

Leon Trotsky

What Is Proletarian Culture, and Is It Possible?

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Every ruling class creates its own culture, and consequently, its own art. History has known the slave-owning cultures of the East and of classic antiquity, the feudal culture of medieval Europe and the bourgeois culture which now rules the world. It would follow from this that the proletariat has also to create its own culture and its own art.

The question, however, is not as simple as it seems at first glance. Society in which slave owners were the ruling class, existed for many and many centuries. The same is true of feudalism. Bourgeois culture, if one were to count only from the time of its open and turbulent manifestation, that is, from the period of the Renaissance, has existed five centuries, but it did not reach its greatest flowering until the nineteenth century, or, more correctly, the second half of it. History shows that the formation of a new culture which centers around a ruling class demands considerable time and reaches completion only at the period preceding the political decadence of that class.

Will the proletariat have enough time to create a “proletarian” culture? In contrast to the regime of the slave owners and of the feudal lords and of the bourgeoisie, the proletariat regards its dictatorship as a brief period of transition. When we wish to denounce the all-too-optimistic views about the transition to

socialism, we point out that the period of the social revolution, on a world scale, will last not months and not years, but decades – decades, but not centuries, and certainly not thousands of years. Can the proletariat in this time create a new culture? It is legitimate to doubt this, because the years of social revolution will be years of fierce class struggles in which destruction will occupy more room than new construction. At any rate the energy of the proletariat itself will be spent mainly in conquering power, in retaining and strengthening it and in applying it to the most urgent needs of existence and of further struggle. The proletariat, however, will reach its highest tension and the fullest manifestation of its class character during this revolutionary period and it will be within such narrow limits that the possibility of planful, cultural reconstruction will be confined.

On the other hand, as the new regime will be more and more protected from political and military surprises and as the conditions for cultural creation will become more favourable, the proletariat will be more and more dissolved into a socialist community and will free itself from its class characteristics and thus cease to be a proletariat. In other words, there can be no question of the creation of a new culture, that is, of construction on a large historic scale during the period of dictatorship. The cultural reconstruction, which will begin when the need of the iron clutch of a dictatorship unparalleled in history will have disappeared, will not have a class character. This seems to lead to the conclusion that there is no proletarian culture and that there never will be any and in fact there is no reason to regret this. The proletariat acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture and to make way for human culture. We frequently seem to forget this.

The formless talk about proletarian culture, in antithesis to bourgeois culture, feeds on the extremely uncritical identification of the historic destinies of the proletariat with those of the bourgeoisie. A shallow and purely liberal method of making analogies of historic forms has nothing in common with Marxism. There is no real analogy between the historic development of the bourgeoisie and of the working class.

The development of bourgeois culture began several centuries before the bourgeoisie took into its own hands the power of the state by means of a series of revolutions. Even when the bourgeoisie was a third estate, almost deprived of its rights, it

played a great and continually growing part in all the fields of culture. This is especially clear in the case of architecture. The Gothic churches were not built suddenly, under the impulse of a religious inspiration. The construction of the Cologne cathedral, its architecture and its sculpture, sum up the architectural experience of mankind from the time of the cave and combine the elements of this experience in a new style which expresses the culture of its own epoch which is, in the final analysis, the social structure and technique of this epoch. The old pre-bourgeoisie of the guilds was the factual builder of the Gothic. When it grew and waxed strong, that is, when it became richer, the bourgeoisie passed through the Gothic stage consciously and actively and created its own architectural style, not for the church, however, but for its own palaces.

With its basis on the Gothic, it turned to antiquity, especially to Roman architecture and the Moorish, and applied all these to the conditions and needs of the new city community, thus creating the Renaissance (Italy at the end of the first quarter of the fifteenth century). Specialists may count the elements which the Renaissance owes to antiquity and those it owes to the Gothic and may argue as to which side is the stronger. But the Renaissance only begins when the new social class, already culturally satiated, feels itself strong enough to come out from under the yoke of the Gothic arch, to look at Gothic art and on all that preceded it as material for its own disposal, and to use the technique of the past for its own artistic aims. This refers also to all the other arts, but with this difference, that because of their greater flexibility, that is, of their lesser dependence upon utilitarian aims and materials, the 'free' arts do not reveal the dialectics of successive styles with such firm logic as does architecture.

