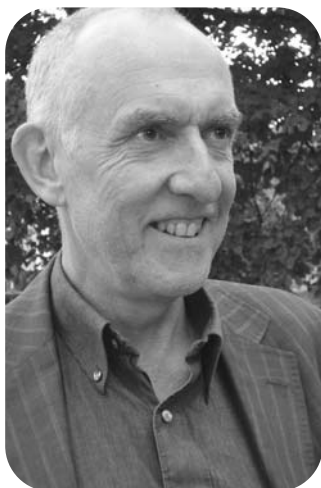
1 K Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction*, in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 3, p 175; online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.

2 F Engels, Letter to Franz Mehring, 14 July 1893, in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 50, p 164; also in *Marx and Engels Correspondence*, International Publishers, New York, 1968, and online at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm (NB the *Collected Works* translation uses the term “spurious” rather than “false” –Ed).

3 K Marx and F Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Collected Works*, Vol 6, p 496.

4 The one time a British general secretary tried to impose top-down centralism, he split in the party wide open.

5 Faced with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Comintern’s assessment, at the outbreak of the war, that it was “just another imperialist war”, the CPGB decided to resolve their internal differences over this by having Harry Pollitt, the general secretary, stand down, but he continued to work for the Party until going into war work as a boilermaker in April 1941. He was re-elected general secretary in July of that year.



SOULFOOD

A regular literary selection

Selected by Mike Quille

THERE IS NO BETTER way to start the *Soul Food* column than with a poem. But is it a poem ... ?

**Note to the reader:
this is not a poem**
by Helen Ivory

The pictures are falling from
my walls
because the paint is too heavy.
Illusionary landscapes are real
landscapes now.

No need for tonality or warmth
of colour.
Now I write another poem
that no-one will read.
There is loneliness in
these words

I tell you the supposed reader in
plain terms.
There is no need to hide
behind poetry.
I won't try to be clever
with you.

In this article, which is based on a workshop on 'Poetry and Class Struggle' at the Communist University of the North in September, I am going to outline an analysis of poetry, showing its relevance to the critique of capitalism, and to the project of imagining and creating a communist society.

It will be a very brief presentation of a very wide-ranging and powerful theoretical approach consisting of

several interlinked theories. I hope that this is more acceptable to readers than a long and detailed discussion, because I am really only building on the approach adopted in previous *Soul Food* columns. And anyway, it won't be the last you hear of it, as elements will be repeated and fleshed out in more detail in future columns.

Marxism and Poetry

Firstly then, let us look at what poetry is all about. I am relying for this analysis on three Marxists: George Thomson, who wrote a pamphlet called *Marxism and Poetry* in 1945;¹ Ernst Fischer, who wrote *The Necessity of Art* in 1959;² but above all on the poet and Communist Party activist Christopher Caudwell, who died fighting fascism in the Spanish Civil War, and who wrote *Illusion and Reality*,³ published posthumously in 1937.

The analysis of these writers broadly proceeds from looking first at where poetry has come from and what its function was. Historically, poetry evolved as part of humanity's attempt to relate imaginatively to, understand and control its environment. It is an intense, powerful form of linguistic communication which strikes sparks in our imaginations and intellects. It has heightened language, memorable words and phrases and images. It also carries meaning through its musical qualities, and through rhyme and rhythm.

Here is one of the greatest and purest examples of an intense and powerful poem, perhaps the poem in this issue most relevant to the theme of Revolution

and Culture. Its greatness lies in the way it simultaneously links the terrifying, yet wonderfully powerful, historical events occurring around the time Blake wrote the poem – including the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and the ongoing capitalist transformation of the world generally – to the more timeless forces of creation. The poem is both about, and a great example of, the force and beauty of poetic art.

The Tyger by William Blake

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful
symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare sieze
the fire?



And what shoulder, & what art.
 Could twist the sinews of
 thy heart?
 And when thy heart began
 to beat,
 What dread hand? & what
 dread feet?

What the hammer? what
 the chain?
 In what furnace was thy brain?
 What the anvil? what
 dread grasp
 Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down
 their spears,
 And watered heaven with
 their tears,
 Did he smile his work to see?
 Did he who made the Lamb
 make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
 In the forests of the night,
 What immortal hand or eye
 Dare frame thy fearful
 symmetry?

