

Shallow moralizing instead of Marxism

By Frank Brenner

What does it mean to build a socialist culture in the working class?

This phrase crops up in our polemics with the International Committee, but we certainly didn't coin it. On the contrary, you will find that this phrase was often used in the political writing of the IC itself if you go back far enough, say to the mid-1990s.

Back then, it was clear what this phrase meant, at least in a historical sense. In the last decades of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th, socialism was a political and social movement of liberation that united millions of workers around the globe. The term 'socialist culture' was meant to convey that much more was involved in this movement than just signing a membership card, paying dues or voting in elections. The workers, youth and intellectuals caught up in this movement felt themselves to be part of an inspiring social undertaking, the forging of a new world. Thus the hallmark of the thriving 'socialist culture' of this era was that socialism was itself a social ideal for great masses of people.¹

This point has been made by many historians and political analysts. Here for instance are some remarks by Daniel Guerin, from his book, *Fascism and Big Business*, long a staple of Trotskyist literature:

[E]arly socialism, more than any other movement, required of its pioneers and militants an unheard of amount of unselfishness and devotion. It had, more than any other movement, its heroes and martyrs. Although materialists [i.e. philosophically], the proletarian revolutionists were, in the words of [French poet] Marcel Martinet, "the only idealists in the modern world."²

But Guerin, writing in 1936, could already say that "socialism is an old movement which has lost its original flame." The great betrayals of Social Democracy and Stalinism had even by then taken a heavy toll on the socialist culture of the working class. In the many decades since then, this degeneration has gotten much worse. The crimes of Stalinism, above all, served to transfigure socialism in mass consciousness from a liberating ideal into a political nightmare. And with that, virtually every vestige of that earlier socialist culture withered away. In the era of Thatcher and Reagan, the catchphrase 'There Is No Alternative' to capitalism summed up the political zeitgeist, and this was reinforced by the demise of the Soviet Union, the turn of China to capitalism and the degeneration of the trade unions into 'business unionism'.

¹ The word culture in 'socialist culture' is used in the same sense that sociologists speak of a 'subculture': we can think of the socialist movement of this era in the broadest sense as a major political subculture. The classic case here is German Social Democracy, which became virtually a state within a state in Wilhelmine Germany.

² Daniel Guerin, *Fascism and Big Business*, (1973/1936), p.74.

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It was in this historical context that the need to rebuild a socialist culture in the working class began to be raised. Clearly it was intended to address this stultifying political atmosphere in which socialism had virtually disappeared from working class consciousness as a viable political alternative. Obviously a mass socialist culture is not something that can be willed into existence; in this regard, as in every other, objective conditions are of decisive importance. But a revolutionary party does what it can to exploit the objective conditions to the limits of their possibilities.

In terms of revolutionary practice, rebuilding a socialist culture is, to a great extent, identical to the fight to bring socialist consciousness to the working class, that fundamental political imperative of revolutionary Marxism. This means finding a road to the masses by providing alternative leadership in the everyday struggles of the working class, and through that work, building bridges to socialist consciousness. But it also means, in an era pervaded by a ‘There Is No Alternative’ zeitgeist, propaganda and agitation aimed at rekindling the flame of socialist idealism.

However, there was never any effort on the part of the IC to examine concretely what the implications were of trying to rebuild a socialist culture. Indeed the phrase itself largely disappeared as the party veered increasingly towards an objectivist theory and abstentionist practice. It was in this sense that the issue figured in our polemic with IC leader David North, *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart* (MWHH) – as a crucial aspect of a revolutionary orientation that the IC was abandoning.

But recently this phrase has been making something of a comeback in IC literature. This is specifically the case with WSWs arts editor David Walsh: in a lecture tour and meetings held in Britain last month, Walsh raised this issue a number of times. His remarks bear some comment because they demonstrate that this newfound interest in rebuilding a socialist culture is not at all a symptom of political health; on the contrary, what Walsh has done is to skew this phrase in such a way as to empty it of any revolutionary content and fill it instead with an old and banal form of middle class moralizing.

The remarks I want to comment on are from a transcript of a public meeting at the University of Manchester titled “The Writer and Revolution”, in which Walsh shared the platform with British playwright Trevor Griffiths.³ At one point Walsh raises the need for “a revival of a very rich, socialist culture that was damaged by Stalinism.” He then goes on to say: “It is certainly my view that the cultural level of the population has to be raised, there has to be a moral awakening, a cultural awakening, as part of the revolutionary socialist project. That, from our point of view, is why we hold this meeting, why we speak of these issues.”

