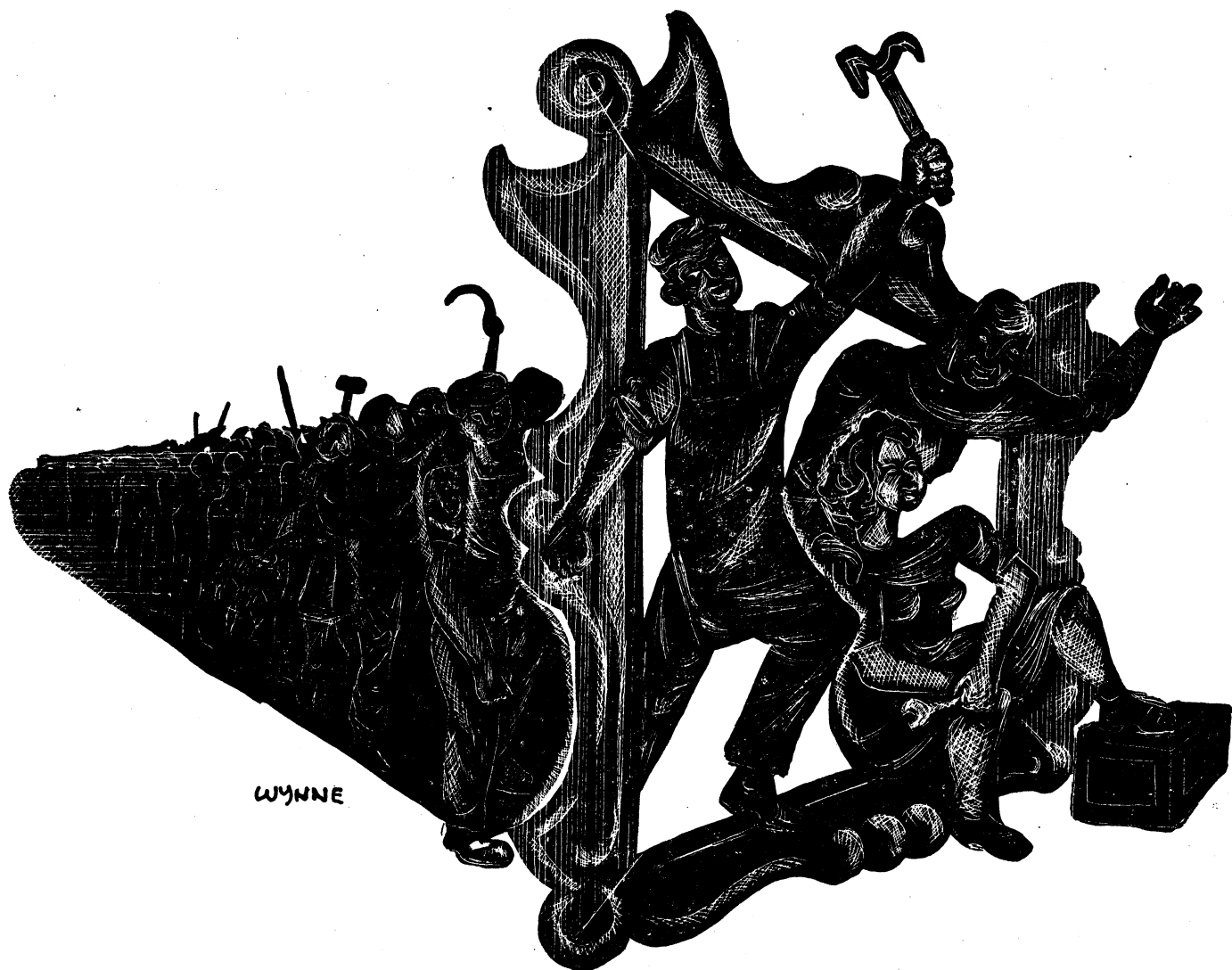


# PEOPLE'S CULTURAL POLICY

*The chairman of the Communist Party discusses art as a weapon; foresees a resurgence of progressive spirit in all cultural fields.*

By **WILLIAM Z. FOSTER**



AS A START on a people's cultural program, there must be a clear understanding that "art is a weapon" in the class struggle. Not only is art a weapon, but a very potent one as well. Through 5,000 years of recorded history ruling classes have understood this fact and have lavishly used art to buttress their regimes. This was true of the early Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, Roman and other great empires, whose potentates not only made wide use of architecture, precious metal work, sculpture, the dance, poetry, pottery,

and so forth, for beauty and luxury's sake, but used them especially to impress the enslaved masses with the power and divine origin of the rulers and their God-given right to retain their domination. Throughout the long centuries of feudalism, also, the dominating landed aristocracy made free use of every major art form to glorify itself and to entrench its class rule. Especially was the powerful Catholic hierarchy skillful in this use of art during the Middle Ages. Its gorgeous cathedrals, splendid rituals, and great music, sculpture and painting were all

designed to awe the people and to strengthen the Church's material and spiritual control.

