ELEMENTS OF A

PEOPLE’S CULTURAL POLICY

The chairman of the Communist Party discusses art as a weapon; foresees a resurgence of progressive spirit in all cultural fields.

By WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

As a start on a people’s cultural program, there must be a clear understanding that “art is a weapon” in the class struggle. Not only is art a weapon, but a very potent one as well. Through 5,000 years of recorded history ruling classes have understood this fact and have lavishly used art to buttress their regimes. This was true of the early Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, Roman and other great empires, whose potentates not only made wide use of architecture, precious metal work, sculpture, the dance, poetry, pottery, and so forth, for beauty and luxury’s sake, but used them especially to impress the enslaved masses with the power and divine origin of the rulers and their God-given right to retain their domination. Throughout the long centuries of feudalism, also, the dominating landed aristocracy made free use of every major art form to glorify itself and to entrench its class rule. Especially was the powerful Catholic hierarchy skillful in this use of art during the Middle Ages. Its gorgeous cathedrals, splendid rituals, and great music, sculpture and painting were all designed to awe the people and to strengthen the Church’s material and spiritual control.

Likewise the modern capitalist class, from its inception, has extensively used art in many forms as a means both to defeat its early feudal rivals and to establish its domination over the present-day working class. One would be blind not to see that the major art forms of today—the radio, the motion picture, the novel, the theater and so forth—all of which are highly organized and capitalized—are instruments used by the bourgeoisie not only for
profit and pleasure's sake, but also to
defend their class rule. This artistic
support of capitalism is often subtle,
which makes it the more effective.
Thus in the various bourgeois mediums
of art and culture the whole capitalist
system, with all its ethical and moral
implications, is taken for granted as
the inevitable and immutable form of
society, and as such it is systematically
and dextrously supported.

In view of the long indisputable his-
toric record of the use of art by ruling
classes as a major means to maintain
themselves in power, it is absurd to
contend at this date that “art is not a
weapon”; that it is some sort of mystic
force “above the battle” of the classes.
Throughout the ages of civilization
artists have, for the most part, sung,
written, painted and built in the class
interest of the current political and
clerical rulers.

Second, we must also recognize that
not only have all ruling classes through-
out the centuries used art as a class
weapon, but they have also kept their
artists in the status of servitors. In the
great empires of antiquity artists, even
the most eminent, were often, if not
usually, actual slaves. Under feudalism
also, while the position of cultural
workers was somewhat better, the
ruling classes nevertheless dominated
them ruthlessly. The “patronage” sys-
tem prevailed almost universally, under
which arrangement the livelihood of
the poet, painter, playwright, sculptor
or architect depended upon the good-
will of ruling class “angels.” Thus,
many of the great plays, paintings and
other works of art (and even various
scientific studies of the Middle Ages)
were dedicated in the most servile
terms of adulation to the insignificant
princes of state and Church who
financed them.

Capitalism uses somewhat less obvi-
ous ways than slavery and the patron-
age system (although strong remnants
of the latter still remain) to retain
control of its artists and its cultural
workers, but its methods are neverthe-
less effective. With the great organized
cultural institutions of our times firmly
in their grasp, the capitalists confront
artists with the ultimatum that if they
want to work and live they must de-
defend the prevalent social system
through their various forms of artistic
expression. The artist is “free” under
capitalism no more than the industrial
worker is “free,” although the artist’s
shackles may be gilded and somewhat
less obvious than those of the worker.

The artist, be he playwright, actor,
novelist, musician or what not, who
ventures upon artistic work detrimental
to the interests of the ruling bourgeoisie
may expect to find himself belabored
by their heavy weapons of boycott or
direct attack, as thousands of Left
and progressive artists have found out
to their bitter cost. On the other hand,
if the artist sings the glories of capitalism
(and can do it competently, and if
there is no surfeit of artists) he will
find himself a financial success. Free
art and free artists under capitalism
are a fiction. As Lenin said: “The freedom
of the bourgeois writer, artist, or ac-
tress is nothing but a self-deceptive (or
hypocritically deceiving) dependence
upon the money bags, upon bribery,
upon patronage.”

