

Discussion Contributions on:

The Communist Party and Developments in British Culture

John Chambers

Jeremy Hawthorn's admirably constructive and concise introductory article on the present position regarding the Communist Party and recent developments in British culture (*Marxism Today*, December 1973) raised many interesting and stimulating points. I felt especially valid was his call for broader democratic involvement in both the evolving structure of cultural organisations and the fabric—i.e. the content—of those activities.

It seems to me that we must first resolve questions of the historical role of culture within the wider framework of Marxist theory and practice and then relate that role to present-day communist strategy on the political and social fronts—those strategic offensives and counter-offensives dictated by the day to day events arising from the cultural and economic crisis of modern capitalism—a crisis which is not only created by the innate contradictory nature of capitalism, but also by its present-day panic and loss of self-confidence, as it is continuously harried and forced to regroup in order to meet the growing development and challenge of the new socialist societies.

Even having resolved those primary questions, however, we are still left with the need to further examine just which of these activities come within classical definitions of culture—to say nothing of whether such “cultural” categories are still satisfactory and still accommodate all such socio-cultural phenomena we may wish to include. Next, to what extent are these categories within the social superstructure a direct or indirect reflection of the economic base? Finally—and crucially—to what extent is this complex and often ephemeral area of activity and study either valid in the context of—in part or whole—or relevant to our wider responsibilities as communists and as such ultimately applicable to the cause of socialist advance in the class struggle?

Open Ended

Most would support the Cultural Committee's contention that today there exists an especially significant period of cultural development and

that these recent developments call for a close Marxist analysis in order to relate to the wider political, industrial and social activity of the Communist Party. Past precedent however suggests that not only does such a review need to be closely observant of the reality of cultural phenomena, but also, to avoid past errors of judgment and to avoid hindering possible advance through too close attention to unproductive dogma etc., then any resulting programme—theoretical, or practical—will by necessity need to contain to a certain degree open ended, flexible elements in order to ensure that progressive tendencies—as they arise—can be encouraged to link up with, and to identify with, the political—and associated—role of the Communist Party.

Again, while firmly resisting undue criticism of past positions, such situations stress the additional need for continual and open review in order to guard against premature rejection of what may later be seen to be positive qualities in areas of cultural activity as yet unrecognised and developed to their true potential. However this is secondary at this stage to our main concern—conjecture may be interesting but largely irrelevant—which is the analysis and observation of the reality of today and our relationship with real situations.

Three Situations

Perhaps at this stage I can usefully introduce three, seemingly diverse, situations I have experienced recently which—for me at least—together demonstrate (agreed on a minute scale) the complexity of the overall task of analysis and yet the prime need for Marxists to come to grips with problems of culture and the necessity for communists to initiate a programme of positive action across the theoretical and practical front and to relate such a programme of socio-cultural activities more closely to our political and trade union commitments.

I cannot pretend that my three events are uniquely significant—every comrade will instantly recall many such similar incidents perhaps more compelling—but I put them forward as repre-

sentations of those daily reminders we all receive of the inadequacy of capitalism to contribute to an enriched and developing life for the vast majority of the British people.

First. It is a cold night. An audience of some 50 or so adults and children occupy only about a third of the school hall, sitting in straight-backed chairs, wrapped in our coats for warmth. The stage is bare of props, the wing flats and backcloth plain and black. We are waiting for a small travelling theatre group to perform their pantomime *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

Suddenly "Uncle Bertie"—"Eee, straight from Scarborough!" leaps into the solitary spotlight, the smallest possible band—a booming bassdrum and a wobbly cornet—oompahs forward from the back of the hall and we are away. Jack's mum is a cart-wheeling knockabout straight from Monty Python's Circus, and Jack is an autistic mute with a clown's painted face who is soon speeding through a psychedelic-rock space to the plant of nasty, threeheaded King Bullo.

The whole thing is impossible, there seem to be too many odds stacked against the young cast, but somehow their enthusiastic skill communicates to the audience and there is a tremendous rapport so that by the time Jack silently and acrobatically wrestles with the Great White (ultra violet) Worm we are totally involved, jumping up and down in our seats, cheering Jack on.

Second. The back room of a local pub. A poster on the wall—"In memory of Salvador Allende and the People of Chile." A communist Trades Council delegate is reading out a lengthy document explaining the long history of social and economic oppression in Chile and how the junta crushed the democratic people's government when they started the long haul to socialist freedom. Trade unionists, students, housewives, and left activists sit in a large circle listening intently to the speaker.

When he has finished another speaker reads extracts from the poems of Neruda and finishes with a moving account of the death and funeral of the great poet under the iron heel of the junta. Someone talks briefly about the Spanish Civil War and the never-changing face of fascism. Another comrade reads out his own poem on the tragedy of Chile. As soon as he has finished another member of the audience asks if he can read one of his own poems in tribute. And then another from the audience stands . . . and another. It is very quiet, only the voices of the readers, but the atmosphere is charged with emotion and resolve.

Third. I am a member of the staff of an art school. We are having a special staff meeting

to be told of the stringent cut-backs in our budget and future restrictions in staffing and student intake. While we are waiting to begin one adult education member shows us a few small coloured prints brought in by one of his elderly evening class students. He explains that they were done by the old lady's merchant sailor nephew—"to while away the time on sea voyages". She discovered them by accident and said he was too shy to ever show them to anyone, never mind think about taking art lessons.

They have been made by laboriously engraving and cutting into the surfaces of plywood off-cuts and on vinyl floor tiles, and then hand printed by rubbing the back of the print paper with a spoon. They are naïve, untutored and quite superb. "Vinyl tiles! Christ, the hours of painstaking work! And how beautiful!" the evening tutor exclaims in genuine surprise and admiration. It is impossible not to agree. Such talent buried away in isolation.

