Culture and the Left (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

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"The economic crisis is at the door, and behind it is the shadow of the approaching war. Holding on to things has become the monopoly of a few powerful people, who, God knows, are no more human than the many; for the most part, they are more barbaric, but not in the good way. Everyone else has to adapt – beginning anew and with few resources. They rely on the men who have adopted the cause of the absolutely new and have founded it on insight and renunciation. In its buildings, pictures, and stories, mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be." – Walter Benjamin, Experience and Poverty, 1933

"Today we no longer look toward socialism for a new culture-as inevitably as one will appear, once we do have socialism. Today we look to socialism simply for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now." – Clement Greenberg, Avant-garde and Kitsch, 1939

Cultural issues are at the forefront of leftist discourse today. This was not always the case. The socialists of the 19th– and early-20th-century, from Marx and Engels to Lenin and the Second International, said and wrote comparatively little about culture and art. The question of culture became a major issue for the Left only following the Bolshevik revolution, as the working class was now in power and had a say in cultural production for the first time in its history. The first major Marxists that wrote extensively on culture were Trotsky and Gramsci, and many followed, such as the Frankfurt School and the Situationists. As the revolutionary Left and the workers' movement gradually faded as a political force during the course of the 20th-century, the focus on culture increased proportionally: unable to make demands for social transformation through political action, and armed with superficial readings of Gramsci's call for working-class cultural hegemony, leftists turned to art and culture as the only sphere seemingly amenable to demands for social transformation. Hence, more and more demands for political art, and an increasing tendency to evaluate cultural products in political terms. It is no accident that the culture wars arose simultaneously with the New Left's demise and neoliberal capitalism's political triumph.

The Left's take on culture is predominantly Stalinist. In the USSR during Stalin's reign, cultural products were evaluated primarily for their propaganda content; an artwork was praised to the extent it promoted and/or glorified the regime and its policies, with no consideration of aesthetic form. The same holds for most leftist cultural critics today. Cultural products, from TV series and films to music and literature, are judged on the basis of whether they repeat and promote leftist talking points or not. Countless articles are being written regarding the feminism of Game of Thrones or Barbie, we have boycotts and shaming campaigns for products viewed as politically problematic, and all in all, a moralism pervades our approach to culture. Very few leftists seem interested in addressing the

formal, aesthetic qualities of artworks, which are suspiciously similar to each other regardless of differences in propaganda content.

In its quest for cultural hegemony, the Left seeks to create its own spaces which are supposed to be independent of and hostile to the dominant bourgeois culture. The anarchist practice of squatting is a prime example of that, but there are others. In Cyprus for example there is currently a trend to rent warehouses in order to use them as alternative cultural spaces. Such spaces hold concerts, screenings, performance art, exhibitions, and lots and lots of parties. Hip-hop with socially conscious lyrics is particularly popular in such spaces, though not as popular as techno music. The idea is to have fun outside the logic of profit-making; drinks are cheap, and a DIY mentality dominates. However, the way we have fun in these spaces is suspiciously similar to the way we have fun in ordinary bars and clubs: it is a party culture of mindless hedonism which serves as a respite from the daily drudgery of exploitative work. Even the music sounds exactly the same.

So, what is going on here? Is the Left actually building an alternative culture to the bourgeois status quo, or is it unconsciously replicating bourgeois culture? In my view, it is doing the latter as the former is impossible: one cannot create a non-bourgeois, anti-bourgeois, and/or proletarian culture within the confines of bourgeois society. Furthermore, even after a revolution that puts the working class in power as had happened briefly in Russia after 1917, bourgeois culture persists and the creation of a proletarian culture is impossible, despite attempts to the contrary. The only way to transcend bourgeois culture is by transcending bourgeois society and building socialism. The purpose of this essay is to explain these claims and argue that it is essential for any future Left to stop focusing on cultural issues and focus on reconnecting with the plebeian masses to build a working-class movement for socialism/communism.