Under fascism it is made especially
clear that the bourgeoisie uses art as a
weapon and also controls its artists as
instruments of class rule. In Nazi Ger-
many, for example, art in all its forms
was hardly more than the crudest
propaganda, and the artists, no less
than members of the Wehrmacht, were
soldiers of the German imperialist
bourgeoisie. Throughout capitalism
generally the same principles apply,
but it is under fascism that the subju-
gation of bourgeois art to bourgeois
political rule is made unmistakably
obvious.

Historically, however, although
ruling classes have always under-
stood and used art and artists as major
instruments to maintain their economic,
political and religious regimes, they
have never been able fully to monopo-
lize art or completely to enslave the
artists. All through the ages the op-
pressed classes, often under severe hard-
ships, have developed in greater or
lesser degree their own art forms and
artists. National cultures are rich with
the peoples’ folk songs, their minstrels
and ballad singers, their poetry, their
theaters, their artistic handicrafts.
Moreover, rising revolutionary social
classes, instinctively realizing the im-
portance of art as a social weapon,
have always forged their own art and
used it to challenge that of the existing
ruling class. The national culture in
any given period has never been identi-
cal with the culture of the ruling class.
Only under socialism, with its aboli-
tion of classes, does there develop an
integrated, harmonious and luxuriant
culture, expressive of the moods, in-
terests and artistic spirit of all sections
of the population.

Especially vivid and dramatic was
the winning struggle of the art and
artists of the rising bourgeoisie against
those of the declining feudal aristoc-
acy, a struggle which lasted from the
sixteenth century right down (in di-
minishing degree) to our own times.
Thus, for example, the great play-
wrights of the late feudal period waged
fierce (and largely conscious) warfare
against the new writers and ways of
life of the developing bourgeoisie.
And thus, Protestantism all over Europe,
with a leftist anti-artistic streak that
it has not yet fully recovered from,
tried, with its austere doctrines and its
naked churches, to combat the feudal-
istic influence of the magnificent Cath-
olic cathedrals and their gorgeous re-
ligious ritualism. Akin to this leftist
was the English Puritan bourgeoisie’s
bitter assaults upon the theater, which
had long been an artistic and political
buttruss of feudalism. These cultural
class conflicts greatly complicated the
character of art during such revolu-
tionary periods, often producing hybrid
as well as new forms of art and litera-
ture, combining different class art
expressions in the person of individual
writers, painters, poets, architects, etc.
Thus Shakespeare, although reflecting
certain feudal values, nevertheless
displayed some influences of the rising
bourgeoisie. But through all this maze
of varied art expression Marxists have
little difficulty in tracing the ideologi-
cal battle lines of the contending social
classes.

We are now living in such a period
of revolutionary art struggle, with all
its complexities and subtleties. The ad-
ancing proletariat, with the rest of the
democratic forces tending to follow in
its train, is challenging the bourgeoisie
in the fields of culture, as well as in
those of industry and politics. These
new artistic trends, which are to be
found in every phase of present-day
culture, are not to be considered
merely as variations or currents in
bourgeois art. In the fire of the cur-
rent class struggle the elements of
a new people’s culture are being
forged.

This new people’s art is not a Socialist
culture, as it has not broken with capi-
talist ideology; but it is nevertheless
imbued with a democratic spirit and it
is arrayed against capitalist reaction and
fascism. The new democratic culture
now developing embraces interests as
broad and deep as the people’s love of
freedom, their sense of beauty, their
hopes and aspiration, their hates and

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loves and fears, their plans and struggles, their defeats and victories.

The basic task of Communist and other democratic artists and cultural workers of all kinds is to identify themselves with this basic artistic striving of the masses and to help it find effective expression in all its ramifications. There are some artists, however, among them pseudo-Lefts, who, with the slogan of "art for art’s sake," claim that the life interests of the democratic masses of our people are too restricted to provide these artists with adequate breadth for the expression of their artistic talents. Such people seem to be able to find true artistic expression only when they are voicing the moods and ideas and interests of the bourgeoisie in one way or another. The real motivation of such people is less ideological than material. Beneath their elaborate defense of the freedom of capitalist art lies a longing for the rich fleshpots with which capitalism rewards its artistic defenders. The artistic and political degeneration of such writers as Richard Wright, John Dos Passos, James Farrell and others, who claimed that the Left cranked their artistic qualities, illustrates this point.