These powerful poetic tools, this specialised use of language, evolved to meet social and individual needs, towards imagining and planning for and committing to and working towards a future goal. This might be getting the harvest in, making war, engaging in rites of passage to adulthood, forming and sustaining personal relationships etc. It describes a world for us to aspire to and work towards, and inspires us to get there. It is a kind of magic which, along with science and religion, is dialectically linked to the social and economic life of humanity. So, for instance, in the case of agricultural work, it stimulates and makes easier the arduous labour needed to hunt, fell trees, grow and harvest crops.

Both Caudwell and Thomson use the example of the harvest song, which imagines the granaries bursting and the joy and satisfaction of having plenty to eat, in order to channel people's emotions into the hard work, the collective endeavour needed to realise the project. Humans, unlike ants or bees or beavers, do not work instinctively at a social level. Their emotions and ideas need to be stimulated, developed, collected and channelled. And here we have the origins and fundamental nature of poetry in a unified society, as part of the social mechanisms in place to get work done. Like all language generally, it is social in origin, it is generated collectively for

collective purposes.

This may seem paradoxical when we consider that reading and writing poetry appear to be such individualistic, solitary activities. But this is because collectively generated emotions persist in solitude, so that, when we are alone, reading a poem or singing a song, we still feel our emotions and intellect stirred by poetry, song and music.

Poetry in a Class Society

So much for the historic origins of poetry, and the psychosocial mechanisms which account for its communicative power. But what happens to poetry as society evolves, as the division of labour generates classes which come into conflict? It too becomes conflicted. Poets and artists generally are expected by the ruling class to suppress division, conflict and collectivity, and help shape a world in which it is easier for that class to manage exploitative social relationships. This is why, in all class-divided societies and across all the arts, there are traditions of art which are patronised by and made for the ruling class, and which become exclusive, incomprehensible, and inaccessible to most people.

This does not mean that they are without value, truth or beauty, but it does mean that their meanings spring from, are conditioned by, and related to the particular class-based society in which they arise. These are large generalisations, but their fundamental truth can be seen whether one considers Greek plays, Egyptian murals, Renaissance portrait painting or ancient Chinese poetry.

Let us focus closer on the application of this thesis to poetry in capitalist society – because poetry becomes especially conflicted, difficult and individualised during the history of capitalist societies, for a few reasons.

In capitalist society, there are fewer direct economic relationships between people than there are in feudal or slave owning societies. The prime economic relationship is between the individual and their property, called ownership, which is upheld and guaranteed by the coercive powers of the state. Members of society are 'free' to buy and sell, on a 'free' market, goods, services and labour power itself. People take their labour power to market and are free to sell their labour power there to the highest bidder. Capitalists are free to extract surplus value from workers and appropriate the resulting profits for private uses. The unreserved access to an unrestricted market is what 'freedom' means in a

capitalist society. These arrangements are what guarantee 'freedom of the individual', the notional freedom for each individual to become what he or she wants to become.

But as Marxists we know that this is not real freedom, it is the freedom to dine at (or write poems in!) the Ritz. It is a sham individualism, a hollow freedom for the majority, who do not own the means of production. They are in practice coerced to sell their labour power to the owners of the means of production, and to be exploited and oppressed, either as direct producers under contract to capitalists, or indirectly as carers, healers, educators etc.

The Culture of Individualism

This culture of individualism, generated by capitalist economic relationships, has several consequences for poetry. They include:

- At its beginning, a tremendously powerful outbreak of self-centred consciousness, a kind of expansive outward movement of internal energy which is felt to be crippled or threatened by outward social forms. It is the drama and celebration of the 'I' making the world, the bourgeois dream in poetic form.
- A continuous revolution in form, content and approach; technical advances in sophistication of literary techniques; new approaches and movements and schools of poetry. This mirrors the continual revolution in the way capitalist production is managed
- A growing tension between the needs and expectations of the ruling class, and those of the people. The ruling class needs a poetry whose form and content suit its purpose, of promoting individualism, legitimating political and economic arrangements, promoting harmony and togetherness ('We're all in this together') in order to disguise fundamental class conflicts. The people need a poetry which suits their historic mission to overthrow class-based society and truly, beautifully express the values of a communist society, not of the primitive hunter-gatherer variety but a communism based on abundance.
- Tensions appear, because of this class-based conflict, between poets and the ruling classes and poets and the public, leading to the loss of an authoritative public voice, and to inaccessibility of poetic language and general meaning. Individualism leads



to fragmentation, to multiple competing voices with diminishing audiences. Poetry is no longer the voice of the whole society, nor even of a class, but just of a coterie, or of a number of cliques and sects.

