

A VISION FOR CULTURE

There are libraries full of books seeking to define and understand the word culture. Cultural Studies is an academic subject in its own right. There is a deep and important tradition of dialogue across the world within socialist movements about the place and importance of cultural matters in the struggle against feudalism, capitalism and imperialism. Some of the leading thinkers on the place of art and literature and cultural theories in the history of progressive thought have come from Britain and various strands of Marxist inspired traditions.

The battle of ideas does not just exist in the workplace alone when arguing over the right course of action in a struggle for jobs or wages or other improvements. It takes place in the many forms of expression that people create about the value systems and ideas and emotions that flow around and within us and make up our identity and sense of place in the world. Marx often said that the greatest insights into history were given in novels. We also know that it is often the persecution of writers and artists by reactionary regimes that most clearly expresses their fear and loathing of political progress and symbolises the repression of an entire people.

Who was it who said that people cannot live by bread alone? Human beings are creative not just in the development of the natural world to produce things, processes and systems that improve material existence and continually develop science and technology, but in the creation of art. Because there is a human need to participate, to be social, cooperative and collective, there is a need to produce reflections of our perceptions of the world and our human relationships. We communicate because we cannot survive as individuals. There is a need to create images of ourselves and how we feel and think about others and the natural world which our collective labour continually transforms.

art and the struggle for change

Many of the world's great artists and writers in recent history have been communists and chose art as their form of contribution to the struggle for revolutionary change. Their work should be promoted more. Socialist societies have always valued highly the role and function of artists and sought to enable workers to access the best thought of the past as expressed in dance, drama, writing, films, photography, and so on. Just look, for example, at the role of classical music in creating from amongst the poorest children and young people in Venezuela some of the finest musicians in the world in the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra. Everyone has an artistic talent, and this should be fostered throughout the education system.

Key moments in history, whether the stirrings of the first democracy in Athens, the first bourgeois revolution in England, or the pain of imperialist wars have been communicated to later generations through plays, arts and poetry. It is the sculpture and created artefacts of ancient Egypt that give us an insight into their entire civilisation and systems of belief.

So a vision for culture in Britain, which has a deep cultural tradition, large cultural industries and dozens of visions both specific to sectors and to broad organisations, cannot be a simple short statement. The vision of a more creative future with more participation in the arts and the release of the creative powers of people are linked to the economic transformation which as socialists we seek and the consequent end of the drudgery of exploited work and the alienation of workers from the wider human society.

Enjoyment of the arts under capitalism has always competed with the more profitable and superficial entertainments and distraction markets. In recent years huge profits have been made from computer gaming. The Nintendo Wii sold 14.2 million units in Europe in 2008, a record-breaking year for the UK for games industry generally with the market worth over £4 billion. Since then computer gaming has developed hugely, making it a multi-billion industry with the potential to “enslave” many young people.

Rich benefactors also make a ridiculous commodity market out of a select handful of painters and sculptors, or a world market out of certain musicians and singers. This skews the purpose of producing artistic expression to the fortune-making of an artificial art market. This kind of market has also perpetuated the idea of artists as aloof geniuses whose insights are beyond the reach of the ‘common people.’ Artistic production gets put on a pedestal as though it is the product of a magically gifted few.

An inverted snobbery has developed as a result. There is, it would appear, elitist ‘high art’ for a certain well-heeled section of society, or university people, and pulp fiction and soaps allegedly for the less enlightened masses. This is a prejudice and division that socialist society breaks down. It is also based on the illusion that only a few create and the rest consume. We will seek to engage people more broadly in the creation and enjoyment of cultural activities.

There will be an increased role for cultural production and the need for greater public and state subsidy. Currently the creative industries in Britain are funded by three precarious sources; the market, the state and gambling money through the lottery. A new mainstream public funding approach will have to be adopted and greater access through public provision will have to be created more evenly throughout the country. The country as a whole, not one or two cities, should be the capital of culture.

our cultural industry

There are over a million workers involved in the cultural industries. Almost half of these fall within three classifications: writers and journalists; commercial artists and graphic designers; and finally entertainers, stage managers, producers and directors. A quarter of the workforce is concentrated in London. This workforce is highly qualified with about a half having an NVQ level 4 equivalent qualification compared with about a quarter in the general labour market.

The low wages and poor conditions of this workforce reflect the precarious funding and the lack of state commitment to the sector. Around 40% of those working in cultural production are self-employed. This compares with only 12% of workers in the general economy.

However, cultural industries make an effective contribution to wealth creation, invisible exports and employment. In 1998, when the British government took a renewed interest in the sector, they estimated that the creative industries generated £60 billion in revenues and an estimated £7.5 billion exports per year and accounted for over 1.4 million jobs. By 2001 the revenues generated by UK creative industries had grown to around £112.5 billion and the exports contributed some £10.3 billion to the balance of trade. Creative industries now account for over 5% of the Gross Domestic Product. They grew by 8.9% in 2014, double the UK economy as a whole; generating £10 million per hour. It has been the fastest growing sector of the economy.

The recent interest in this sector has of course led to its further commercialisation. Never mind the quality, feel the width. The neoliberal agenda also introduced unnecessary and higher charges to public places of the enjoyment of culture such as galleries and theatres. Regional theatres with active community outreach programmes withdrew to promote less thought provoking, more 'bums on seats' type productions for paying 'customers'.

art and culture as weapons of emancipation

The challenge that progressive art and cultural activities pose to the inhuman system of profit making and to despots and reactionary modes of thought has always been a powerful weapon in the struggle for emancipation and socialism. Enjoyment of this challenge and promotion of it must be at the heart of a new cultural policy. Art is not the ornament of the rich. It is the creation of a people in the struggle for change and understanding. Being able to discuss the meaning of dance or sculpture and how we feel about a piece of music is an opportunity to consider ourselves and our hopes and fears for others. It is a skill that cements collectivity and should be learned from an early age.

The current education system focuses from an early age on testing, leading to an increasing neglect of the cultural subjects as a child progresses through school. This will need to be addressed through changes to the school curriculum.

The cultural industries clearly have an economic impact apart from their social, emotional and intellectual ones. Community and individual renewal and regeneration have often been best undertaken when accompanied by a clear cultural and artistic dimension. Participation in the arts and the creation of symbolic meanings and forms have been of benefit in a wide range of contexts, from prisons to the health service, to urban regeneration. Within a social commitment to lifelong learning opportunities for all, the arts, cultural studies and literature must play a bigger part.

Last Updated 20-02-18