

A Comment on Art and the Marxist Party

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The following comment was delivered on January 9, 1998 to the International Summer School on Marxism and the Fundamental Problems of the 20th Century, organised by the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) in Sydney from January 3-10, 1998. Laurier's remarks followed a lecture by World Socialist Web Site arts editor David Walsh, The Aesthetic Component of Socialism.

I would like to expand on one question raised in the lecture: the objective character of artistic cognition and the significance of its study for revolutionaries.

There still may be the conviction, although today's discussion indicates that we have made considerable progress in combating it, that a concern for art is a luxury item for a Marxist party, a sort of pleasant pastime to which one retreats from the rigors of the daily grind. This is to do art and oneself a disservice.

Art is one of the principal means by which human beings make sense of the world and through which their striving to change reality takes place. The need to translate experience, knowledge and desire into concrete imagery is not a whim or a fancy, it is clearly built into human consciousness. All of us are artists at night. Dreams, with their compressed, imagistic references to conscious experience, demonstrate many of the characteristics of works of art.

Unlike scientific thought, art presents its subject matter in sensuous form, thereby bringing that subject matter, as Hegel says, "closer to our sensitive and emotional life." He writes: "The creative imagination of an artist is the imagination of a great mind and a big heart; it is ... the grasp of the profoundest and most embracing human interests in the wholly definite presentation of imagery borrowed from objective experience."

How can this grasping of "the profoundest and most embracing human interests" be a matter of indifference to Marxism?

There is, first of all, the fact that art presents objective knowledge, in the form of concrete imagery, that is inaccessible to science. We can recall Marx's comment in 1854 that "the splendid brotherhood of fiction writers in England," including Dickens, Thackeray, Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë, had issued to the world more truths than had been uttered by all the "professional politicians, publicists and moralists together."

We all know from our own experience that certain films, novels or paintings capture social and psychological truths more effectively, more indelibly than a thousand pages of political or scientific analysis. What the character of Clyde Griffiths in Dreiser's *American Tragedy* says about the illusions and fantasies of the American petty bourgeoisie, its pathos and tragedy, has never been equaled or surpassed in all the literature of the Marxist movement.

If one were to cut oneself off from literature and art merely as a source of knowledge of social life one would be restricting oneself dangerously.

But clearly the realm of art is not simply the realm of objective knowledge of historical or social processes. Artistic creation should not be confused with a scientific discipline, although there is not a Chinese wall between art and science. Science seeks to attain knowledge of objects in their universality. The concrete sense object is transformed in science into abstract subject matter. Think of the opening chapter of *Capital*. In art the universal takes the form of a concrete sense object.

Moreover, this difference in approach to the world, this formal difference, brings art nearer, as Hegel points out, to our sensitive and emotional life. Here we are dealing with far more subterranean, far more convoluted processes than in the sciences: the inner lives of human beings, the vast, centuries-old accumulation of psychological experience. How could this enormously complex psychic experience be distilled into a set of axioms or universal laws? The art image is an objectively necessary means of preserving, summing up and enriching this experience.

It will easily be seen as well how inadequate it is to judge a work of art solely on an analysis of the artist's conscious social outlook.

The artist of course is not a free-floating atom; he or she is a member of a social class, generally the middle class, with a definite quantity of class prejudices and limitations. But if such prejudices prevented an individual from grasping or sensing essential truths about life, then there would never be incisive thought of any kind, including Marxism. Of course Marxism requires a conscious break with a certain class outlook. But artistry requires a break too, with ways of seeing and experiencing the world that have become outmoded.

The artist is able, through a particularly developed aesthetic sense, to decode social and psychological processes, undetectable to the numbed senses of the average individual in class society, and transform them into images. The development of that sense does not mean that he or she is necessarily aware of the wider implications of those discoveries. What Trotsky wrote about the scientific specialist also applies to the art specialist: "Just as inside the hull of a steamship impenetrable partitions are placed so that in the event of an accident the ship will not sink all at once, so also in man's consciousness there are numberless impenetrable partitions: in one sector, or even in a dozen sectors, you can find the most revolutionary scientific thinking; but beyond the partition lies philistinism of the highest degree."