Now, given the context of the meeting and Walsh’s own role as an arts editor, it isn’t surprising that he should, as it were, take literally the word ‘culture’ in socialist culture. And there is

³ “*The Writer and Revolution*: WSWs arts editor David Walsh in conversation with Trevor Griffiths – Part 2,” WSWs, Dec. 12, 2008: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/dec2008/man2-d12.shtml>.

nothing wrong with this: the socialist movement has always been involved in efforts to raise the cultural level of the working class, and this cultural/educational work has an important – although necessarily secondary – role to play in the essential task of raising the *political consciousness* of the working class.

But Walsh goes off in a different direction: he speaks of “a moral awakening” along with “a cultural awakening” but makes no mention of a political awakening. Instead he refers vaguely to this “moral awakening” as being “part of the revolutionary socialist project.” Exactly what part?

A little later in the transcript, after some remarks on the global economic crisis, Walsh expands on this idea:

What we do, what we make of it [i.e. the economic crisis - FB], how it is transformed in a revolutionary direction is a complex issue, but we are convinced that the question of culture, a deepening sensibility, sympathy for others ... in my opinion, if there were a mass revulsion, as is growing, in the US against the death penalty, that would be a great step towards the social revolution. Because the revolutionary programme comes relatively late in the game for masses of people. But sympathy, solidarity, self-sacrifice, nobility, compassion—those are qualities we very much need to encourage, and it is certainly one of the things that art can do. That’s why if you look at every great revolution in history it is impossible to imagine it without great artistic and cultural fermentation.

Let me note that the ellipsis in this quote (i.e. before “in my opinion”) is not something I added but is in the original transcript.

So, we now have a clearer picture as to what this “moral awakening” consists of. Walsh calls for “a deepening sensibility” in the sense of “sympathy for others” that must be developed in the working class. A little later he talks about “sympathy, solidarity, self-sacrifice, nobility, compassion” as qualities that need to be encouraged among the masses. He also gives an example of the kind of “moral awakening” he has in mind – mass revulsion at the death penalty in the US, and significantly he adds that if that were to occur, it “would be a great step towards the social revolution.”

There is one more point that Walsh makes, and it is crucial: this “moral awakening” *precedes* the adherence of the masses to a revolutionary program. That’s what Walsh means when he says: “Because the revolutionary programme comes relatively late in the game for masses of people.” In other words, first you have this “moral awakening” within the masses and *only after that* (i.e. “relatively late in the game”) do they undergo a political awakening to socialist consciousness. Thus, in the conception Walsh is putting forward here, this “moral awakening” isn’t actually a “part” of the revolutionary socialist project but rather a *precondition* for it.

This last point is stated explicitly in a preliminary report on this meeting that the WSWS posted right after it had taken place. Walsh’s remarks on this issue are summarized as follows:

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This underlined the necessity for writers and artists today to familiarize themselves with history, in particular the multifaceted struggle to develop socialist consciousness amongst broad layers of society. The *World Socialist Web Site* places particular emphasis on the need to raise the cultural level of the working class, to develop sensitivity, a sense of solidarity and an empathy with others *as a precondition for such a development*, Walsh said [emphasis added].⁴

Presumably Walsh vetted this report, if not actually writing it himself. And we can add yet a further quote, this time from a lecture Walsh gave in Britain titled “Art and socialism: the real premises”, which puts forward the same basic conception:

We are seeking to revive and rebuild the international socialist culture that was so damaged by Stalinism. We see this as essential to the project of world socialist revolution. *To put it bluntly, without a higher level of culture the working class will not achieve victory.* Of course, we don't fault the population for its present predicament. The present situation is an indictment of capitalism—which in its decay, has no interest or capacity to lift masses of people out of degradation and ignorance—and the so-called labor movement, the various Socialist, Communist and Labour parties, and trade unions, which have proven their utter rottenness in the past quarter-century. Nonetheless, we don't conceal the fact that, in our view, *a heightening of the cultural, moral, intellectual level of a significant layer of the population is **an indispensable precondition** for a profound social transformation* [all emphases added].⁵

In this last formulation Walsh has added to the “moral awakening” a cultural and intellectual “heightening” – all of which are now posited as being “an indispensable precondition” for the victory of the socialist revolution. Since you can't have that victory without the emergence of socialist consciousness in the masses, it follows that this three-fold “heightening” of the “cultural, moral, intellectual level” is also an indispensable precondition for socialist consciousness as well. (Hence Walsh's point about how the revolutionary program only comes “relatively late in the game for masses of people,” i.e. after they've become morally etc. “awakened”.) If you add it all up, this becomes quite a pile of ‘preconditions’.