Likewise the modern capitalist class, from its inception, has extensively used art in many forms as a means both to defeat its early feudal rivals and to establish its domination over the present-day working class. One would be blind not to see that the major art forms of today—the radio, the motion picture, the novel, the theater and so forth—all of which are highly organized and capitalized—are instruments used by the bourgeoisie not only for

profit and pleasure's sake, but also to defend their class rule. This artistic support of capitalism is often subtle, which makes it the more effective. Thus in the various bourgeois mediums of art and culture the whole capitalist system, with all its ethical and moral implications, is taken for granted as the inevitable and immutable form of society, and as such it is systematically and dextrously supported.

In view of the long indisputable historic record of the use of art by ruling classes as a major means to maintain themselves in power, it is absurd to contend at this date that "art is not a weapon"; that it is some sort of mystic force "above the battle" of the classes. Throughout the ages of civilization artists have, for the most part, sung, written, painted and built in the class interest of the current political and clerical rulers.

Second, we must also recognize that not only have all ruling classes throughout the centuries used art as a class weapon, but they have also kept their artists in the status of servitors. In the great empires of antiquity artists, even the most eminent, were often, if not usually, actual slaves. Under feudalism also, while the position of cultural workers was somewhat better, the ruling classes nevertheless dominated them ruthlessly. The "patronage" system prevailed almost universally, under which arrangement the livelihood of the poet, painter, playwright, sculptor or architect depended upon the goodwill of ruling class "angels." Thus, many of the great plays, paintings and other works of art (and even various scientific studies of the Middle Ages) were dedicated in the most servile terms of adulation to the insignificant princes of state and Church who financed them.

Capitalism uses somewhat less obvious ways than slavery and the patronage system (although strong remnants of the latter still remain) to retain control of its artists and its cultural workers, but its methods are nevertheless effective. With the great organized cultural institutions of our times firmly in their grasp, the capitalists confront artists with the ultimatum that if they want to work and live they must defend the prevalent social system through their various forms of artistic expression. The artist is "free" under capitalism no more than the industrial worker is "free," although the artist's shackles may be gilded and somewhat less obvious than those of the worker.

The artist, be he playwright, actor, novelist, musician or what not, who ventures upon artistic work detrimental to the interests of the ruling bourgeoisie may expect to find himself belabored by their heavy weapons of boycott or direct attack, as thousands of Left and progressive artists have found out to their bitter cost. On the other hand, if the artist sings the glories of capitalism (and can do it competently, and if there is no surfeit of artists) he will find himself a financial success. Free art and free artists under capitalism are a fiction. As Lenin said: "The freedom of the bourgeois writer, artist, or actress is nothing but a self-deceptive (or hypocritically deceiving) dependence upon the money bags, upon bribery, upon patronage."

Under fascism it is made especially clear that the bourgeoisie uses art as a weapon and also controls its artists as instruments of class rule. In Nazi Germany, for example, art in all its forms was hardly more than the crudest propaganda, and the artists, no less than members of the Wehrmacht, were soldiers of the German imperialist bourgeoisie. Throughout capitalism generally the same principles apply, but it is under fascism that the subjugation of bourgeois art to bourgeois political rule is made unmistakably obvious.

**H**ISTORICALLY, however, although ruling classes have always understood and used art and artists as major instruments to maintain their economic, political and religious regimes, they have never been able fully to monopolize art or completely to enslave the artists. All through the ages the oppressed classes, often under severe hardships, have developed in greater or lesser degree their own art forms and artists. National cultures are rich with the peoples' folk songs, their minstrels and ballad singers, their poetry, their theaters, their artistic handicrafts. Moreover, rising revolutionary social classes, instinctively realizing the importance of art as a social weapon, have always forged their own art and used it to challenge that of the existing ruling class. The national culture in any given period has never been identical with the culture of the ruling class. Only under socialism, with its abolition of classes, does there develop an integrated, harmonious and luxuriant culture, expressive of the moods, interests and artistic spirit of all sections of the population.