The new, elementary people’s culture is developing along two general avenues. For one thing, progressive artists are raising their voices independently in literature, in the theater, and in various other artistic fields. At the same time they are also exerting constructive pressures upon the organized, capitalized cultural forms: the radio, the press, the motion pictures, etc.

Communist and other democratic artists should cultivate both of these streams of the new people’s art. As the very basis of their activity, they should further the growth of every form of democratic cultural activities outside direct capitalist control, including the work of independent artists in every field, the publication of good books and the production of progressive plays, the promotion of artistic and general cultural work by trade unions, Negro groups, farmers’ organizations and other people’s groupings, the development of democratic art projects by the local, state and national governments, the strengthening of publication facilities by the Left, and the establishment of organized artists’ movements. It was one of the worst features of Browder’s revisionism in the cultural field that, with its policy of tainting the bourgeoisie, it tended to liquidate these independent artistic endeavors.

Progressive artists should also strive to make their constructive influence felt within the scope of the great commercialized organizations of the bourgeoisie—motion pictures, radio, literature, theater, etc. Artists must eat, like other people. Many artists, therefore, are necessarily constrained to work under direct capitalist controls, on employers’ payrolls, pretty much as workers are. It is also a political and artistic necessity to penetrate the commercialized art medium. It would be as foolish for artists to refuse to work for bourgeois cultural organizations as it would be for workers to declare a permanent strike against the capitalists’ industries.

But this does not mean that artists so employed should become servile tools or prostitutes for these exploiters, as unfortunately many do. On the contrary, the progressive artists have a double responsibility. Not only should they actually cultivate every form of independent artistic activity, but they should also fight, as workers do in the capitalist industry, to make their democratic influence felt in the commercialized cultural organizations. The fact that the capitalists, through their commercialized art forms, have to appeal, for profit’s sake, to the broadest ranks of the people, makes these forms especially vulnerable to ideological and organizational pressure, as much experience demonstrates.

Often, the struggle against the capitalists’ domination of the organized cultural field is a very difficult one, as many Left artists have learned to their cost. But the struggle can be greatly facilitated if the artists will call upon the people in their mass organizations to support their struggle for democratic art.

Here, the trade unions and artistic guilds have an especially important role to play. Artists in the motion picture industry, for example, whether actors, writers, or others, should fight against all “Stepin Fechit” caricatures of the Negro people, against Red-baiting, anti-Semitism, anti-trade union concepts and other reactionary currents. More than this, artists and writers on the payroll of the capitalists should also fight to compel bourgeois commercial art to make place for positive expression of the new cultural needs of the people.

Toscanini refusing, under heavy threats, to play the Italian fascist national anthem, a Robeson or a Sinatra singing the songs of the people on capitalist-produced radio and motion picture programs, a Dreiser blasting away at narrow-minded literary standards—these are typical symbols of how true democratic artists can compel even the highly-organized bourgeois culture to hearken to the voice of the masses. When such courageous artists get solid backing from the democratic mass organizations it will be possible to strike a much sharper progressive note in our national culture, even in those big branches of it that are organized primarily for profit and to develop ideological support for the capitalist system.

It was also an especially disastrous effect of Browderism that it weakened such struggles within the capitalized art forms and tended to surrender the artists to Browder’s so-called progressive bourgeoisie.

The special task of the Communists in the development of the new democratic trends in our national culture is to enrich culture with Marxist understanding and to carry it to the people. The Communists must, above all others, be the ones to understand the true significance of art as a weapon in the class struggle and to know how to combat all reactionary capitalist ideological hindrances to the development of the new people’s democratic art. They must realistically develop a penetrating Marxist criticism. They must strive for the utmost excellence in their own artistic creative work. They must take the lead in educating and mobilizing the great masses to support all independent art projects of the people, to fight against reactionary trends in the capitalistically organized literature, theater, radio, motion pictures, etc., and to insist upon democratic artistic expressions through these powerful mediums. They must ceaselessly teach artists the elements of Marxism and inspire the whole body of artistic and cultural workers with the perspective of the great cultural renaissance that socialism brings with it.