Extraordinary sensitivity and extraordinary philistinism -- or

worse -- have coexisted within quite remarkable artists. This is perhaps even more possible in art because we are not speaking about a purely conscious or rational process. Human beings feel deeply and sense the truth about many things in ways that never reach the level of conscious thought. Most people repress or ignore those feelings. The artist, whether he is cursed or blessed, cannot; he or she has access to them and they must emerge in the peculiar language of artistic imagery.

But if the means by which art works are formed involves unconscious or semi-conscious processes, then it would be entirely wrong to judge a work simply on the basis of its conscious outlook. Then one would only be looking at a fragment of the work, the conscious fragment above the surface. And since in class society only a relative handful of people have a coherent scientific view of society, it would turn out that the artists are nearly always wrong. Such a view might be comforting, but it would entirely miss the point.

Why should any of this be of concern to a Marxist, a man or woman of science and objectivity? It ought to be of concern, first of all, to *anyone* because artistry is one of the most extraordinary and rewarding elements in life. But let's consider Marxism in particular. It is a science, but it is the science of human relations; it is objective, but guiding human subjective activity is its prime concern. Marxism is not a study of the movement of inanimate atoms and molecules. How can anyone concerned with the welfare of humanity ignore the field in which human relationships, motivations and emotions are given their most compelling and enduring expression?

Isn't this what Trotsky has in mind when he says that art makes individuals "more complex and flexible"? The assimilation of any science inevitably involves learning a specific terminology, body of knowledge and practical application of that science's insights. What do we value in Marxism? Objectivity, rational analysis, proceeding from the immediate to its more general implications. This almost inevitably produces, in the inexperienced, a certain formalism, a tendency to apply laws without a thorough grasp of the contradictory whole. Here sensitivity to art work plays an absolutely vital role.

A serious study of art, in any of its forms, is one of the most effective antidotes to formalism. Genuine art is the enemy of the simplistic, the cut-and-dried; it is the realm of the complex, the ambiguous, of problems that never offer immediate solutions. A serious work of art sets off infinite vibrations; it resists assimilation, changes form and reasserts its truth; it cannot be put to rest; in Lenin's phrase, it is as radical as reality itself.

And I think that the interest generated in the party in recent years over artistic questions -- which have generated a number of controversies -- is a sign of the vitality and intellectual substance of our movement, as opposed to the petty bourgeois Left groups who have next to nothing to say on these matters. (What other socialist party could find its membership inspired to debate the significance and merits of a new film version of *Hamlet*?) The interest in the arts pages has demonstrated as well that neither party members nor readers of our press are satisfied with 'politics alone.' There is a desire for something else, something which satisfies an aesthetic and spiritual hunger.

I would make this appeal in particular to the younger people here. One joins the revolutionary party for the most generous and comprehensive motives -- a hatred of injustice, a feeling for humanity, the desire for a better world. And then one inevitably and necessarily refines those sentiments in the light of scientific knowledge, makes them harder, more precise, more exacting. But it would be unfortunate, more than unfortunate, if anyone were to draw the inference that the process of deepening one's knowledge required a narrowing of interest, or turning one's back on the widest human concerns. Those original, untrained, but revolutionary motives inevitably contain something that is akin to the artistic sensibility, and should never be entirely lost. Revolutionary passion should have something of that quality that the Italian writer Pasolini describes in his poem about himself;

"Grown up? Never never !
Like existence itself
which never matures
staying always green
from splendid day to splendid day."

This is an important discussion. Work in such a relatively unfamiliar area will not be easy. There are no shortcuts. Certain comrades will have to devote themselves to these questions in every section. It is a serious and time-consuming effort. But the rewards are considerable, from the standpoint of objectively deepening the party's understanding of contemporary society and social relationships, and from the standpoint of making the party more flexible and more human, and therefore deepening its ability to make a truly revolutionary appeal to the widest layers of the population.



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