Ideology

“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.” – Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, 1846

All Marxists are familiar with the above dictum that in every epoch, the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas. What this means is that in every epoch, the class which is socially dominant is also culturally and intellectually dominant. The class which rules society owns the means of production, including the means of mental production (media, education etc.). It thus controls mental production, which is an objectification of the ruling class’ consciousness. In bourgeois society, the ruling class is the bourgeoisie, and hence, the dominant culture is bourgeois. It is shared by both rulers and the ruled: the working class is culturally bourgeois, like everyone else in bourgeois society.

To avoid a popular misconception, it should be noted that the bourgeoisie does not consciously impose its ideology on everyone else: bourgeois ideology is not a mere strategically useful lie rationalizing existing social conditions. Rather, the ruling ideas are the mental expression of the social relations and conditions which make one class dominant. As Marx puts it: “The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.”[1] In other words, the ruling ideas emanate from the social structure of society regardless of anyone’s intentions; they are the necessary form of consciousness arising from a specific social structure. Because these ideas correspond and are appropriate to the social conditions giving rise to them, they appear as common sense to most people living in bourgeois society, be they capitalists or workers. To give an example, the bourgeois social relations of competition necessarily give rise to the notion that human beings are naturally competitive; most people subscribe to these notions, including most workers. In general, the ruling ideas of each epoch

tend to be naturalized and perceived as eternal truths.

It should also be emphasized that bourgeois ideology is not a mere set of lies or illusions to be rejected tout court. Bourgeois society is self-contradictory, and this is reflected in its ideology which is likewise self-contradictory (and not merely false). For example, the central ideals of bourgeois liberalism are the Enlightenment ideals of freedom, justice, democracy and equality. These are not lies, as many leftists think, but instead ideals which social conditions both promote and undermine simultaneously. For instance, bourgeois society in many countries has legislated formal equality for all its members and this has improved the life of people in certain respects, but in practice there is huge economic inequality as a result of the bourgeois relations of production. Does that mean we ought to reject equality as an illusion? No, it means that we ought to strive to overcome the self-contradiction that prevents the full realization of the ideal of equality.

Let us now consider the implications of the Marxist conception of ideology on culture and art. Given that in every epoch the ruling class is culturally dominant, it follows that in bourgeois society, the bourgeoisie is culturally dominant, and the culture is hence bourgeois. This includes the culture of the working class as well. Now, this does not mean that the cultural and artistic production of the bourgeoisie and the workers is the same, or that all of it is affirmative of bourgeois society. For one, the workers tend to be less cultured and less interested in culture than the bourgeoisie. This is because cultural production and appreciation requires time and education, which the poor and overworked working class generally lacks, despite some exceptions: “Capitalism does not permit the average worker to become thoroughly educated. Because of this the worker who loves a Beethoven symphony or a Faulkner novel is a rare bird indeed.”[2] For another, there are artworks produced in bourgeois society that criticize and attack said society, such as the films of Louis Bunuel or the punk music of the Clash. While critical of bourgeois society, these artworks are still products of the bourgeois world: “they cannot avoid the influence of its forms, traditions and social conditions, although they may fight its ideology.”[3] They may qualify as revolutionary art, and revolutionary art has a role to play in raising revolutionary consciousness, but revolutionary art remains bourgeois, at best self-critically so.

Insofar as the working class organizes itself, it can acquire a *political* culture distinct from the political culture of the bourgeoisie. Broadly speaking, the culture of a class includes its politics, and as Trotsky pointed out, “the culture of the proletariat is concentrated in its political struggle.”[4] In the process of its organization, the proletariat can become a revolutionary class with revolutionary ideas about overcoming capitalism. It develops its own forms of organization and action, which however do not extend to its own cultural forms.[5] Moreover, this political culture is still a product of bourgeois society, specifically, of its self-contradictory character that breeds discontents and points beyond itself to the possibility of communism. The workers might become idealistic and develop solidarity among themselves, but the class struggle will still be motivated by self-interest. The working class cannot overcome individualism and self-interest under capitalism; all of us grew up in a competitive, individualist environment and cannot but be self-interested, whether we are capitalists or workers. The psychology of the capitalists and the workers is essentially the same; the workers are not morally superior. Only by making a revolution that transforms social conditions will a different psychology and culture develop, not before.