Especially vivid and dramatic was the winning struggle of the art and artists of the rising bourgeoisie against those of the declining feudal aristocracy, a struggle which lasted from the sixteenth century right down (in diminishing degree) to our own times. Thus, for example, the great playwrights of the late feudal period waged fierce (and largely conscious) warfare against the new writers and ways of life of the developing bourgeoisie. And thus, Protestantism all over Europe, with a leftish anti-artistic streak that it has not yet fully recovered from, tried, with its austere doctrines and its naked churches, to combat the feudalistic influence of the magnificent Catholic cathedrals and their gorgeous religious ritualism. Akin to this leftism was the English Puritan bourgeoisie's bitter assaults upon the theater, which had long been an artistic and political buttress of feudalism. These cultural class conflicts greatly complicated the character of art during such revolutionary periods, often producing hybrid as well as new forms of art and literature, combining different class art expressions in the person of individual writers, painters, poets, architects, etc. Thus Shakespeare, although reflecting certain feudal values, nevertheless displayed some influences of the rising bourgeoisie. But through all this maze of varied art expression Marxists have little difficulty in tracing the ideological battle lines of the contending social classes.

We are now living in such a period of revolutionary art struggle, with all its complexities and subtleties. The advancing proletariat, with the rest of the democratic forces tending to follow in its train, is challenging the bourgeoisie in the fields of culture, as well as in those of industry and politics. These new artistic trends, which are to be found in every phase of present-day culture, are not to be considered merely as variations or currents in bourgeois art. In the fire of the current class struggle the elements of a new people's culture are being forged.

This new people's art is not a Socialist culture, as it has not broken with capitalist ideology; but it is nevertheless imbued with a democratic spirit and it is arrayed against capitalist reaction and fascism. The new democratic culture now developing embraces interests as broad and deep as the people's love of freedom, their sense of beauty, their hopes and aspiration, their hates and

loves and fears, their plans and struggles, their defeats and victories.

The basic task of Communist and other democratic artists and cultural workers of all kinds is to identify themselves with this basic artistic striving of the masses and to help it find effective expression in all its ramifications. There are some artists, however, among them pseudo-Lefts, who, with the slogan of "art for art's sake," claim that the life interests of the democratic masses of our people are too restricted to provide these artists with adequate breadth for the expression of their artistic talents. Such people seem to be able to find true artistic expression only when they are voicing the moods and ideas and interests of the bourgeoisie in one way or another. The real motivation of such people is less ideological than material. Beneath their elaborate defense of the freedom of capitalist art lies a hankering for the rich fleshpots with which capitalism rewards its artistic defenders. The artistic and political degeneration of such writers as Richard Wright, John Dos Passos, James Farrell and others, who claimed that the Left cramped their artistic qualities, illustrates this point.

The new, elementary people's culture is developing along two general avenues. For one thing, progressive artists are raising their voices independently in literature, in the theater, and in various other artistic fields. At the same time they are also exerting constructive pressures upon the organized, capitalized cultural forms: the radio, the press, the motion pictures, etc.

Communist and other democratic artists should cultivate both of these streams of the new people's art. As the very basis of their activity, they should further the growth of every form of democratic cultural activities outside direct capitalist control, including the work of independent artists in every field, the publication of good books and the production of progressive plays, the promotion of artistic and general cultural work by trade unions, Negro groups, farmers' organizations and other people's groupings, the development of democratic art projects by the local, state and national governments, the strengthening of publication facilities by the Left, and the establishment of organized artists' movements. It was one of the worst features of Browder's revisionism in the cultural field that, with its policy of tailing after the bourgeoisie, it tended to liquidate these independent artistic endeavors.

Progressive artists should also strive to make their constructive influence felt within the scope of the great commercialized organizations of the bourgeoisie—motion pictures, radio, literature, theater, etc. Artists must eat, like other people. Many artists, therefore, are necessarily constrained to work under direct capitalist controls, on employers' payrolls, pretty much as workers are. It is also a political and artistic necessity to penetrate the commercialized art medium. It would be as foolish for artists to refuse to work for bourgeois cultural organizations as it would be for workers to declare a permanent strike against the capitalists' industries. But this does not mean that artists so employed should become servile tools or prostitutes for these exploiters, as unfortunately many do. On the contrary, the progressive artists have a double responsibility. Not only should they actively cultivate every form of independent artistic activity, but they should also fight, as workers do in capitalist industry, to make their democratic influence felt in the commercialized cultural organizations. The fact that the capitalists, through their commercialized art forms, have to appeal, for profit's sake, to the broadest ranks of the people, makes these forms especially vulnerable to ideological and organizational pressure, as much experience demonstrates.

