

'ROOTS' - liquidating national struggle

Over 130 million people watched the TV novel "ROOTS" written by Alex Haley. "ROOTS" was the most successful show in television history. There is no surprise as to the success of "ROOTS" because it retells the dramatic history of Afro American people during the period of slavery and the initial period of Reconstruction in a lively mass style. But although "ROOTS" was done in a mass style, it was not in the interests of the masses. Mao Tsetung says about art: "In the world today all culture belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics." (Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art, Selected Works, v. III, p. 86. "ROOTS" is geared to the political line of the bourgeoisie.

Even though "ROOTS" did serve to popularize aspects of the barbarity and horror of the slave system, "ROOTS" still serves the ruling class of this country and helps it to maintain its power. One can only read the bourgeois press to see the declarations of the various bourgeois politicians--both black and white to see that they are well pleased.

Haley's book was originally begun in a time of mass rebellion in 1964 under the title "Before This Anger." But although a product of struggle, its purpose is to divert the struggle. Its goal is to retell Black history from a bourgeois perspective and to divert Black people from getting at the roots of their common oppression.

ROLE OF IMPERIALISM

Imperialism divides the world into oppressor and oppressed nations and the system of imperialism means the ever-widening extension of national oppression. The history of Black people in the US is the history of a people drawn first into a vicious and barbarous slave system and then forged into a nation on the territory of the Black Belt with the collapse of slavery and the failure of Reconstruction. Black people on this territory constituted a majority closely tied to the land linked by common bonds of history, language, economy and culture. But the nation which developed was an oppressed nation, dependent upon and enslaved politically, militarily and culturally by US imperialism. Historically the economic basis for the oppression of the Afro American nation was the seizure of land in the Black Belt territory of the South by southern plantation owners in alliance with US finance capital. The export of oppressor nation capital to the Black Belt deformed and retarded the development of that area. The impoverishment of the peasantry coupled with the strict segregation enforced by Jim Crow laws and KKK terror led to a migration of Black people off the land into the cities throughout the US in search of work. For that reason the special oppression and superexploitation of Black people throughout the US

has its roots in the national oppression and domination of the territory of the Black Belt South by US imperialism.

The common history of the Afro American people has been a protracted and turbulent struggle against national oppression and for equal rights.

The heart of this struggle is the struggle of the Afro American nation in the Black Belt South for national liberation. The purpose of "ROOTS" is to obscure the historical constitution of the Afro American people into a nation in the Black Belt South and to liquidate the struggle for national liberation and self determination. The rising upsurge of the Black masses requires that the bourgeoisie use the weapon of culture to retell Afro American history from a perspective that will liquidate the struggle for national liberation, up to and including the right of political secession for the Black Belt South and limit the struggle for equal rights by dulling the consciousness of Afro Americans to the true character of their common oppression. Yet it is only by taking up the struggle in alliance with the struggle of the multi-national proletariat of the US for socialism that the Afro American people can rip out the root

of their common oppression.

"ROOTS" liquidates the struggle for national liberation by belittling the right of the people to the land they have earned through their labor. In the last episode, the Senator, a carpet-bagger says, "whoever owns the land, controls the people-so goes the land, so goes the people." But the lesson portrayed by the drama contradicts this. When Chicken George and his family trick the vigilantes and escape to Tennessee, the trick is on them, for the Senator still owned the land and there would be plenty of other Black people who would be forced to work to survive because they did not own the means of production, above all the land, which was stolen from them with the betrayal of Reconstruction. In order for Black people to be liberated the solution is not for one family to escape, but for the oppressed masses to seize the land and territory of their historical homeland. But the solution put forward in "ROOTS" is the bourgeois solution pushed by every reformist and revisionist--there is no need to fight for land and territory in the Black Belt South because the national question is dying away as the Black masses escape to jobs and opportunities in the rest of the country.

"ROOTS" liquidates the struggle for national liberation by throwing up an individual solution to the question of the liberation of an oppressed people. The major theme was Kunta Kinte's individual struggle to be free. While he was constantly plotting to escape, this was contrasted with the passive mobs of Black people portrayed as basically content to make the best of a bad situation. On the other hand Kunta Kinte, because of his desire for freedom, was characterized as "that crazy African with his run away blood." But this is a bourgeois distortion of history, for Black people have never taken their oppression peacefully. There were constant acts of resistance, some organized, some spontaneous. But what "ROOTS" did was spread the illusion that one man could be free while his nation and his class were in bondage.

"ROOTS" reinforced the theme of passivity and capitulation in the face of oppression by putting forward a bourgeois view of the family. The family was seen as

a refuge for retreat rather than a base for struggle. It was a source of compromise rather than of strength. After Kunta was married to Bell and once Kizzy was born, Kunta did not try to escape. Basically as long as their family was together, slavery was at least tolerable. It wasn't until Kizzy was sold off and Bell died that Kunta returned to plotting his escape and freedom again.