The impossibility of proletarian culture

At this point, one might reasonably think that, following a successful proletariat revolution that puts the working class in power, the ruling ideas and culture will become those of the ruling working class. Just like the bourgeoisie and the feudal nobility before it, the proletariat will finally be able develop its own culture and art. However, as Trotsky most famously argued, this is not the case.

According to Trotsky, the proletariat cannot create a genuinely proletarian culture under its class rule because said class rule is meant to be transitional and short in duration, while the creation of culture requires an extended amount of time. It is a common Marxist point that the superstructure, which includes culture, lags behind society's economic base. Consequently, and there is plenty of empirical evidence for this, the formation and full flowering of a new culture corresponding to a new ruling class takes considerable time and reaches completion only at the period preceding the decline of that class' power. For example, bourgeois culture has existed for 600 years, since the Renaissance, and only reached its peak relatively late, during the 19th-century (though this is debatable), at a time when the bourgeoisie started to be challenged by the rising proletariat. Now, the dictatorship of the proletariat is meant to be relatively brief in duration, lasting a few decades at the most, an insufficient duration for creating a new culture. Only if we cease to view the dictatorship of the proletariat as transitional does talk of producing a proletariat culture make sense; it entails abdication of the revolutionary task of transitioning from capitalism to communism and abolishing classes including the proletariat. Qua transitional, this period is not an independent epoch to which corresponds an independent culture: "in its essence, the dictatorship of the proletariat is not an organisation for the production of the culture of a new society, but a revolutionary and military system struggling for it. One must not forget this."[6]

Trotsky also points out that during the transitional dictatorship, the proletariat will be mostly occupied with issues other than culture and art, another reason why proletarian culture will not develop. The proletariat will be primarily occupied in a class struggle against counterrevolutionary tendencies in order to safeguard its rule, and in restructuring production beyond the shackles of capital. It will also be occupied with safeguarding the material well-being of the population, which is a precondition for the production of culture. The revolution and the transitional period will lay down the conditions for a new society, but they will lay them using the methods of the old society, i.e., force and possibly violence. It is likely that the period will involve a lot of destruction, as was the case with the Russian Civil War that followed the 1917 revolution. There was little artistic production in Russia during the Civil War, as conditions of intense class struggle are not suitable for the production of culture. In France during the 1789 revolution and its aftermath, little art was produced; the majority of the art responding to the revolution was made in neighbouring European countries. The development of culture requires social stability, which will only come towards the end of the transition from capitalism to communism. This stability will be proof of the viability of communism and will herald a new society upon which a new, communist culture can be built.

On that note, it should not be forgotten that the aim of the proletariat during its transitional dictatorship is to abolish itself and class society in toto. Unlike the bourgeoisie which took political power in order to safeguard and extend its social power indefinitely, the proletariat takes political power with the purpose of abolishing itself as a class. Such a purpose runs contrary to the purpose of creating a proletarian culture, as the latter would be based on the class character of the proletariat which is to be abolished. The proletariat will indeed engage in and affect cultural production before the advent of communism, but this is a much more modest claim than the claim that the proletariat will create its own culture. To the extent workers engage in cultural and artistic production, said production will be bourgeois until bourgeois culture is overcome. A new culture will indeed start developing as the dictatorship of the proletariat runs its course, but the more this culture develops the less it will have a proletarian and the more it will have a socialist/communist character, as the closer we will be to the abolition of the proletariat as a class. "[T]he longer the proletariat remains a proletariat – that is, bears the traces of its former oppression – the less is it capable of rising above the historic heritage of the past, and the possibilities of new creation will really open themselves only to the extent that the proletariat dissolves itself in a socialist society. All this means, in other words, that the bourgeois culture should be replaced by a socialist, not a proletarian, culture."[7]

Everything we have said is consonant with Marx's point in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* that bourgeois right will persist in the dictatorship of the proletariat and will only be left behind in communism: — "only then [in the higher stage of communism] can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety".[8] The dictatorship of the proletariat is the attempt to overcome bourgeois society on its own basis, and is hence imbued with the bourgeois spirit and its cultural values such as equal pay for equal work. The cultural aspect of bourgeois society will be the last to be overcome given that cultural changes lag behind socioeconomic ones.