From the time of the Renaissance and of the Reformation, which created more favourable intellectual and political conditions for the bourgeoisie in feudal society, to the time of the revolution which transferred power to the bourgeoisie (in France), there passed three or four centuries of growth in the material and intellectual force of the bourgeoisie. The Great French Revolution and the wars which grew out of it temporarily lowered the material level of culture. But later the capitalist regime became established as the 'natural' and the 'eternal.' Thus the fundamental processes of the growth of bourgeois culture and of its crystallisation into style were determined by the characteristics

of the bourgeoisie as a possessing and exploiting class. The bourgeoisie not only developed materially within feudal society, entwining itself in various ways with the latter and attracting wealth into its own hands, but it weaned the intelligentsia to its side and created its cultural foundation (schools, universities, academies, newspapers, magazines) long before it openly took possession of the state. It is sufficient to remember that the German bourgeoisie, with its incomparable technology, philosophy, science and art, allowed the power of the state to lie in the hands of a feudal bureaucratic class as late as 1918 and decided, or, more correctly, was forced to take power into its own hands only when the material foundations of German culture began to fall to pieces.

But one may answer: It took thousands of years to create the slave-owning art and only hundreds of years for the bourgeois art. Why, then, could not proletarian art be created in tens of years? The technical bases of life are not at all the same at present and therefore the tempo is also different. This objection, which at first sight seems convincing, in reality misses the crux of the question. Undoubtedly, in the development of the new society, the time will come when economics, cultural life and art will receive the greatest impulse forward. At the present time we can only create fancies about their tempo. In a society which will have thrown off the pinching and stultifying worry about one's daily bread, in which community restaurants will prepare good, wholesome and tasteful food for all to choose, in which communal laundries will wash clean everyone's good linen, in which children, all the children, will be well-fed and strong and gay, and in which they will absorb the fundamental elements of science and art as they absorb albumen and air and the warmth of the sun, in a society in which electricity and the radio will not be the crafts they are today, but will come from inexhaustible sources of superpower at the call of a central button, in which there will be no "useless mouths," in which the liberated egotism of *mana* mighty force! – will be directed wholly towards the understanding, the transformation and the betterment of the universe – in such a society the dynamic development of culture will be incomparable with anything that went on in the past. But all this will come only after a climb, prolonged and difficult, which is still ahead of us. And we are speaking only about the period of the climb.

But is not the present moment dynamic? It is in the highest degree. But its dynamics is centred in politics. The war and the

revolution were dynamic, but very much at the expense of technology and culture. It is true that the war has produced a long series of technical inventions. But the poverty which it has produced has put off the practical application of these inventions for a long time and with this their possibility of revolutionising life. This refers to radio, to aviation, and to many mechanical discoveries.

On the other hand, the revolution lays out the ground for a new society. But it does so with the methods of the old society, with the class struggle, with violence, destruction and annihilation. If the proletarian revolution had not come, mankind would have been strangled by its own contradictions. The revolution saved society and culture, but by means of the most cruel surgery. All the active forces are concentrated in politics and in the revolutionary struggle, everything else is shoved back into the background and everything which is a hindrance is cruelly trampled underfoot. In this process, of course there is an ebb and flow; military communism gives place to the NEP, which, in its turn, passes through various stages.