When "ROOTS" does portray mass resistance, rather than individual escape, it is always portrayed as the unruly violence of a tyrannical mob--an uncontrollable lashing out at any white. For example, Nat Turner was mentioned, but he was seen as someone negative who killed indiscriminately. Once George and his wife found one of his men, dead with several bullet holes in his chest. They commented that the dead man had a peculiar smile on his face. That was all that was mentioned. Never was it hinted that Turner represented organized resistance in a democratic struggle. Instead, it was left to us to believe that he and his men had some kind of maniacal escapade until they got stopped. Mao writes: "Writers and artists of the bourgeoisie in its period of reaction depict the revolutionary masses as mobs and themselves as saints, thus reversing bright and dark." (Yenan Talks on Literature and Art, S.W., v. III, p. 278.)

Another example occurs when the son of the blacksmith Tom wants to kill the vigilantes for whipping Tom. He is consoled by a young white woman who tells him "it ain't right to kill--where will it end? Does that mean you will kill me?" Of course this was not on Tom's mind, but what Haley does is to portray all anger that could lead to violence as indiscriminate and uncontrollable and to equate the reactionary deeds of the vigilantes with all whites. A revolutionary stance would have made clear that the rage was justified and taken the position, yes, these men should be punished and made an example.

CHARACTER OF THE ENEMY

Just as "ROOTS" attempts to substitute escape for the path of righteous resistance, it also attempts to obscure the character of the enemy. "ROOTS" gave the impression that all whites had an interest in maintaining slavery and then the national oppression of the Afro American nation. They were viewed as racist cutthroats. The majority, however, had neither slaves nor plantations and in fact had a common enemy in the slaveowning and landowning class. This was manifested through common armed offensive of whites and Blacks in the Abolitionist movement led by John Brown (who was never mentioned in the movie). And after the Civil War this unity of ex-slaves and poor whites continued in organized armed resistance to the violence of the KKK and reactionary landowners.

The slave system is also portrayed from a bourgeois point of view which sees it is based not on a system of class oppression, but caused by evil human nature. And instead of the real savagery of the slave system where the average life expectancy was 7 to 9 years and people were literally worked to death from "can't see in the morning to can't see at night" we get a slave who has easy accessibility to the master, who shares his ups and downs, etc.

The enemy is either "all white people" or "evil human nature" in order to liquidate the struggle against an exploiting class which owns the means of production. When the enemy is not identified as a class and the people are portrayed as passive or in disarray, this is done to hide class struggle. As the Comintern pointed out almost 50 years ago, the "stench of the slave market" persists today to expose the rotten threads that connect oppressor nation capitalists who exploit Afro American people today and the class of slave owners whose ruthless exploitation they inherit. "ROOTS" tries to divert our attention from that target.

SUMMARY

These major points: (1) the liquidation of the history and democratic struggle of a nation for national liberation and self determination, including the belittling of the role of land, (2) the passivity and lack of resistance in the face of oppression, portraying individual escape rather than class war under slavery or national liberation after Reconstruction as the means to liberation, (3) portraying collective resistance as uncontrolled and tyrannical mob violence, (4) the bourgeois role of the family in holding back struggle, (5) the refusal to identify the enemy as an exploiting class in control of the means of production--all these points represent the views of a particular class, the ruling class. The drama attempts to divert the masses of American people from the primary issue of class and national struggle to the secondary issue of one man's life. It attempts to turn history from a foundation of action into an object of passive entertainment.

The desire of the working class and the oppressed nationalities to know their history is growing. Thus, "ROOTS" will open the door for other stories of defiance and resistance--Nat Turner, the underground railroad, etc. But none of them, done by writers like Haley, will call into question the capitalist system or the power of the capitalist state.

Culture is a critical arena of class struggle. Mao said: "To overthrow a political power, it is always necessary to first of all create public opinion to do work in the ideological sphere. This is true for the revolutionary as well as the counterrevolutionary classes." "ROOTS" demonstrates the importance the bourgeoisie places on preserving its hegemony in the field of art and culture. As revolutionaries we cannot pretend to overthrow the rule of the bourgeoisie without breaking the grip of the bourgeois culture on the working and oppressed masses.

Revolutionary artists must base their work on Marxist science and point the direction forward for the masses. We need artists who will portray the historical constitution of the Afro American nation and the development of the struggle for national liberation and self-determination. We need artists who can show the fighting alliance that exists between the struggle of the black nation for self-determination, the struggle of all oppressed national minorities for equal rights and the struggle of the multinational proletariat for socialism.