Proponents of the need for proletarian culture proceed from a false analogy between the historical development and nature of the bourgeois and the proletariat classes. This analogy is not Marxist. In the Marxist picture, the historical development of the proletariat follows the opposite direction of that of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie started to become dominant socially, e.g., the wealthiest class, long before it acquired political power in the bourgeois revolutions of England, America and France. The bourgeoisie started to dominate socially, and by extension culturally as well, gaining increasing influence and control over educational institutions and the press, while political power was still in the hands of the old aristocratic nobility. In Germany, this was the case as late as 1918; bourgeois science, philosophy and art flourished in Germany while it was under autocratic rule. The bourgeoisie acquires political power only as the capstone of its social dominance.

The historical development of the proletariat follows the opposite course. The proletariat is by definition the propertyless class which has to work in order to survive. This fact restricts it greatly from having the time to educate itself in and produce culture. This is still the case today, with the difference that the bourgeoisie is likewise uninterested in culture and lacking cultural education. While the situation of the workers is not as dire as it was in the factories of the 19th-century (though only in the West), people still work hard during the day and then want distraction and light entertainment on Netflix and social media or rest. They lack the energy and motivation to seriously engage with culture and art. For this situation to change, the proletariat needs first to organize, take power, and restructure production in order to minimize the time it needs to work and free time for engaging culture. Contra the bourgeoisie, it acquires political power as a means to social dominance and as a prerequisite to its engagement with culture: "The bourgeoisie came into power fully armed with the culture of its time. The proletariat, on the other hand, comes into power fully armed only with the acute need of mastering culture."[9] The worker produces culture only to the extent that she escapes the common condition of her class, i.e., only to the extent that she transcends her position as a worker, either by taking the role of a bourgeois intellectual or by overcoming her working-class position in socialism. In other words, the worker produces culture to the extent that she is not a worker, and hence, said culture is not proletarian.[10]

A final essential point is that culture cannot be created on a blank slate. Each new culture begins when a class is able to differentiate its cultural production from the already-existing tradition and employ elements of the past tradition in new ways while adding new elements to it. We would not be able to talk of historical development otherwise.[11] This is a process that takes time as a new culture entails a change in one's sensibility, outlook and emotions. The change is much more fundamental than merely changing ideology because you have been convinced by an argument.[12] Artistic creation has a large unconscious psychological component that is not directly affected by one's reasoning and views and that is changing more slowly than the latter. This fact may lead and has led to situations where we have intellectuals that grew up in a bourgeois environment but have been convinced that the cause of the proletariat is just and have allied themselves with it, but without foregoing their deeply-ingrained bourgeois psychology and sensibility. Each new culture is in dialogue with and is a response to the culture that came before it. The proletariat is prevented from familiarizing itself with the bourgeois cultural tradition, which has in fact been buried and forgotten by

the bourgeoisie themselves, as we shall see. Consequently, it is tasked first with recalling and mastering said tradition, in order to then go beyond it. During the dictatorship of the proletariat then, the proletariat will first and foremost need to master bourgeois culture, not try to create a new culture from the ground up. The latter is simply impossible: any attempts to produce a new culture out of nothing will end up unconsciously reproducing bourgeois forms.

In the early years of the Soviet Union there were attempts by multiple groups of intellectuals to create authentic proletarian art. However, art and culture cannot be created by an intellectual vanguard on its own, separated from the working class, even if said vanguard is constituted by proletarian intellectuals. Culture is the organic sum of the knowledge, sensibility, values and capacities of a society, and as such, cannot be created artificially, without input from and interaction with the mass of people: “Art is created on the basis of a continual everyday, cultural, ideological inter-relationship between a class and its artists. Between the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie and their artists there was no split in daily life. The artists lived, and still live, in a bourgeois milieu, breathing the air of bourgeois salons, they received and are receiving hypodermic inspirations from their class. This nourishes the subconscious processes of their creativity.”[13] The conditions for such an organic interrelationship between working-class intellectuals and the rest of the class do not exist either under capitalism or during the dictatorship of the proletariat for the reasons given above. Thus, the art created by intellectuals sympathetic to the revolution such as Mayakovsky and Pilnyak is pro-worker but in a bourgeois sense, while so-called socialist realism was only a kitsch version of the 19th-century’s bourgeois social realism.