It should be evident by now that what might seem at first sight a relatively uncontroversial appeal on Walsh's part for sympathy and solidarity is actually on closer analysis quite a remarkable claim – remarkable as a departure from positions long held by the Marxist movement.

Since when have Marxists ever believed that a “moral awakening” of the masses (or for that matter a cultural and intellectual “heightening”) is an indispensable precondition for socialist consciousness? This has been the standpoint of liberals, reformists, ‘Christian socialists’ and their ilk, the standpoint of those who want to ‘morally regenerate’ the masses before there can be

⁴ “Trevor Griffiths and David Walsh discuss ‘The Writer and Revolution’”, WSWS, Nov. 13, 2008: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/nov2008/tgdw-n13.shtml>.

⁵ David Walsh, “Art and socialism: the real premises”, WSWS, Nov. 26, 2008: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/nov2008/lect-n26.shtml>.

any talk of fundamental social change. The standpoint of revolutionary Marxists has always been that the masses will find their “moral awakening” *through the struggle for socialism itself*. In other words, it is the political awakening of the masses that is the precondition for their moral awakening, which is the exact opposite of what Walsh is arguing for here.

There is a passage in Trotsky’s *Results and Prospects*, his groundbreaking 1906 work on the theory of permanent revolution, that addresses this issue directly. Trotsky is discussing the objective and subjective pre-requisites for socialism. With regard to the subjective pre-requisites, he writes that it is necessary that the working class “should be conscious of its objective interests; it is necessary that it should understand that there is no way out for it except through socialism; it is necessary that it should combine in an army sufficiently powerful to conquer political power in open battle.”⁶ This is what Trotsky means by socialist consciousness (a conception obviously informed by what was at the time his recent experience leading the 1905 revolution).

But he goes on to contrast this with a very different view of socialist consciousness, one with a ‘moral’ slant:

But many socialist ideologues (ideologues in the bad sense of the word – those who stand everything on its head) *speak of preparing the proletariat for socialism in the sense of its being morally regenerated*. The proletariat, and even ‘humanity’ in general, must first of all cast out its old egoistical nature, and altruism must become predominant in social life, etc. As we are as yet far from such a state of affairs, and ‘human nature’ changes very slowly, socialism is put off for several centuries. *Such a point of view probably seems very realistic and evolutionary, and so forth, but as a matter of fact it is really nothing but shallow moralizing* (all emphases added).

This is the same position as Walsh’s – the working class must be “morally regenerated” to prepare it for socialism – and though Walsh doesn’t take this argument as far as putting off socialism for several centuries, he is equally guilty of “shallow moralizing.”

Trotsky goes on to show that this “shallow moralizing” is based on shallow logic: “It is assumed that a socialist psychology must be developed before the coming of socialism, in other words that it is possible for the masses to acquire a socialist psychology under capitalism.” That is putting the cart before the horse: how can you have a socialist psychology before you have socialism? And by a socialist psychology Trotsky means “the absence of egotistical motives in economic life” – in other words, “sympathy, solidarity, self-sacrifice, nobility, compassion” that make up Walsh’s conception of a “moral awakening”.

⁶ Leon Trotsky, *Results and Prospects*, chapt. 7: “The Prerequisites of Socialism”: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp07.htm>. All further quotes from this book are from this chapter.

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At this point Trotsky introduces a crucial distinction between a socialist psychology and what he calls “the conscious striving towards socialism”:

One must not confuse here the conscious striving towards socialism with socialist psychology. The latter presupposes the absence of egotistical motives in economic life; whereas the striving towards socialism and the struggle for it arises from the class psychology of the proletariat. However many points of contact there may be between the class psychology of the proletariat and classless socialist psychology, nevertheless a deep chasm divides them.