This is why poetry is for most people so far removed from their real lives. It is why poetry and class struggle can seem like opposites. On the one hand, the stereotype of the starving poet in the garret writing agonised, incomprehensible lyrics about some massive but private individual experience; on the other, the mass of cloth-capped working men, toiling in the factories.

But just as we know there is the potential for workers to take power, to abolish private property in its current form, to take (or take back) collective control of the means of production, through class struggle, so we can claim poetry back, as readers and writers, from this individualist culture. We need to be aware that part of class struggle is a cultural struggle, and that poetry and art generally is one of the battlegrounds.

A Moment of Humanity

Marx, when writing about how we respond to Greek art, suggested that the interesting problem was not how that art is related to the society it springs from, but why it still has the capacity to move us, inspire us.⁴ And his conclusion was that it is because art has the power to help us empathise with humans across the ages, that we see humans in those societies as part of the human family, at a particular point of development. The work of art is ‘a moment of humanity’, with potentially timeless capability to affect other humans, across time, distance, and cultures.

An Exchange of Gifts

by Alden Nowlan

As long as you read this poem
I will be writing it.
I am writing it here and now
before your eyes,
although you can't see me.
Perhaps you'll dismiss this
as a verbal trick,
the joke is you're wrong;
the real trick
is your pretending
this is something
fixed and solid
external to us both.
I tell you better:
I will keep on
writing this poem for you
even after I'm dead.



Artists are also driven, by the nature and history of their art, to want to express suffering and decay, heal the divisions, unify and reconcile individual lives, challenge exploitation, and help shape a better world for us all. That is how art and poetry have evolved; that is what they are for historically; that is the nature of the beast, however caged and deformed it may be in modern capitalist society.

I hope you can see from this analysis why poetry, and art generally, is such an important part of the communist project. Just as we seek as communists to reclaim our lives and a less alienated relationship with our work and the world around us through economic and political struggle, so we can use poetry and art, as producers and consumers, to help us – to educate us, enlighten us, inspire us and entertain us.

That is why I would recommend study of the poetry of the past, despite all our memories of how we were taught it at school, and the various difficulties of language and culture that sometimes present as problems. Read *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* by Keats, and see how

wonderfully he presents the breakdown of social relationships under the onslaught of individualism. Read *Easter 1916* by Yeats, and see how uncomfortable and yet how admiring that poet is, faced with revolutionary struggle. Read *Poetry of Departures* by Philip Larkin, or *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* by T S Eliot, to see how even poets who are political conservatives can be read as critiquing the individualism of capitalist culture. Poetry is a tremendous resource for us – not just socialist poetry, or even political poetry, but any poetry.

Here is a quote from Thomson's pamphlet:

“The English people have not lost their sense of poetry; only, their poetry has been taken from them and misinterpreted, so as to lose its appeal. They will recover it with the rest of their heritage.”⁵

The Poetry of the Future

And finally I want to add my own two penn'orth of theory, which is simply this.

As a writer, I find that the struggle of writing poems is a kind of political struggle. It is a struggle to express the sense of alienation most individuals experience in capitalist society, particularly the very alienating experience of being individualised. It is a struggle to find the words and phrases and rhythms that work to communicate truth, when so many forms of communication have become clichéd, corrupted or compromised by capitalist culture. And it is a struggle to find the outlet to communicate directly with an audience that is able and willing to listen.

But writing poetry is also deeply liberating. It enhances consciousness, develops awareness of humanity, it helps solve and dissolve the problems caused by capitalist culture, by bourgeois individualism, just as the ancient harvest songs worked to make life more meaningful, purposeful, and enjoyable.

Theories about art and poetry and culture are fine, and the ideas presented in this article (and indeed by other contributors to this issue) are perfectly correct and very useful as part of the political struggle for a communist society. I hope this article shows how a Marxian historical and materialist analysis, which was of course developed primarily to inform and guide political struggle, can illuminate our understanding of poetry.

But dear reader, there is no substitute for doing it yourself! There is a creative element to art which reaches parts of us that theories cannot reach, and I would urge readers to have a go at some form of artistic activity yourselves, as well as enjoying other people's good art. Because criticism, however enlightening, is not the same as creation. The Greek root of the word 'poetry' is *poiesis*, meaning 'making' or 'creating', and Marxism too, in theory and in action, is surely a creative as well as critical project.

Marx himself wrote poetry when he was young. So let us end in the same way we began, with a poem, one which imagines Marx writing to his father about being sacked from the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1843.