The workers’ stake in bourgeois culture

We have said above that the workers need to master bourgeois culture and art and in order to go beyond it. At first glance, this appears a strange proposition coming from the Left: isn’t bourgeois culture something to be opposed? After all, culture serves to legitimize the class organization of society, and the exploitative bourgeois society gives rise to an exploitative culture. Bourgeois culture and ideology are instruments of class oppression by legitimizing and naturalizing the latter. For this reason, most leftists oppose bourgeois culture, along with anything bourgeois.

The issue needs to be approached dialectically, like everything bourgeois. According to Marxism, capitalism oppresses us but we can only overcome capitalism on its own basis, realizing capitalism’s own potential for socialism. Similarly, technology oppresses us but we can only overcome oppression through applying technology. It is naïve and unfeasible to reject all prior scientific knowledge just because it was developed by the bourgeoisie: efforts to do that under Stalin proved disastrous.[14] With regards to bourgeois culture, while it has a pernicious ideological function, it is also a necessary tool for proletarian liberation in the sense that the proletariat needs to master the accumulated knowledge and skill of humanity and employ them in creating a classless society. Even if our ultimate goal is to cleanse, modify and eventually overcome bourgeois science and art with communist science and art, mastering bourgeois culture is a prerequisite for this goal: “Assimilation and application go hand in hand here with critical re-working.”[15]

It is also important to note that bourgeois culture, like every culture, is not merely something negative. Culture is everything that has been created by humanity’s collective efforts and has served to enhance human capacities and our standard of living. Art cultivates us by making us more psychologically complex, more sensitive and empathetic, increasing our emotional intelligence, and generally enriching our minds. This enrichment is a genuine achievement of the development of culture that must be safeguarded. Mastering bourgeois culture, such as its science and art, is necessary for the intellectual and emotional cultivation of the workers, and this cultivation is necessary if they are to build a better society than this one. Any clearly reactionary art that threatens to undermine class solidarity and revolutionary fervor ought to be rejected, of course, but it is childish

to think that the greatest achievements of bourgeois art such as the works of Shakespeare, Dostoevsky or Beethoven constitute such a threat.[16] The artistic significance of such works does not lie in what they reveal about the ideology and social conditions of their respective epochs – i.e., in the ideological limitations of the works – but in what they reveal that is universal to human experience in class society, enhancing our understanding and sensitivity towards the world and our fellow human beings.

To sum up, "there can be no question of the creation of a new culture, that is, of construction on a large historic scale during the period of dictatorship. The cultural reconstruction, which will begin when the need of the iron clutch of a dictatorship unparalleled in history will have disappeared, will not have a class character. This seems to lead to the conclusion that there is no proletarian culture and that there never will be any and in fact there is no reason to regret this. The proletariat acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture and to make way for human culture. We frequently seem to forget this."[17] In other words, we should not be sad that proletarian culture is impossible, as we will have socialist/communist culture, the first universally human, classless culture in history.

Once the proletariat has completed its revolutionary task of abolishing bourgeois social relations, the drastic reduction of the time people are required to work will provide ample opportunity for cultural creation. Communism will provide hitherto unprecedented possibilities for cultural creation by freeing up lots of time for the development of individual talents and creative activities. Freed from the imperative of producing profit, the arts and the sciences will develop much more than under capitalism. The changed social conditions will give rise to a new psychology, and by extension, to a new art adequate to the new human being and the new conditions. Art will express the new spiritual point of view of the new human being. This will happen inevitably due to the changed social conditions, so it does not have to be decreed by the state.[18] It is impossible to predict what the new culture will be like because we cannot predict the effect on the human psyche of communism's qualitatively different social conditions. We can nevertheless presume that it will be imbued with the spirit of solidarity, friendship and sympathy that will characterize communist society. Moreover, we can be sure that communist culture will appreciate all that is valuable in past cultures.