It is this “conscious striving towards socialism” that is what Marxists mean by socialist consciousness. And the precondition for that is not a moral but a political awakening of the working class. To be sure, this “striving” and the struggle against class oppression inevitably take on a moral dimension, as anyone who has fought scabs on a picket line or resisted police brutality at a protest demonstration can attest, but this moral dimension has no room to develop under capitalism:

The joint struggle against exploitation engenders splendid shoots of idealism, comradely solidarity and self-sacrifice, but at the same time the individual struggle for existence, the ever-yawning abyss of poverty, the differentiation in the ranks of the workers themselves, the pressure of the ignorant masses from below, and the corrupting influence of the bourgeois parties do not permit these splendid shoots to develop fully.

Trotsky’s point is incontestable: the constant pressure of the rat race, poverty, backwardness in its various forms and (particularly in our era) the degrading role of popular culture and the mass media in polluting the political atmosphere – all of this inevitably stunts the “splendid shoots of idealism, comradely solidarity and self-sacrifice” that spontaneously arise in the working class. If we were to follow Walsh’s conception, this would mean the struggle for socialism is hopeless, but this only demonstrates that Walsh’s conception is a muddle. A morally ‘unawakened’ working class is still capable of a “conscious striving towards socialism” – striving to the point of revolution.

For all that, in spite of his remaining philistinely egoistic, and without his exceeding in ‘human’ worth the average representative of the bourgeois classes, the average worker knows from experience that *his simplest requirements and natural desires can be satisfied only on the ruins of the capitalist system.*

Let us be clear about what this means. A worker who remains “philistinely egoistic”, who isn’t any better, morally speaking, than “the average representative of the bourgeois classes” – such a worker can still play a revolutionary role. Take the example that Walsh gives – revulsion at the death penalty. It is of course the responsibility of the revolutionary movement to do what it can to oppose this abhorrent practice and promote revulsion towards it among workers. But is this revulsion necessarily a precondition for socialist consciousness? It is not only conceivable, it is a certainty, that in a mass revolutionary movement there will be a good many workers who still believe that the death penalty is a just form of punishment. And yet these workers will also be

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willing to fight for a social revolution based on the “philistinely egoistic” motivation that their “simplest requirements and natural desires can be satisfied only on the ruins of the capitalist system.” What goes for the death penalty goes for any number of other moral issues. Revolutions are not uprisings of the virtuous but the “strivings” of the masses who have become convinced that “there is no way out for [them] except through socialism.”

Shallow moralizing leads to shallow politics. Consider how Walsh conceives the rebuilding of a socialist culture in the working class. As I noted earlier, he has a conception of stages: first there is the “moral awakening” of the masses over issues like the death penalty and then – “relatively late in the game” – comes the revolutionary program. We are back to the classic divide of Social Democracy between immediate reforms and a perpetually postponed ‘full’ revolutionary program. The perspective of the *Transitional Program* – of building bridges to socialist consciousness in the working class – plays no role in this conception.

Instead we are told that, were a mass movement to emerge against the death penalty, “that would be a great step towards the social revolution.” Is that even true? Immediate reforms or extending democratic rights under capitalism are far more likely to be used as *diversions* from the revolution rather than steps towards it *in the absence of any link in mass consciousness to the fight against capitalism*. The US civil rights movement, a historic struggle for democratic rights, did nothing on its own to revive a socialist culture in the working class. Instead, it ended up bolstering liberalism and illusions in the bourgeois state, finding its bitterly ironic fruition in the coming inauguration of Barack Obama as president.

Walsh’s conception turns out to have nothing to do (except in words) with rebuilding a socialist culture; instead it is symptomatic of a growing tendency in the ICFI *to blur the distinction between liberalism and Marxism*. Walsh is of course well acquainted with Trotsky’s arguments against “shallow moralizing” but he has chosen to ‘forget’ them for his own purposes. Since this blurring of the divide with liberalism is antithetical to classical Marxism, the approach to the latter tradition within the ICFI becomes increasingly selective, despite numerous claims to the contrary.