Marx Writes a Political Poem by Mike Quille

"A poet must these days know that he has something sound to offer if he wants to appear in public ... I would be very sorry to see you appear in public as a minor poet."
Heinrich Marx to his son Karl, 1834

Dear father,
I've cashed the cheque,
and thanks,
I'll need the money, because
I've been sacked from the paper
for writing a piece on
the poverty
among the winegrowers of
the Moselle.

Their age old custom
of collecting dead wood for fuel
has been outlawed.
From now on, the wood belongs
to the landowner.

And so it seems
the dead dominate the living
and woods and trees and timber
become only commodities,
mysteriously doubling meanings
like a metaphor, a poem, or
like Spanish gold doubloons.

Father, for saying these things
last week, I was sacked,
and can freely write these lines,
and maybe become a minor poet,
because

The Government has given
me back my liberty.

Sources and Acknowledgements

The sources for the poems in this issue of CR are as follows:

The Real Read, by John G Hall, is from *Emergency Verse: Poetry in Defence of the Welfare State*, edited by Alan Morrison, Caparison, 2010.

Note to the reader: this is not a poem, by Helen Ivory, is from *The Double Life of Clocks*, Bloodaxe Books, 2002.

The Tyger, by William Blake, is from *William Blake*, Penguin, 1958

An Exchange of Gifts, by Alden Nowlan, is from *Selected Poems*, House of Anansi Press, Toronto, 1996.

Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking, by Karen Brodine, is from her collection of the same title, Red Letter Press, Seattle, 1990.

Poetry Itself is a Kind of Sunlight, by Yan Yi, is from *The Red Azalea: Chinese Poetry since the Cultural Revolution*, University of Hawaii Press, 1990

A big THANKYOU to Rab Wilson for permission to publish his new poem *The End o The World*; and grateful acknowledgements are also due to all the poets and publishers mentioned above.

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- 1 G Thomson, *Marxism and Poetry*, Marxism Today Series No 6, Lawrence & Wishart, 1945.
- 2 E Fischer, *The Necessity of Art*, Penguin, 1981.
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- 4 K Marx, *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 28, p 45, and in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, D McLellan Ed, OUP 1977, p 360; online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/appx1.htm>.
- 5 Thomson, *op cit*, p 60.

Junk food: an irregular cartoon strip



Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking

BY KAREN BRODINE

she thinks about everything at once without making a mistake.
no one has figured out how to keep her from doing this thinking
while her hands and nerves also perform every delicate complex
function of the work. this is not automatic or deadening.
try it sometime. make your hands move quickly on the keys
fast as you can, while you are thinking about:

the layers, fossils. the idea that this machine she controls
is simply layers of human workhours frozen in steel, tangled
in tiny circuits, blinking out through lights like hot, red eyes.
the noise of the machine they all sometimes wig out to, giddy,
zinging through the shut-in space, blithering atoms;
everyone's hands paused mid-air above the keys
while Neil or Barbara solo, wrists telling every little thing,
feet blipping along, shoulders raggy.

she had always thought of money as solid, stopped.
but seeing it as moving labor, human hours, why that means
it comes back down to her hands on the keys, shoulder aching,
brain pushing words through fingers through keys, trooping
out crisp black ants on the galleys. work compressed into
instruments, slim computers, thin as mirrors, how could
numbers multiply or disappear, squeezed in sideways like that
but they could, they did, obedient and elegant, how amazing.
the woman whips out a compact, computes the cost,
her face shining back from the silver case
her fingers, sharp tacks, calling up the digits.

when she sits at the machine, rays from the cathode stream
directly into her chest. when she worked as a clerk, the rays
from the xerox angled upward, striking her under the chin.
when she waited tables the micro oven sat at stomach level.
when she typeset for Safeway, dipping her hands in processor
chemicals, her hands burned and peeled and her chest ached
from the fumes.

well we know who makes everything we use or can't use.
as the world piles itself up on the bones of the years,
so our labor gathers.

while we sell ourselves in fractions. they don't want us all
at once, but hour by hour, piece by piece. our hands mainly
and our backs. and chunks of our brains. and veiled expressions
on our faces, they buy. though they can't know what actual
thoughts stand behind our eyes.

then they toss the body out on the sidewalk at noon and at five.
then they spit the body out the door at sixty-five.