The problem: The terminal decline of bourgeois culture

The task of a proletarian intelligentsia in the present and the immediate future is thus not to attempt to create a new proletarian or non-/anti-bourgeois culture, but to teach to the backward masses the best elements of the already existing culture, of its science and art. By the time the proletariat will have mastered bourgeois culture and will have begun to modify it to create a new culture, it will be close to its self-abolition as a class: "One has only to add that before the proletariat will have passed out of the stage of cultural apprenticeship, it will have ceased to be a proletariat."[19]

What complicates this task is that in the present, bourgeois culture is in terminal decline. It started developing during the Renaissance and arguably reached its peak in the 18th– and early 19th-century. After the Industrial Revolution, it fell into successive crises that gradually destroyed it. The general bourgeois public of the 19th– and early 20th-centuries – from the so-called middle class and up – was way more culturally educated than now. People were united by a common humanistic tradition and a liberal education, hence having common cultural points of reference. People cared about art a lot, as evidenced by the many debates regarding art and philosophy in the 19th-century; novels by Balzac and Hoffman are populated by characters having such lively debates. The 20th-century saw the destruction of this common humanistic tradition, the killing blow being the two World Wars and the rise of fascism, but the roots of the rot lie in the rise of monopoly capitalism. The utilitarian instrumental ethos and the overt specialization characterizing monopoly capitalism placed

no value in the liberal arts, which fell into disrepair.

Both Trotsky and Walter Benjamin identified said cultural decline. In *Experience and Poverty,* Benjamin describes how the shared culture and accumulated experience and tradition of past generations was destroyed by the traumatic event of WW1, heralding an era of barbarism: "[E]xperience has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world… A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body."[20] The barbarism and poverty Benjamin refers to is not of the colloquial kind, but rather, a spiritual and moral poverty resulting from a kind of overproduction of experience: we are being bombarded with endless amount of information and goods that we cannot properly process, a rapidly changing world that leaves us dazed and confused. Trotsky for his part notes that bourgeois society was able to have a relatively stable and flowering culture as long as the bourgeoisie were politically and morally democratic, i.e., allowed the free expression of artists and could afford to be or appear socially liberal while retaining the social peace. The deepening of the social contradictions of capitalism, however, made bourgeois society "completely incapable of offering the minimum conditions for the development of tendencies in art which correspond, however little, to our epoch."[21] Both authors highlight the 20th-century as an epoch of shattered values and existential uncertainty, and this has only been exacerbated by the never-ending crises of the 21st-century (the War on Terror, the 2008 financial crisis, Covid, the threat of WW3, climate change, increasing government surveillance over the whole of our lives etc.)

At present, our education is strictly utilitarian, preparing us for the very competitive, specialized job market, with precious few resources spent on cultural education. We have become unable to separate art from entertainment, rejecting demanding artworks and favoring the light entertainment of blockbusters and pop music. The difference between the cultured middle- and upper-classes and the uncultured working class has evaporated into a common lack of culture and desire for mindless hedonistic entertainment and escapist stupefaction. People do not make the necessary effort to understand serious art, but instead expect the artist to lull them with entertainment. Avant-garde art has little to no audience and has almost become extinct, while the serious art of the past such as classical music is likewise the purview of a dwindling number of people. The last few years saw a rising tendency to judge cultural products on the basis of their producer's identity, disregarding the qualities of the product itself: the ultimate barbarism.