But in its essence, the dictatorship of the proletariat is not an organisation for the production of the culture of a new society, but a revolutionary and military system struggling for it. One must not forget this. We think that the historian of the future will place the culminating point of the old society on the second of August, 1914, when the maddened power of bourgeois culture let loose upon the world the blood and fire of an imperialistic war. The beginning of the new history of mankind will be dated from November 7, 1917. The fundamental stages of the development of mankind we think will be established somewhat as follows: prehistoric 'history' of primitive man; ancient history, whose rise was based on slavery; the Middle Ages, based on serfdom; capitalism, with free wage exploitation; and finally, socialist society, with, let us hope, its painless transition to a stateless commune. At any rate, the twenty, thirty, or fifty years of proletarian world revolution will go down in history as the most difficult climb from one system to another, but in no case as an independent epoch of proletarian culture.

At present, in these years of respite, some illusions may arise in our Soviet Republic as regards this. We have put the cultural questions on the order of the day. By projecting our present-day problems into the distant future, one can think himself through a

long series of years into proletarian culture. But no matter how important and vitally necessary our culture-building may be, it is entirely dominated by the approach of European and world revolution. We are, as before, merely soldiers in a campaign. We are bivouacking for a day. Our shirt has to be washed, our hair has to be cut and combed, and, most important of all, the rifle has to be cleaned and oiled. Our entire present-day economic and cultural work is nothing more than a bringing of ourselves into order between two battles and two campaigns. The principal battles are ahead and may be not so far off. Our epoch is not yet an epoch of new culture, but only the entrance to it. We must, first of all, take possession, politically, of the most important elements of the old culture, to such an extent, at least, as to be able to pave the way for a new culture.

This becomes especially clear when one considers the problem as one should, in its international character. The proletariat was, and remains, a non-possessing class. This alone restricted it very much from acquiring those elements of bourgeois culture which have entered into the inventory of mankind forever. In a certain sense, one may truly say that the proletariat also, at least the European proletariat, had its epoch of reformation. This occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century, when, without making an attempt on the power of the state directly, it conquered for itself under the bourgeois system more favourable legal conditions for development.

But, in the first place, for this period of 'reformation' (parliamentarism and social reforms) which coincides mainly with the period of the Second International history allowed the working class approximately as many decades as it allowed the bourgeoisie centuries. In the second place, the proletariat, during this preparatory period, did not at all become a richer class and did not concentrate in its hands material power. On the contrary, from a social and cultural point of view, it became more and more unfortunate. The bourgeoisie came into power fully armed with the culture of its time. The proletariat, on the other hand, comes into power fully armed only with the acute need of mastering culture. The problem of a proletariat which has conquered power consists, first of all, in taking into its own hands the apparatus of culture – the industries, schools, publications, press, theatres, etc. – which did not serve it before, and thus to open up the path of culture for itself.

Our task in Russia is complicated by the poverty of our entire cultural tradition and by the material destruction wrought by the events of the last decade. After the conquest of power and after almost six years of struggle for its retention and consolidation, our proletariat is forced to turn all its energies towards the creation of the most elementary conditions of material existence and of contact with the ABC of culture – ABC in the true and literal sense of the word. It is not for nothing that we have put to ourselves the task of having universal literacy in Russia by the tenth anniversary of the Soviet regime.

Someone may object that I take the concept of proletarian culture in too broad a sense. That if there may not be a fully and entirely developed proletarian culture, yet the working class may succeed in putting its stamp upon culture before it is dissolved into a communist society. Such an objection must be registered first of all as a serious retreat from the position that there will be a proletarian culture. It is not to be questioned but that the proletariat, during the time of its dictatorship, will put its stamp upon culture. However, this is a far cry from a proletarian culture in the sense of a developed and completely harmonious system of knowledge and of art in all material and spiritual fields of work. For tens of millions of people for the first time in history to master reading and writing and arithmetic is in itself a new cultural fact of great importance. The essence of the new culture will be not an aristocratic one for a privileged minority, but a mass culture, a universal and popular one. Quantity will pass into quality; with the growth of the quantity of culture will come a rise in its level and a change in its character. But this process will develop only through a series of historic stages. In the degree to which it is successful, it will weaken the class character of the proletariat and in this way it will wipe out the basis of a proletarian culture.