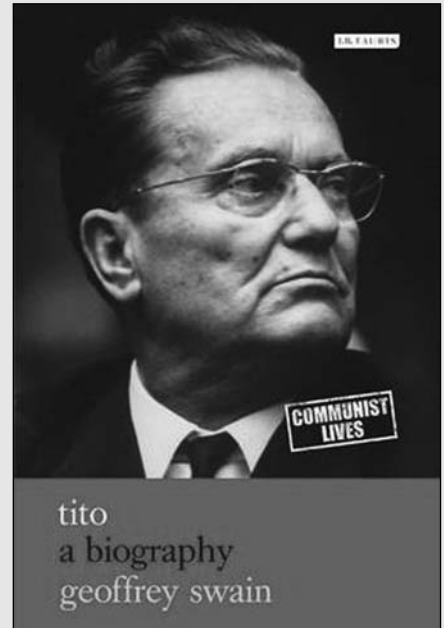
BOOK REVIEW

Tito – attempting to maintain a socialist Yugoslavia outside the socialist camp

Review by Kate Hudson

Tito: A Biography

By GEOFFREY SWAIN
(I B Tauris, London, 2011, 232 pp, hbk,
£59.50. ISBN: 978-1845-11727-6)



WITH THIS NEW biography of Josip Broz Tito, publishers I B Tauris have published the eighth title in their Communist Lives series. Previous subjects include Togliatti, Thorez, Thälmann, Gramsci, Gomulka, Nagy and Dimitrov; and their addition of Tito has provided the first biography of the Yugoslav leader since the collapse of the state that he led from wartime victory to his death in 1980.

The scale of the work is significant, covering in valuable detail the enormous achievements of Tito the revolutionary, the partisan leader and defeater of Nazism, the unifier of the peoples and the builder of a unique form of socialism. The author, Geoffrey Swain, describes his work as a sympathetic biography. As he observes, “it is assumed that Tito’s communist experiment was a worthwhile undertaking”. In Swain’s view, Tito’s career “predated Stalinism”, he struggled both “to oppose and to overcome Stalinism”, and he saw communism as a liberating ideology. Swain has an evident admiration for the construction, by Tito and his closest comrades, of a self-management system after the break with

the Soviet Union in 1948, searching – as Swain sees it – for a practical solution to Marx’s understanding of the alienation of labour. Tito’s communism, in Swain’s view, stressed the Marxism in Marxism-Leninism.

Notwithstanding Swain’s sympathy for Tito, which comes through the text very clearly, Swain concludes – controversially in my view – by suggesting that Tito was “right” in most of what he did, but took a fundamentally wrong turn in 1968 when he put a stop to the moving of workers’ self-management in what he considered to be a syndicalist direction. Instead, Swain argues, Tito transferred power to republican *élites* which reignited nationalist passions. Tito then clamped down on these passions, prevented debate and thus any evolution towards a democratic polity. Tito, Swain asserts, was a dictator, and he ends the biography by agreeing with Milovan Djilas’s statement in 1953, that Tito was the “standard bearer of the bureaucracy”.

Swain is right to identify 1968 as a crucial moment in the development of Yugoslavia and his biography sheds

considerable light on Tito’s vision for Yugoslavia and the continual process by which he evolved the federal state. Understanding Tito’s balancing of the country’s different component parts, in the context of the divided world of the Cold War and the realities that Tito faced whilst striving to advance socialism within Yugoslavia, is essential to understand the reasons for the eventual break-up of the Yugoslav federal state. Swain is right to identify the strengthening of the republican *élites* as a factor within that break-up; but would be wrong to conclude that the characterisation of Tito, as a dictator or champion of the bureaucracy, as against the workers, adds anything to understanding the reasons for those choices or – more importantly – the complex range of factors which led to Yugoslavia’s eventual demise.

The rapid breakdown of relations with the Soviet Union, just three years after the end of the Second World War, left Yugoslavia isolated from its natural ally and thus high and dry in economic terms. Yugoslavia’s first five-year plan had been based on aid and trade with the



Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, but this was no longer forthcoming. So Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Soviet bloc necessitated a change in approach to the economy, which was mirrored by political change. In the economy, Tito embarked on the policy of self-management of enterprises by their workers. The counterpart of this in the political sphere was significant decentralisation.