Even the few artists who persevere in trying to create art beyond entertainment do so with diminishing returns. They understand that the world is out of joint and portray this in their art but cannot identify the root of the problem, namely, capitalism. Their art tends to be either nihilistic and dystopian a la Lars Von Trier and Lanthimos, or escapist, seeking refuge in the cult of love a la Wim Wenders or in anodyne humanism a la Dardenne Brothers and Ken Loach. The situation confirms Trotsky's quip that "art, which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected, suffers most from the decline and decay of bourgeois society."[22]

The result of the decline of bourgeois culture is that its best aspects have been forgotten even by most bourgeois intellectuals, erased by postmodernism, with the possible exception of advances in the natural sciences.[23] There appear to be very few intellectuals, either from the bourgeois or the proletarian class, that have received an education in the best traditions of the past and who can thus transmit their education to the proletarian masses. A big reason for this has been the Stalinist total rejection of bourgeois culture as irredeemable decadence, a rejection that the Left has since naturalized. By throwing away the baby together with the bathwater with regards to culture, where does that leave us?

After culture

It leaves us with the unenviable but necessary task of having to outlive culture. Benjamin was prescient about this, writing in “Experience and Poverty” that “mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be.”[24] In that essay, Benjamin was trying to identify potential and possibility in the aforementioned barbaric present, to see how and whether we could utilize the new barbarism in order to go beyond it. He was trying to view the modern barbarism descending upon humanity dialectically, i.e., to not view barbarism as something merely negative (which it is), but also as an occasion for new possibilities for a better future. He thus called for, as he put it, “a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right.”[25] Benjamin was suggesting that our spiritual and moral poverty calls for a new start for human civilization from scratch. In the present, I would argue such a new start is definitely necessary, as culture is dead and we have outlived it. This new start must amount to a foregoing of the current leftist focus on cultural hegemony and cultural alternatives to capitalism, and on rebuilding instead a working-class movement that would target the root of the problem, namely, the bourgeois social relations of production.

I started this essay by noting that the Left’s focus on culture is inversely proportional to the Left’s political potency. Unfortunately for the Left, the culture wars are no substitute for politics nor can they lead to renewed political power for the Left. Rather, any genuine, living culture in the present is predicated on the existence of revolutionary leftist politics, as Clement Greenberg’s quotation at the beginning of this essay indicates. In his famous essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch”, Greenberg stressed that as long as the masses have to work hard in order to make a living, they will lack the necessary leisure time, comfort and energy to be educated in appreciating culture. He notes that there is no natural instinct for cultural cultivation; consequently, when the worker has a little free time, she will choose to unwind from the pressures and anxieties of work by consuming kitsch, e.g., generic TV shows, which require no mental effort. Only with the drastic reduction in necessary labor time which requires a socialist revolution will the masses of workers have the time for proper aesthetic cultivation. In other words, contrary to what most progressives and leftists think, there can be no art and culture for the masses under capitalism.[26]

As Trotsky put it with regards to art: “To find a solution to this impasse through art itself is impossible. It is a crisis which concerns all culture, beginning at its economic base and ending in the highest spheres of ideology. Art can neither escape the crisis nor partition itself off. Art cannot save itself. It will rot away inevitably… unless present-day society is able to rebuild itself. This task is essentially revolutionary in character.”[27] Art, and culture more broadly, cannot save society; it cannot even save itself from extinction. This is because art does not lie at the base of bourgeois society, but is its most vulnerable ideological component. At its best, modern critical art could express the suffering caused by capitalism and point to the need to overcome it, but could not on its own satisfy said need. The need can only be satisfied by revolutionary politics that will transform society, saving humanity from capitalist barbarism and art itself with it. Almost a century later, critical art has rotted away and our cultural products prove the infamous proposition that it is easier for us to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

What hasn’t changed since Marx’s time is the existence of capitalism with its recurring crises. Said crises continue to produce discontents and potential for radical social movements. We, the barbarians of the 21st century, must reconnect the discontents of the working class with the need to struggle to overcome capitalism. Instead of building our impotent subcultures separately from the mass of society, we should reach out to the working masses and start addressing their bread-and-butter

concerns as the first step in rebuilding a revolutionary proletarian movement.

Phedias Christodoulides

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[1] Tucker, Robert C., editor. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Norton, 1978, p. 172-3.

[2] Hutter, Trent, *The Stake of Workers in Bourgeois Culture*, Fourth International, Vol.17 No.1, Winter 1956, pp.21-24: https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/fi/vol17/no01/hutter.html

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Hutter: "While the workers have developed forms of action and organization of their own, the anti-bourgeois artist must continue to use the art forms of bourgeois culture."

