

WSWS arts editor David Walsh discusses art and the present political situation

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During a visit to San Francisco to attend the annual international film festival, David Walsh spoke to a receptive audience on the significance of the SEP election campaign and the current cultural and political situation in the United States. The meeting—held at San Francisco State University—drew a diverse group, made up of members of various professions including healthcare, education and auto mechanics, with participants ranging from age 17 to 74.

The lecture was followed by a lively discussion, which carried on until 10 p.m., well after the meeting ended. The topics of discussion ranged from a consideration of the increasingly volatile love/hate of the American public for celebrities, in particular Barry Bonds, the character of the new film on the September 11 terrorist attacks (*Flight 93*) to the relatively low-level of historical understanding among college students.

Nearly all the meeting's participants offered to volunteer their time to the SEP election campaign, making donations and purchasing over \$100 worth of pamphlets and books.

Walsh began by drawing a parallel between the political complacency which followed the post-World War II boom period in the US to that of the pre-1914 period. "Some of the notions that arose in the period of economic expansion from 1871 to 1914 bear a resemblance to the illusions produced during the decades following the end of World War II in 1945." He located the material root of these notions by analogizing to the present international situation, "the jockeying for position by the various great powers (today in Europe, America and Asia), the creation of alliances that may or may not endure, the entry of new economic powers (such as China and India) and the growth of intense economic rivalries that cannot be resolved within the old status quo, colonial adventures that threaten to burst into wider conflagrations (Iraq, Iran), a furious growth of armaments."

Walsh quoted from Trotsky's core analysis of WWI: "The present war is at bottom a revolt of the forces of production against the political form of nation and state. It means the collapse of the national state as an independent economic unit." He pointed to the revolutionary opportunities created by this enduring contradiction and the increased urgency of a socialist political intervention. "These words should have the most immediate meaning to us. The unprecedented globalization of recent decades has raised the conflict between the forces of production and the nation-state system to new heights. This conflict is the objective ground for a new wave of revolutionary struggles."

Counterposing popular resistance to attacks on the standard of living in France to the imperialist slaughter in Iraq and the possibility of a nuclear strike on Iran, Walsh pointed to the two roads that lay before working people internationally, saying, "The alternatives before the

world's population are socialism or barbarism."

Walsh prefaced his lecture on art and culture with an appeal to the supporters in attendance. "The Socialist Equality Party is intervening in the 2006 elections to offer an alternative: the perspective of international socialism. We are fighting to place a candidate on the ballot in the 29th Congressional District in California and we encourage everyone here to participate in that campaign. The most pressing question in the US is the building of a socialist alternative to the present political set-up"

Walsh then moved to the issues confronting artists, workers and students grappling with the crisis of culture in contemporary America. "We concern ourselves with the question of art and culture because we are concerned with the fate of humanity, and humanity's fate depends on the growth of a far deeper perception of reality. We are far from believing that radical social change is merely the product of advancing a correct political program, as decisive as that is."

Quoting the great Russian Marxist Plekhanov, he summarized the SEP's essential challenge to today's artists: "The development of knowledge, the development of human consciousness, is the greatest and most noble task of the thinking personality. '*Licht, mehr Licht!*' ['Light, more light'—Goethe's dying words]—that is what is most of all needed."

Although demanding that art reveal more truth, he drew a distinction between the artistic orientation of "populist works, cheaply political or radical, works that score easy points" clarifying that most so-called radical art essentially condescends to its audience. "No one needs to be reminded of the obvious." In opposition to works that merely strike a revolutionary pose, Walsh elaborated a more expansive approach to the project of artistic revelation of social reality, setting some minimum requirements:

"The world and human life need to be approached from every side, in every mood, with every instrument at the artist's disposal. But we insist that a seriousness about the fate of humanity, about the conditions of existence of millions of people, about how we've arrived at our present global human situation—these are the minimum requirements, nothing enduring will be accomplished without these at least. A seriousness about these facts of life, which are complex and require thought and struggle, will oblige the artist to call on the most highly developed formal means.

"I agree with Oscar Wilde; the chief task is not, as such, to make art popular, but to make the population artistic, i.e., to raise the cultural level of the population."

On the perceived opposition of art and science, Walsh commented, "Art and science are not divided by a Chinese Wall, they treat the same objectively existing universe, but they have different functions

and, to a certain extent, different subject matter. Science, including Marxist social science, distills material and spiritual phenomena to their abstract essence, to laws, to axioms. Art draws directly from life, it contains elements of empirical observation, it dies without spontaneity, but art also establishes its own general truths.”

Turning to the present conditions in the US, Walsh asked, “What is holding the artists back? What is the chief source of the difficulty?” While Walsh called for an all-sided approach to artistic creation, he emphasized the need of today’s artists to heed social and historical facts. “Art, in our view, suffered a great deal as the result of the traumas and tragedies of the twentieth century.”