There is a further irony that deserves to be noted. Starting in 2002, I began to raise the need for a revival of utopianism within the Marxist tradition precisely to address the issue of how to rebuild a socialist culture in the working class. The “conscious striving towards socialism” that Trotsky could take for granted in Russia in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution was virtually non-existent in the working class a century later. Marxists needed to do what they could to revive the flame of socialist idealism. The belief that this would automatically happen as a result of objective conditions was a dangerous illusion, indicative of a growing hold of objectivism within the ICFI. Even under conditions of the current global financial meltdown, the absence in mass consciousness of any credible alternative to capitalism is probably the single most important ideological bulwark sustaining the system. Marxists had to make the case as widely as possible not only against capitalism but also *for* socialism.

Predictably, my argument was greeted with hostility: I was trying to push the clock back from scientific to utopian socialism; I was a stalking horse for the supposed ‘neo-utopianism’ of demoralized, petty bourgeois radicals and academics, etc. But in their brushing aside of utopianism, my critics were ignoring serious gaps in their own perspective:

There is an old line of argument that goes: everyone has a philosophy, and even if you think you don’t have one, this is only because you’ve never consciously thought about the one you have. The same can apply to vision in a revolutionary movement: there is always a vision, but so long as it remains unacknowledged and therefore unreflected upon, it becomes a vision *by default*, i.e. one that uncritically absorbs assumptions from the prevailing ideology. And not surprisingly, the prospect such ‘vision’ opens up is never that of a brave new world but of an ‘ideal’ version of the present world, minus its worst abuses but retaining many of its essential features.⁷

What Walsh has given us in his remarks about the need for a “moral awakening” in the working class as a precondition for socialist consciousness is yet another example of “a vision by default,” and it is indeed one “that uncritically absorbs assumptions from the prevailing ideology.” No doubt Walsh and the rest of the WSWS editorial board would vehemently deny there was anything ‘utopian’ about these remarks, but there most certainly is. The only trouble is that this kind of utopianism truly does have nothing to do with Marxism; instead Walsh echoes the pieties of liberalism and even of Sunday school sermonizing.

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Postscript:

I leave for another time a detailed analysis of Walsh’s lecture, “Art and socialism: the real premises.” Anyone familiar with MWHH will readily recognize that much of this lecture is a polemical attack on Steiner and myself, although neither of us or our documents are ever mentioned. This lecture has two principal themes – the Marxist theory of art and a critique of Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School – but it has to be said that there is nothing particularly new or insightful that Walsh has to say on either matter. Walsh’s criticism of Marcuse is similar to North’s treatment of the Frankfurt School in both of his polemics – which is to say, superficial and dishonest. As for the Marxist theory of art, Walsh goes back to positions he has stated many times before. Indeed, one has long since gotten the sense in reading Walsh that all of Marxist wisdom on art is contained in a single formula – art is the cognition of life. This is a disservice to Aleksandr Voronsky, who was himself trying to grapple with the limitations of this perspective before his career (and life) were cut short by Stalinism. The problem is not the idea itself but the making of it into an all-purpose formula. There is more richness to the classical Marxist tradition than this formula conveys and there are also theoretical problems which that tradition was never able to tackle but which a creative development of Marxism needs to address. Some of those

⁷ Frank Brenner, *To know a thing is to know its end*: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf, pp, 12-3.

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problems are evident in the Voronsky phrase itself – art is the cognition of life *through images*. As soon as one asks the question, what is an artistic image, a series of questions emerge about the specifically aesthetic nature of art that this formula cannot encompass. And that inadequacy is painfully evident in Walsh's own lecture when he states:

Art is a means of thinking about and feeling the world in images. Science and art cognize the same universe, but by different means and for somewhat different purposes, and even in different aspects. There are corners of existence that can't be reached by scientific axioms and laws, and corners that can't be reached by poems. Intuitively, we understand this difference.

Intuitively?? But the whole point of theory is to replace intuitions with explanations and analysis. A theory of art that can only appeal to intuition on as fundamental an issue as the distinction between art and science is not a credible theory of art. The Voronsky formula has become Walsh's way of avoiding the theoretical challenges that a Marxist theory of art needs to address.

Objectivism is a bane on the development of Marxist theory generally, but this surely applies with special force to the sphere of art. I very much doubt that I am the only one of Walsh's readers who has found that his film and art criticism, for many years the best and most engaging writing on the WSWS, has become increasingly predictable and uninspired. The reports from yet another international film festival seemed to recycle the same themes year in and year out. One had the sense of someone spinning his wheels. Now that spinning has given way to shallow moralizing. The decline in Walsh's work is emblematic of the theoretical and political decline afflicting the movement as a whole.