Often, the struggle against the capitalists' domination of the organized cultural field is a very difficult one, as many Left artists have learned to their cost. But the struggle can be greatly facilitated if the artists will call upon the people in their mass organizations to support their struggle for democratic art.

Here, the trade unions and artistic guilds have an especially important role to play. Artists in the motion picture industry, for example, whether actors, writers, or others, should fight against all "Stepin Fetchit" caricatures of the Negro people, against Red-baiting, anti-Semitism, anti-trade union conceptions and other reactionary currents. More than this, artists and writers on the payroll of the capitalists should also fight to compel bourgeois commercial art to make place for positive expression of the new cultural needs of the people. A Toscanini refusing, under heavy threats, to play the Italian fascist national anthem, a Robeson or a Sinatra singing the songs of the people on capitalist-produced radio and motion picture programs, a Dreiser blasting

away at narrow-minded literary standards—these are typical symbols of how true democratic artists can compel even the highly-organized bourgeois culture to hearken to the voice of the masses. When such courageous artists get solid backing from the democratic mass organizations it will be possible to strike a much sharper progressive note in our national culture, even in those big branches of it that are organized primarily for profit and to develop ideological support for the capitalist system. It was also an especially disastrous effect of Browderism that it weakened such struggles within the capitalized art forms and tended to surrender the artists to Browder's so-called progressive bourgeoisie.

The special task of the Communists in the development of the new democratic trends in our national culture is to enrich culture with Marxian understanding and to carry it to the people. The Communists must, above all others, be the ones to understand the true significance of art as a weapon in the class struggle and to know how to combat all reactionary capitalist ideological hindrances to the development of the new people's democratic art. They must realistically develop a penetrating Marxist criticism. They must strive for the utmost excellence in their own artistic creative work. They must take the lead in educating and mobilizing the great masses to support all independent art projects of the people, to fight against reactionary trends in the capitalistically organized literature, theater, radio, motion pictures, etc., and to insist upon democratic artistic expressions through these powerful mediums. They must ceaselessly teach artists the elements of Marxism and inspire the whole body of artistic and cultural workers with the perspective of the great cultural renaissance that socialism brings with it.

**T**HE Communists, to be effective in all this work, must be alert to fight against the Left and Right dangers. Left sectarian trends are prominent in the new people's democratic art. They have done great harm in the past and are still not without considerable negative effects. Among such leftist trends may be noted tendencies to sweep aside all bourgeois art, past and present, as useless and dangerous, to have contempt for all art that is not immediately expressive of the class struggle, to fall into narrow cultism of various sorts,

to idealize the working class, to disdain high standards in artistic technique, to adopt sectarian attitudes toward the problems of artists working in the organized art mediums and cultural organizations of the bourgeoisie, etc. Such leftist conceptions have nothing in common with a people's cultural policy. The Communists, contrary to all such narrowness, should have the highest appreciation, as exemplified by Lenin and the Russian Bolsheviks, of bourgeois artistic achievements; they should have the broadest of all conceptions of what art is and of its vital social role; they should strive to be masters of artistic techniques and should eagerly learn much that bourgeois artists have to teach in this respect; they should be militant opponents of every conception of "artists in uniform" controls; they should be leaders in the artistic fight in every field not only in the initiation of independent art activities, but also in cultivating democratic expressions within the scope of the bourgeoisie's organized, capitalized cultural mediums. They must especially fight against the destructive effects of Trotskyism in every cultural field.

Left sectarian trends are still highly corrosive to a democratic cultural program. Nevertheless, the main danger in the cultural field is the Right danger, which is the direct pressure of capital-

ism itself. This Right danger, in general, expresses itself in the tendency of cultural workers to fall victims of, or surrender to, the insidious attempts of the bourgeoisie to stifle every manifestation of the new people's art and to enslave ideologically the people's artists. Among the major manifestations of the Right danger is the acceptance of the bourgeois propaganda to the effect that art is "free" and has nothing to do with the class struggle; that the artist has no democratic message for the people; that the man as artist has no relationship to the man as citizen, and that technical content and not social content is the essence of art. Such ideas not only liquidate the democratic ideology of the artist, but also degenerate him into a puppet of the bourgeoisie, a defender of every detrimental feature of capitalist culture, an acceptor of the wages of the capitalists in return for poisoning the minds of the people. Browderism tended to cultivate all these enervating Right tendencies. The Communists must be the leaders in fighting against such Right dangers, which operate to make the artist merely an appendage and servant of the decadent capitalist system and its sterile art.