Vast Creative Potential

I am sure that all of us are continually faced with such incidents; small everyday events in themselves perhaps and too easily dismissed or forgotten as such. But in reality a continuous reminder to us of the crippling indifference of capitalism, offering sudden insights into the vast creative potential within the so-called culturally inarticulate working class, and underlining that cultural experience and creative activity—buried deep, neglected and almost crushed though it often is—is an integral and necessary part of our instinctive concept of the total potential human social condition.

We must repudiate the cynical claim of capitalist concepts of culture that it is adequate compensation for the human spirit to be swamped in the alienating, affluent, media-dominated alternative culture of the global electronic village. Such dubious compensation in reality means a perpetuation of the values of the entrenched ruling class, and we remain deprived, cut off from our true potential, prisoners of the cultural ideology of modern industrial capitalism.

Conformity or Tolerated Isolation?

We are all familiar with the élitist concept of culture as an attractive private world where the cultural activist, alienated from any sense of identification with a purposive social role, can happily or—masochistically—unhappily play out the inevitably sterile fantasies of the neglected, tormented creator of genius. To counter this essentially negative pre-occupation with the ego-trip we must not only be demonstrably able to

analyse and dissect the confused jungle of today's "cultural activities" but also to confront that—again—inevitably barren system with a theoretically sound and structured socialist alternative that aims to successfully liberate and enrich all and not the select few.

Post-war cultural developments in many ways reflect the growing concern of cultural activists to break away from the inhibiting stranglehold of the old class dominated cultural forms. There is evidence of a widespread, though perhaps unconscious, desire to allow fuller expression to the innate creative wish and ability within us all, and yet there is equal evidence that such developments have been put under tremendous pressure to come to terms with an economically dominant social and political system that cannot by its very nature permit such freedom of expression. Cultural expression then either conforms into socially accepted—i.e. politically innocuous—forms of expression or forces the aware cultural activist into a tolerated—anarchic—isolation, safe in the knowledge that such personally orientated activities are ultimately harmless to the status quo.

A Total Vision

Whether we are dealing with concepts of aesthetics in so-called areas of high culture or examining the energy and dynamism associated with the post-war surge in related areas such as television and film, graphics and posters, pop and the underground scene, the football entertainment industry, fashion clothes and footwear etc., then we need have no fear that our general political analysis of the social, industrial and economic malaise at the heart of capitalist society is not applicable to the apparently difficult areas of culture.

The communist vision is a total vision.

A Cry for Clarity

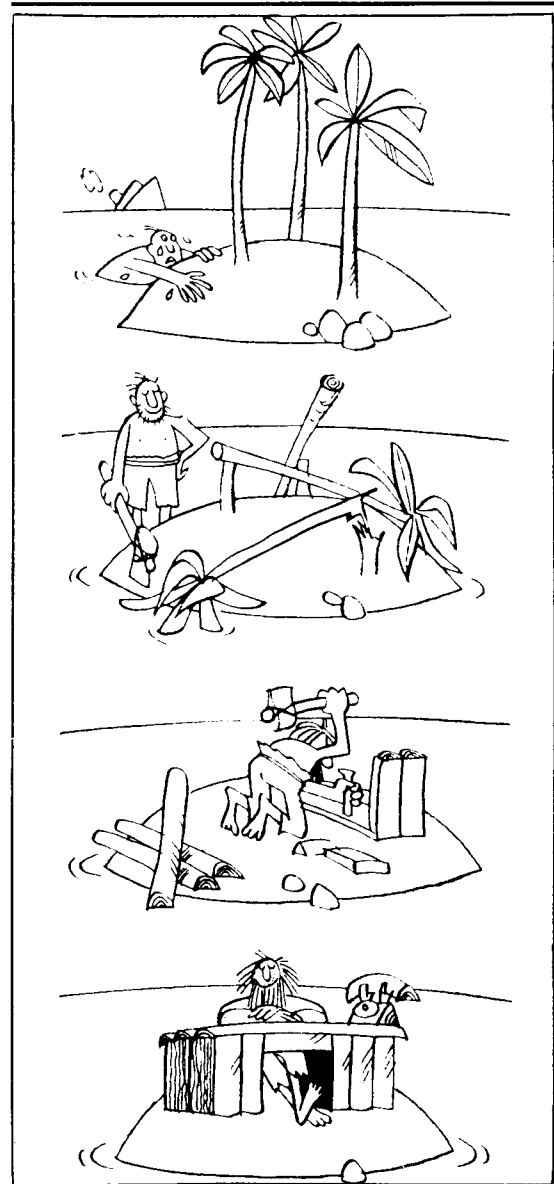
Norman Lucas

Why is it that the articles must use such complicated sentences, and long, obscure words. As a YCLer I think I can say that, the majority of us can't understand much of what is written in *Marxism Today*. The subjects which it treats are very interesting, and I'm sure that a certain amount of the complicated formulations are unavoidable, but I'm equally sure that half are quite simple concepts put in an academically complicated and unnecessary way.

Surely we should be looking for ways of bridging the language gap between the academic world and that of ordinary working people.

The article by Peter Latham on Sociology was what prompted me to write to you, although I have been meaning to for some months.

Would it not be possible to have a series of footnotes explaining the more obscure concepts and words, especially when the writer makes reference to another person's ideas in a contrasting sort of way?



Without Comment (From *Unsere Zeit*, weekly journal of the German Communist Party)