The Communists, to be effective in all this work, must be alert to fight against the Left and Right dangers. Left sectarian trends are prominent in the new people’s democratic art. They may have done great harm in the past and are still not without considerable negative effects. Among such leftist trends may be noted tendencies to sweep aside all bourgeois art, past and present, as useless and dangerous, to have contempt for all art that is not immediately expressive of the class struggle, to fall into narrow cultism of various sorts.
to idealize the working class, to disdain high standards in artistic technique, to adopt sectarian attitudes toward the problems of artists working in the organized art mediums and cultural organizations of the bourgeoisie, etc. Such leftist conceptions have nothing in common with a people’s cultural policy. The Communists, contrary to all such narrowness, should have the highest appreciation, as exemplified by Lenin and the Russian Bolsheviks, of bourgeois artistic achievements; they should have the broadest of all conceptions of what art is and of its vital social role; they should strive to be masters of artistic techniques and should eagerly learn much that bourgeoisie artists have to teach in this respect; they should be militant opponents of every conception of “artists in uniform” controls; they should be leaders in the artistic fight in every field not only in the initiation of independent art activities, but also in cultivating democratic expressions within the scope of the bourgeoisie’s organized, capitalized cultural mediums. They must especially fight against the destructive effects of Trotskyism in every cultural field.

Left sectarian trends are still highly corrosive to a democratic cultural program. Nevertheless, the main danger in the cultural field is the Right danger, which is the direct pressure of capitalism itself. This Right danger, in general, expresses itself in the tendency of cultural workers to fall victims of, or surrender to, the insidious attempts of the bourgeoisie to stifle every manifestation of the new people’s art and to enslave ideologically the people’s artists. Among the major manifestations of the Right danger is the acceptance of the bourgeois propaganda to the effect that art is “free” and has nothing to do with the class struggle; that the artist has no democratic message for the people; that the man as artist has no relationship to the man as citizen, and that technical content and not social content is the essence of art. Such ideas not only liquidate the democratic ideology of the artist, but also degenerate him into a puppet of the bourgeoisie, a defender of every detrimental feature of capitalist culture, an acceptor of the wages of the capitalists in return for poisoning the minds of the people. Browderism tended to cultivate all these enervating Right tendencies. The Communists must be the leaders in fighting against such Right dangers, which operate to make the artist merely an appendage and servant of the decadent capitalist system and its sterile art.

The present debate now going on in the left-wing press over the original Albert Maltz article in New Masses is a healthy sign of the correction of our revisionism in the cultural field, as well as in other branches of our Party’s work. For Browder, with his imperialistic theories to the effect that the American bourgeoisie has become progressive, not only set our Party to tailing after the capitalists in the field of politics, but also in that of culture. Maltz’s article expressed elements of this Right trend, now happily being corrected by Maltz himself. From the course of the debate it is clear that the necessary rectifications in our Party’s understanding and practice are being made.

The tone of the debate has been sharp. Some people attempt to interpret this sharpness as an indication that the Communist Party wants to regiment the artists. But this is decidedly not the case; the Party wants to cultivate the maximum freedom of artistic expression among cultural workers of all kinds. It knows full well that without such freedom there can be no productive people’s art. But Maltz’s article was of a highly theoretical character, and in matters of theory Communists insist upon clarity. Maltz in his article attempted to lay down, and incorrectly, the line that should be followed generally by progressive artists in every field of culture. Hence his proposals had to be discussed with all the sharpness necessary to achieve theoretical clarity. The debate is a healthy one. The Communist Party and its friends are now getting a much-needed lesson in the principles of Marxism in the cultural field, and the Party is actively laying the basis for the soundest artistic program it has ever had.

The next years will show a tremendous resurgence of progressive spirit in every cultural field. Capitalism is sinking deeper into its general crisis, and the reactionaries, who see their precious social system threatened, are moving again in the direction of fascism and another world war in an attempt to save it. More and more the democratic forces, here and abroad, are going over onto the political and ideological offensive against capitalist decadence in all its manifestations. These awakening masses and peoples will increasingly demand the voice of every kind of artist in their struggle against reactionary capitalists, especially American big capital. Hence our Party must be fully prepared to play a vital leading role in this broad cultural movement of the people, even as it does in every other phase of the class struggle.

This Week’s Rankest

"HE doesn’t want to be shut up in school all day."—Senator Rankest.