Much greater flexibility was introduced into the planning systems, with a move towards general objectives rather than specific targets. In terms of growth of industrial production, the new approach seemed to work: between 1952 and 1959, average annual growth was 13 per cent, although the problem of the foreign trade deficit worsened. Less and less of the cost of imports was covered by export earnings – a problem staved off, but not solved, by a huge influx of US aid during this period. The late 1950s and early 1960s saw further expansion of self-management. The 1957 Labour Relations Act gave the workers' councils greater control over recruitment, dismissal and discipline. Self-management was also extended to education, health, culture and social services. These changes were enshrined in the 1963 constitution, amid talk of the changes being steps towards the ultimate withering away of the state. The new constitution declared Yugoslavia to be a socialist society, renaming the state the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia.

There was considerable ideological debate within the League of Communists over self-management. Tito took the view that state socialism – along the centralised lines that Yugoslavia had adopted in its first years of post-war development – was a necessary part of the process of building socialism which would then be followed by a more open, democratic and decentralised system. Others, such as Milovan Djilas – one of the top Yugoslav leaders who developed the 'new class' theory about bureaucratisation in state socialist societies – asserted that the move to self-management came about after the leadership re-read Marx after 1948, to try and make sense of what was happening to them after their split with the Soviet bloc.

The extensive economic decentralisation of the 1960s was accompanied by the move towards 'market socialism' where worker-managed



President Josip Broz Tito with Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden in London.

enterprises would compete with each other, with the goal of becoming more efficient and thus more competitive nationally and internationally. However, economic and political decentralisation reforms in the late 1960s and 1970s strengthened the centrifugal tendencies within the republics, to the detriment of federal government, and weakened the ability of the state to ensure investment in industry and control of inflation. In 1967, the constitution was amended to give more powers to the republics via the strengthening of the Chamber of Nationalities. In 1971, further constitutional amendments considerably increased economic and political decentralisation. The right of workers to dispose of the wealth they had created was affirmed, giving workers' councils greater rights to decide in the allocation of surplus funds from their enterprises, between personal incomes, social and welfare funds, and investment. A further amendment guaranteed the right to private enterprise – to own the means of production and to employ workers. Various modifications were made which shifted the balance of power between the republics and the federal government in favour of the former.

However, far from these changes satisfying the aspirations of the reformers and republican interests, greater autonomy increased the desire of more extreme nationalists for greater devolution. It was in Croatia that this tendency found its most vocal form, culminating in a series of protests in November and December 1971. The key issue, which had been bubbling under for some years, was the economic relationship between Zagreb and Belgrade. Croatia was Yugoslavia's biggest foreign currency earner. Under federal regulations, Croatian enterprises could keep only 10% of their foreign currency

earnings, the rest being passed to the National Bank in Belgrade. Croatia had previously benefited from substantial amounts of federal investment in its infrastructure to enable the tourist industry to flourish. Now, a nationalist sentiment began to develop on the basis of opposition to what was seen as Croatia subsidising poorer parts of the federation. There were suggestions that the Croatian nation was being depleted by the number of workers who had work abroad because, it was claimed, their economic future was being squandered on the other republics.

This upsurge of nationalism, primarily based in the developing middle classes, met a harsh response from Tito, himself of Croat nationality, and a purge of the Croat leadership was carried out. In 1972, Tito warned of four emerging threats: an excessively centralising bureaucratic tendency; technocrats who favoured concentration of power with managerial *élites* rather than through self-management; nationalists who favoured the concentration of power within the republican *élites*; and liberals attracted by western parliamentarianism. Tito suggested that foreign influences were reflected in some of these trends and argued that the aim of all these groups was to weaken the self-management system and devalue the role of the workers in Yugoslav society. Tito concluded that the Yugoslav Communist League should be purified and strengthened and that constitutional changes should be made to ensure that Yugoslavia remained a socialist state.

Tito's 1974 constitution and subsequent legislative changes were designed to strengthen collective participation and representation and stamp out individualism. The constitution also further decentralised power to the republics and went to great lengths to institutionalise equality between them to

