

COMMUNISTS AND CULTURE

By A. M. C.

In his closing remarks to the National Congress of the Communist Party, Comrade J. B. Miles gave to those concerned the task of raising the cultural level of Communists. This implies the raising of the cultural level of the whole Australian working class.

When we Communists use the word culture, we do not give it the same meaning as do the bourgeoisie or those under the influence of bourgeois ideology. These people invariably mean something which could be called, for want of a better word, cultivation.

I wish to discuss only a small facet of the extensive cultural held, not because it is the most important, but because it is an aspect which comes so close to our experience that it is often overlooked. This is the ordinary human relationships, the manner of behaving towards one's fellow man.

Lenin, in his famous discussion with Clara Zetkin, said, "So that art may come close to the people and the people to art, we must first of all raise the general level of education and culture." And again, "We are confronted with the gigantic needs of the workers and peasants for education and culture, needs awakened and stimulated by us." Lenin saw education (real education) as the basis on which art and culture must be built and the basis on which a love of art will develop. Education would include, I suggest, not only the acquisition of knowledge, but the sharing of that knowledge and the social communication that is the means of acquiring it. "Man is a social animal," this is the beginning of all knowledge. Therefore, I want to consider the ordinary personal, social relationship that exists between men.

The manners of the bourgeoisie are intricate and need a long apprenticeship to be mastered, and for them necessarily so, for "good manners" are used as the hall-mark of the ruling class. Some of this more or less artificial behaviour cannot be acquired by workers who spend most of their time at work and in semi-poverty. According to the capitalists, politeness has no place in production, and, even though the owner would reprimand his own children for lack of it, he knows only too well the meaning of the old Russian saying of Czarist days, "When politeness meets politeness, progress stands still," when applied to speed-up on his production line.

However, this is not a good reason for the workers themselves accepting their bosses' opinions on conduct. The usual reason for personal dislikes is directly or indirectly due to clashes of economic interests, and, as soon as workers realise that their basic interests are the same and mainly in opposition to those of the boss, the foundations for greater friendship, respect and tolerance are laid. We Communists give culture a different and fuller meaning than do the bourgeoisie. We mean the way of life of the people. Each different national group has its own traditional way of living, which has grown up along with the race, and this is what we call national culture. It is more than costume or language or folk lore; it is the spirit of the people and how they behave generally towards each other, as well as the cultural superstructure of art in its varied forms. There are national characteristics developed through favourable environment and so on, which one group will have, and another group living in less favourable circumstances will not have.

In our two class society, national characteristics and culture are modified by relations of production until we have reached a sort of two culture society, with beer, movies, football watching and gambling on one hand, and champagne, the opera and racehorse owning on the other—cracked crockery and cut crystal. Class distinctions become extremely important as a means of segregating rich from poor.

The leisured class, precisely because of such leisure, have set standards which are at once the envy of ambitious people in the ranks of the workers and also are considered by most to be virtues in themselves. It is not, of course, correct to believe that all bourgeois standards are also high standards, when we realise the class use to which they are put. But there is no doubt that the very leisure enjoyed by a small section of the ruling class has resulted in the development of many cultural standards of which all people must approve. The destruction of capitalism does not, as the capitalists would have us believe, mean the lowering of culture to the present level of the mass of the workers, but on the contrary, lifting it to higher levels than are enjoyed at present by even the most fortunate of the bourgeoisie.

The arts: music, drama, ballet, painting, poetry, literature, etc., are the highest manifestation of culture, and the more they enter into the life of the people, the more cultured, we can say, are the people. But it must not be forgotten that these forms of culture are by no means all of culture. These forms at once reflect and create the best aspects of the life of the people. We cannot have great art if we are not great people. Our art will not reach high levels if our own way of life is not also at a high level.

Capitalism overcame the technical difficulties of the production of consumption goods. Capitalism has reached this contradiction that the goods it can produce in such profusion cannot be enjoyed by

the people who make them, it cannot distribute the means to leisure because it exploits and keeps in poverty the working class. Capitalism has conquered nature and at the same time almost ruined human nature. The struggle for culture is also the struggle to overthrow capitalism, but in the meantime we must not allow the circumstances of our lives to break down our natural urge for better behaviour, more harmony among people, and comradeship, or, in good Australian, "mateship."

We in Australia have very few cultural traditions; those we have are of very new vintage, and it would be stupid to try to force their growth, but we must guard precious those we have, and we are at liberty to borrow, beg or steal those humanistic qualities developed by national groups around us. The importation of progressive art culture from abroad is for us most important, and a proper understanding and appreciation of it is a duty upon us - a ditty that can so easily become a source of enjoyment and eventually a necessity.

It is the historical role of the proletariat to replace capitalism with socialism. The proletariat will not do this just for the fun of it, or from any sense of revenge or urge to destruction. The new socialist society will see not only the solution of all problems of production, but also the solving of the problems of distribution - for what? Surely for a fuller, freer, higher life for all mankind. The class struggle will be a thing of the past and the struggle for higher cultural development will occupy the mind of man.

All those aspects of life we now see in such utter degradation, the creche, the school, the production line, sport, the cinema, the stage, will have for us an entirely new meaning. Recreation will no longer be an escape from life or an easy pleasant way of wasting time.

It is then the Communist who must first of all see culture in its right perspective. It is not enough that Communists should be the best politicians or the best economists or the best teachers. They must also be the best of friends, the best people.