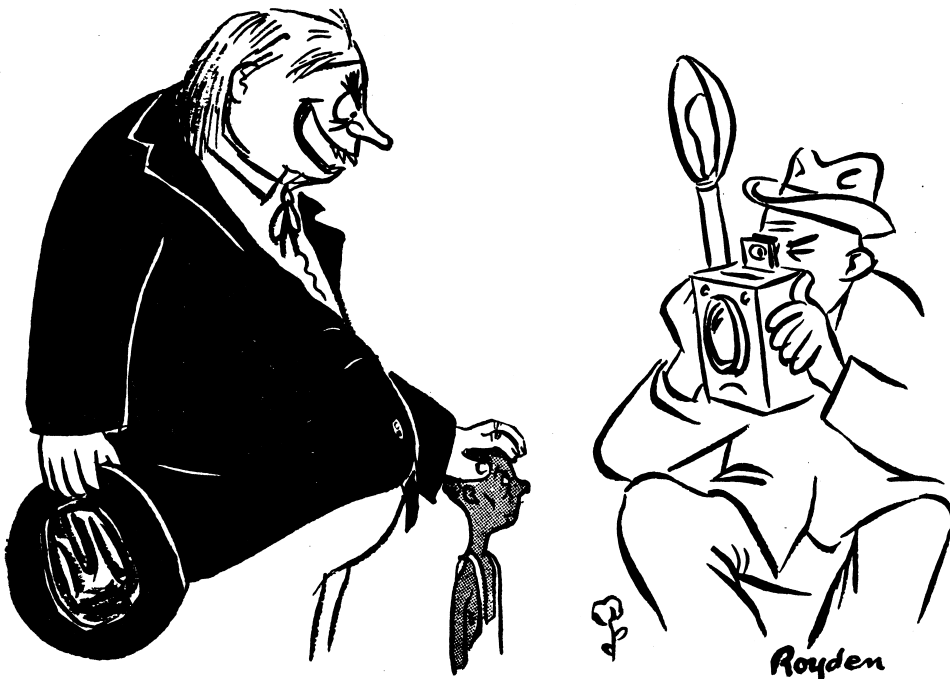
The present debate now going on in the left-wing press over the original Albert Maltz article in *NEW MASSES*

is a healthy sign of the correction of our revisionism in the cultural field, as well as in other branches of our Party's work. For Browder, with his imperialistic theories to the effect that the American bourgeoisie has become progressive, not only set our Party to tailing after the capitalists in the field of politics, but also in that of culture. Maltz's article expressed elements of this Right trend, now happily being corrected by Maltz himself. From the course of the debate it is clear that the necessary rectifications in our Party's understanding and practice are being made.

The tone of the debate has been sharp. Some people attempt to interpret this sharpness as an indication that the Communist Party wants to regiment the artists. But this is decidedly not the case; the Party wants to cultivate the maximum freedom of artistic expression among cultural workers of all kinds. It knows full well that without such freedom there can be no productive people's art. But Maltz's article was of a highly theoretical character, and in matters of theory Communists insist upon clarity. Maltz in his article attempted to lay down, and incorrectly, the line that should be followed generally by progressive artists in every field of culture. Hence his proposals had to be discussed with all the sharpness necessary to achieve theoretical clarity. The debate is a healthy one. The Communist Party and its friends are now getting a much-needed lesson in the principles of Marxism in the cultural field, and the Party is actively laying the basis for the soundest artistic program it has ever had.

The next years will show a tremendous resurgence of progressive spirit in every cultural field. Capitalism is sinking deeper into its general crisis, and the reactionaries, who see their precious social system threatened, are moving again in the direction of fascism and another world war in an attempt to save it. More and more the democratic forces, here and abroad, are going over onto the political and ideological offensive against capitalist decadence in all its manifestations. These awakening masses and peoples will increasingly demand the voice of every kind of artist in their struggle against reactionary capitalists, especially American big capital. Hence our Party must be fully prepared to play a vital leading role in this broad cultural movement of the people, even as it does in every other phase of the class struggle.

## This Week's Rankest



"HE doesn't want to be shut up in school all day."—Senator Rankest.