BOOK REVIEW

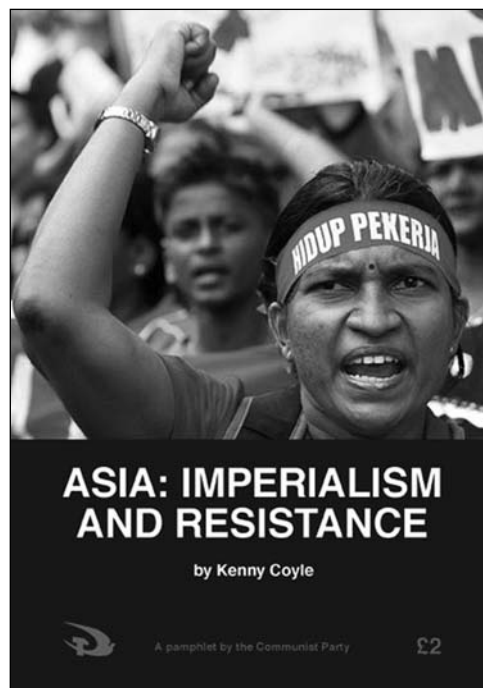
avoid domination by any single nation within the federation. A system of quotas and rotations was used to ensure balanced representation, and the right of veto was granted to all republics over federal legislation. Rather than being the bureaucratic champion of the transfer of power to republican *élites* in preference to the advance of working class power, Tito wrestled with the problem of the erosion of the socialist character of Yugoslavia. Yet he was unable to arrive at an effective solution – the scale and nature of decentralisation did not hold the key. On the contrary: with hindsight it is possible to see the roots of later problems in the 1974 constitution, with the locus of power becoming republican to the detriment of a Yugoslav identity and national cohesion, and the veto system making decision-making extraordinarily slow. Both of these factors gave rise to considerable difficulties in the 1980s, making it extremely difficult to address the economic problems facing the country and facilitating the re-emergence in a more powerful way of nationalist tendencies in the richest republics, orientated against subsidising the poorest.

Despite Tito's undoubtedly remarkable social, economic and political achievements, the federal republic headed for major problems in the 1980s. As western economic pressure on the country, and above all the indebtedness to western financial institutions, increased, the decentralisation of political power and elements of marketisation within the model of self-managed socialism provided multiple points of leverage for the forces which the western powers were able to utilise to pull the Federation apart after the fall of communism in eastern Europe in 1989.

There is much of interest and value in Swain's work, and much light is shed – both upon Tito's political work in attempting to sustain a socialist Yugoslavia essentially outside the socialist camp, and upon the enormous challenges involved in building a new form of socialism in an almost uniquely complex federal state. The self-management system itself deserves a full and fair evaluation, free from preconceptions, for an understanding of both its strengths and weaknesses can provide valuable reference for the development and analysis of economic alternatives in the current global context. And Tito himself deserves no less a fair evaluation.

Which way for the 'Pacific Century'?

Review by Ben Chacko



Asia: Imperialism and Resistance

By KENNY COYLE
(Communist Party of Britain, 2011,
44 pp, pbk, £2.
ISBN 978-1-908315-04-5)

ASIA IS IMPORTANT.

The continent is home to 70% of the world's population; it is at the centre of a shift in global economic strength on a scale not seen since the US eclipsed the old European powers, if ever; and, for socialists, the presence on the continent of four of the world's five remaining self-proclaimed socialist states (China, Vietnam, North Korea and Laos) makes it a focal point for any attempt to understand the global balance of imperialist versus progressive forces. The fact that the widely differing policies pursued by these states are deeply controversial on the left makes the need for detailed analysis even more acute.

Kenny Coyle's new pamphlet *Asia: Imperialism and Resistance* confines itself to East Asia, but this is still a mammoth undertaking, beginning with the first Portuguese predations in the 15th century and tracing the course of Western involvement and the reactions it provoked ever since.

This is not primarily a history, however. It does chart imperialism's history in the region country by country, and will provide an excellent reference for those looking for a quick overview of how the United States displaced Spain in the Philippines or why Thailand was never colonised, but as Leninists we understand that imperialism didn't end when the colonies threw off foreign rule.



BOOK REVIEW

Imperialism reshaped East Asia – as it did so many parts of the world – and anyone who wishes to understand modern developments in the region will find this work an invaluable asset, both for an outline of its legacy in individual countries and for the character of the resistance movements which have taken place in every country there, whether socialist or capitalist.

And imperialism is an ongoing presence. It is not to underestimate the significance of the rise of China to point out that the greatest military power in Asia is still, by far, the United States. Its nuclear-powered warships still patrol the Yellow Sea and the Taiwan Strait and tens of thousands of its troops are stationed permanently in Japan and South Korea. It is commonly maintained that the US is a declining power but, whatever the truth of that analysis, it remains the only power with a truly global reach, a position its ruling class has no intention of giving up. In June 2011, then US Defence Secretary Robert Gates announced that “There is no slackening of the US commitment to our presence in Asia. We are a Pacific nation. We will remain engaged.”