Contrary to the popular notion that exempts art from all objective analysis, Walsh noted that art is also ideology, “produced by a definite social layer, whose relationship to the world is not entirely disinterested. The American intelligentsia has lurched to the right in recent decades, liberalism has collapsed. The radical protesters of 1968 or 1971, in many cases, have comfortable careers, have inherited money and property from their parents, have returned to the middle class or upper middle class.”

Yet, he also rejected the facile explanations which simply locate the failure of today’s art merely in the influence of money and commerce. “Money and markets have been a part of artistic life within bourgeois society since the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century, and that has not stopped a great many from telling the truth and sacrificing their health and even their lives in the process.... One cannot explain the present difficulties simply by referring to money and corruption. If so many are corrupted or seduced, one is back at the same question, in a different form: why has this particular period made so many artists so vulnerable?”

Pointing to illuminating art movements of the past, Walsh found the roots of these periods of artistic clarity in the great social struggles of the twentieth century. “The most serious artists and intellectuals, particularly in the wake of the slaughter of the World War I, where millions lost their lives for a few square yards of soil, drew harsh conclusions about the old society, the profit system, the ‘nation.’ A hatred of kings and emperors, rulers of every kind, hypocritical politicians, munitions makers, generals, bankers, priests, a hatred of patriotism, nationalism, chauvinism—this extended deep into the working class and into the ranks of the artists. That society needed to pass to a higher principle, one way or another identified with socialism, was felt and actively advocated by a great many ... including ... in the US... Dreiser, Fitzgerald, Hemingway.”

Interestingly, he noted that Fitzgerald publicly considered himself a socialist as early as 1922, referring to the hero of *Tender is the Night* as a ‘communist-liberal-idealist ... a man like myself,’ and also advocated the reading of Marx, by the late 1930s believing that ‘most questions in life have an economic base.’

From this era, he examined the rise of Stalinism and the “incalculable damage to the confidence of masses of people, including artists, in the perspective of socialism, indeed in the existence of an alternative to capitalism,” and the shift to the right by the liberal intelligentsia of the US, “who made a devil’s pact with anticommunism during the McCarthyite period.... From the early 1950s onward notice was served that opposition to capitalism was essentially illegal in the film and art world.”

Walsh posed the question: with the perceived “death of socialism”, the decay of the trade unions, the demise of liberalism, what are artists to make of life and society? “Is the artist to be inspired by the stock market, the cruise missile, the ‘global war on terror’?” He asserted,

“To ask the question is to answer it. The artist must be inspired again by the prospect of humanity and the world changing for the better.”

Noting that one “would have to be over 40 to remember, as a conscious human being, the last successful struggles of the American working class, in the late 1970s,” Walsh offered some explanation for the current lack of artistic inspiration, yet made no excuses for artists. “But the artist, the intellectual, has the responsibility to study the present situation and its background in a serious fashion.”

Addressing the pessimism prevalent in the today’s art world, Walsh asked, referring a question posed by the recent International Editorial Board in Sydney, Australia, “Does the political and social history of the United States support the view that the American working class will accept for years and decades to come, without substantial and bitter protest, a continuing downward spiral of its living standards?” He held that the build-up of a massive revolutionary explosion would provide the impulse for a rejuvenation of art and culture.

“The emergence of a mass movement directed consciously against the foundations of the profit system in America will have a galvanizing effect on artists and intellectuals. A great deal of the confusion that seems so impenetrable at the moment, which some may imagine can never be cleared up, will be dispersed in a relatively short period of time. The working class, organized around a socialist program, will show the way forward for every section of society.”

He answered the popular notion that artistic freedom is nothing but the representation of one’s personal experience which cannot be challenged, saying, “We see things differently, and if there is one question I would like to emphasize this evening, it is the need to consider the force of objective circumstances in life and art, the need to orient one’s thinking in accordance with objective tendencies.... The declining influence of Marxism has given subjectivism a new lease on life, and it has taken every advantage. The notion that there is an essence contained within appearance, that something lies beneath the surface, even that discernible general patterns exist in nature and society, these ideas are rejected by various contemporary trends in postmodernist thought and often in art too.”

He continued, “For us, the question remains: what are the motives behind the motives? What driving forces stand behind these motives? What are the historical forces which transform themselves into these motives in the brains of the various individuals? People do things for all sorts of immediate reasons, but what are the more profound causes?”

Concluding, “There is vast opposition to what exists, but it is largely inchoate, inarticulate and uninformed by the lessons of history. The task for the honest artist is considerable. He or she cannot give an inch to anti-intellectualism, to the anti-theoretical tendencies in American life. In the next period, knowledge and consciousness will count for everything. The tasks are daunting, but as Shakespeare says, we need to “meet the time as it seeks us.”



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