[6] Trotsky, Leon. *What is Proletarian Culture and Is It Possible?*, 1923: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23c.htm

[7] Trotsky, Leon. *The Revolution Betrayed*, 1937, Ch. 7: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/ch07.htm

[8] Marx, Karl. *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1875, Part 1: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm

[9] Trotsky, Leon. *What is Proletarian Culture and Is It Possible?*, 1923: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23c.htm

[10] Trotsky: "The proletariat in bourgeois society is a propertyless and deprived class, and so it cannot create a culture of its own. Only after taking power does it really become aware of its own frightful cultural backwardness. In order to overcome this it needs to abolish those conditions which keep it in the position of a class, the proletariat. The more we can speak of a new culture in being, the less this will possess a class character." *Class and Art*, 1924: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/05/art.htm

[11] Trotsky: "A new class does not begin to create all of culture from the beginning, but enters into possession of the past, assorts it, touches it up, rearranges it, and builds on it further. If there were no such utilisation of the 'secondhand' wardrobe of the ages, historic processes would have no progress at all." *The Social Roots and the Social Function of Literature*, 1923: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23b.htm

[12] Trotsky: "The heart of the matter is that artistic creativity, by its very nature, lags behind the other modes of expression of a man's spirit, and still more of the spirit of a class. It is one thing to understand something and express it logically, and quite another thing to assimilate it organically, reconstructing the whole system of one's feelings, and to find a new kind of artistic expression for this new entity. The latter process is more organic, slower, more difficult to subject to conscious influence – and in the end it will always lag behind." *Class and Art*.

[13] Trotsky, Leon. *Class and Art*, 1924: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/05/art.htm

[14] Eventually, we will have scientists that will have grown up under socialist conditions and will be

able to advance beyond bourgeois science, but it will take a long time before we will be able to undertake a complete paradigm shift in the sciences.

[15] Trotsky, Leon. *Culture and Socialism*, 1927: https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2008/10/cult-o23.html

[16] Trotsky: “What the worker will take from Shakespeare, Goethe, Pushkin, or Dostoyevsky will be a more complex idea of human personality, of its passions and feelings, a deeper and profounder understanding of its psychic forces and of the role of the subconscious, etc. In the final analysis, the worker will become richer.” *Communist Policy Toward Art*, 1923: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23.htm

[17] Trotsky, Leon. *What is Proletarian Culture and Is it Possible?*, 1923. https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23c.htm

[18] Trotsky: “The proletariat has to have in art the expression of the new spiritual point of view which is just beginning to be formulated within him, and to which art must help him give form. This is not a state order, but a historic demand. Its strength lies in the objectivity of historic necessity. You cannot pass this by, nor escape its force…” *The Social Roots and the Social Function of Literature*: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23b.htm

[19] Trotsky, Leon. *What is Proletarian Culture and Is it Possible?*, 1923. https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23c.htm

[20] Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 731-2.

[21] Trotsky, Leon. *Art and Politics in Our Epoch*, 1938: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/06/artpol.htm

[22] Ibid.

[23] A plausible argument can be made that even the natural sciences are not really progressing except quantitatively: the last major paradigm shift in the sciences occurred in the early 20th-century, during the high-point and crisis of Marxism with the splits of the Second and the Third Internationals.

[24] Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 735.

[25] Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 732.

[26] Greenberg: “Superior culture is one of the most artificial of all human creations, and the [worker] finds no “natural” urgency within himself that will drive him toward Picasso in spite of all difficulties. In the end the [worker] will go back to kitsch when he feels like looking at pictures, for he can enjoy kitsch without effort. The state is helpless in this matter and remains so as long as the problems of production have not been solved in a socialist sense. The same holds true, of course, for capitalist countries and makes all talk of art for the masses there nothing but demagogy.” Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Beacon Press Boston, 1939, p. 18.

[27] Trotsky, Leon. *Art and Politics in Our Epoch*, 1938: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/06/artpol.htm

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