Nonetheless, it is with the study of class divisions, and the shifting economic status of these countries, that *Asia: Imperialism and Resistance* comes into its own. As noted

in innumerable books, magazines and op-ed articles we may be at the start of a ‘Pacific century’. The economic explosion of Asia onto the world scene has been driven by – what else? – industrialisation, on a bigger scale than ever before.

One of the ironies of the Asian liberation story is that, while it produced some of the most successful socialist movements in history, much of Asia saw Marxism thrive in pre-industrial societies in which the proletariat was often tiny. Lenin’s strategy, by which the working class would ally with the peasantry in order to launch revolution, was essential in such a situation, and it is no coincidence that the influence of Marxism was almost nonexistent in Asia before Lenin. But that situation is now changing.

Recent decades have seen the creation of an enormous working class in East Asia. This may, in time, lead those governing socialist parties which have formerly acted on behalf of an alliance of classes (China and Vietnam, for example) to adapt and develop their strategies to fit the new situation (which is in those countries a product of their own policies); although it should be noted that industrialisation is not finished and in all Asia’s socialist states the rural population remains very large. Elsewhere, however, the

picture becomes bleaker. Coyle notes:

“The rapid development of capitalism in much of Asia has created numerous new tensions in societies that were largely rural and even pre-capitalist just a few generations ago.

Shifting physical production from North America and Europe (as well as Japan) has seen the massive growth of new contingents of the international working class ...

Yet this has occurred at a time when traditional revolutionary working-class parties, communist or socialist, are very much weaker than they were 30 or 50 years ago, or have even been dissolved completely as a result of political disorientation, state repression or a combination of both.

In the capitalist countries of Asia this gap between the growing social weight of the working class and its political weakness provides a new set of challenges for the left in these countries to confront.”

How the Asian left, in state power or out of it,

confronts these challenges will be of paramount importance in the coming century. Increasingly the old capitalist powers, stricken by economic recession, are looking to Asia as a potential solution to their problems. This may be in the form of bail-out loans, though Western foreign direct investment in Asia is huge – and *Asia: Imperialism and Resistance* contains useful information boxes on the investments of British, US and Japanese capital around the region. As Asia becomes the crux of the global economy, the struggles of its working classes will take on a global significance, and could be the deciding factor in whether world capitalism gets a new lease of life or meets its well-earned comeuppance in the coming century.

The tasks facing Asian socialists are huge. Can we help? Coyle reminds us that the task of Western socialists must be to

“help the new wave of Asian struggles through support and solidarity, rather than patronising lecturing. It is also essential for the Western left to be reminded and educated by the historic struggles of the Asian peoples against imperialism, that have displayed such inspiring tenacity and ingenuity.”

POETRY ITSELF IS A KIND OF SUNLIGHT

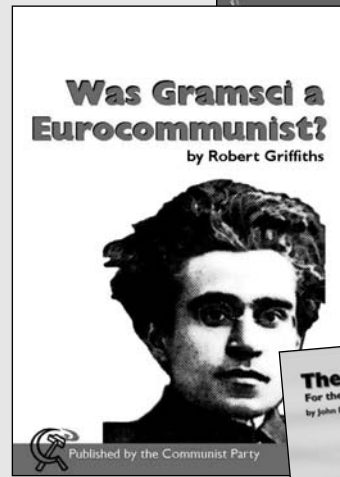
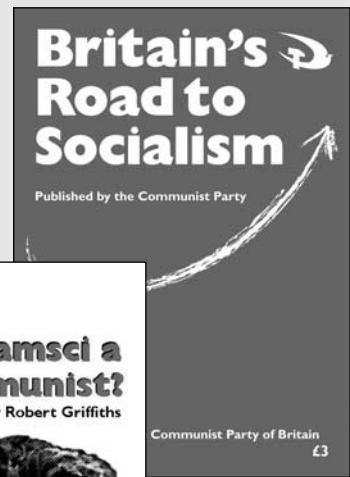
BY YANYI

Believe me, poetry itself is a kind of sunlight
No substance has been found anywhere in the cosmos
That can break the wings of poetry.
Here's a chance at last to meet one another,
The river in Shenzhen chuckles merrily
the sky sheds joyous tears.
Though we've never met before,
We can love each other with brotherly sincerity,

As if we'd lived in the same family
Ten thousand years ago.
Then, believe me, after a hundred thousand years,
We'll still be inseparable.
Yes, there is continual interleaving of poetry's sunlight
While poetry's sun and our hearts
Burn together
Warming and illuminating the cold world.

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