But how about the upper strata of the working class? About its intellectual vanguard? Can one not say that in these circles, narrow though they are, a development of proletarian culture is already taking place today? Have we not the Socialist Academy? Red professors? Some are guilty of putting the question in this very abstract way. The idea seems to be that it is possible to create a proletarian culture by laboratory methods.

In fact, the texture of culture is woven at the points where the relationships and interactions of the intelligentsia of a class and of the class itself meet. The bourgeois culture – the technical,

political, philosophical and artistic, was developed by the interaction of the bourgeoisie and its inventors, leaders, thinkers and poets. The reader created the writer and the writer created the reader. This is true in an immeasurably greater degree of the proletariat, because its economics and politics and culture can be built only on the basis of the creative activity of the masses.

The main task of the proletarian intelligentsia in the immediate future is not the abstract formation of a new culture regardless of the absence of a basis for it, but definite culture-bearing, that is, a systematic, planful and, of course, critical imparting to the backward masses of the essential elements of the culture which already exists. It is impossible to create a class culture behind the backs of a class. And to build culture in cooperation with the working class and in close contact with its general historic rise, one has to build socialism, even though in the rough. In this process, the class characteristics of society will not become stronger, but, on the contrary, will begin to dissolve and to disappear in direct ratio to the success of the revolution. The liberating significance of the dictatorship of the proletariat consists in the fact that it is temporary – for a brief period only – that it is a means of clearing the road and of laying the foundations of a society without classes and of a culture based upon solidarity.

In order to explain the idea of a period of culture-bearing in the development of the working class more concretely, let us consider the historic succession not of classes, but of generations. Their continuity is expressed in the fact that each one of them, given a developing and not a decadent society, adds its treasure to the past accumulations of culture. But before it can do so, each new generation must pass through a stage of apprenticeship. It appropriates existing culture and transforms it in its own way, making it more or less different from that of the older generation. But this appropriation is not, as yet, a new creation, that is, it is not a creation of new cultural values, but only a premise for them. To a certain degree, that which has been said may also be applied to the destinies of the working masses which are rising towards epoch-making creative work. One has only to add that before the proletariat will have passed out of the stage of cultural apprenticeship, it will have ceased to be a proletariat.

Let us also not forget that the upper layer of the bourgeois third estate passed its cultural apprenticeship under the roof of feudal society; that while still within the womb of feudal society it

surpassed the old ruling estates culturally and became the instigator of culture before it came into power. It is different with the proletariat in general and with the Russian proletariat in particular. The proletariat is forced to take power before it has appropriated the fundamental elements of bourgeois culture; it is forced to overthrow bourgeois society by revolutionary violence for the very reason that society does not allow it access to culture. The working class strives to transform the state apparatus into a powerful pump for quenching the cultural thirst of the masses. This is a task of immeasurable historic importance. But, if one is not to use words lightly, it is not as yet a creation of a special proletarian culture. 'Proletarian culture,' "proletarian art," etc., in three cases out of ten are used uncritically to designate the culture and the art of the coming communist society, in two cases out of ten to designate the fact that special groups of the proletariat are acquiring separate elements of pre-proletarian culture, and finally, in five cases out of ten, it represents a jumble of concepts and words out of which one can make neither head nor tail.

Here is a recent example, one of a hundred, where a slovenly, uncritical and dangerous use of the term 'proletarian culture' is made. "The economic basis and its corresponding system of superstructures," writes Sizoy, "form the cultural characteristics of an epoch (feudal, bourgeois or proletarian)." Thus the epoch of proletarian culture is placed here on the same plane as that of the bourgeois. But that which is here called the proletarian epoch is only a brief transition from one social-cultural system to another, from capitalism to socialism. The establishment of the bourgeois regime was also preceded by a transitional epoch. But the bourgeois revolution tried, successfully, to perpetuate the domination of the bourgeoisie, while the proletarian revolution has for its aim the liquidation of the proletariat as a class in as brief a period as possible. The length of this period depends entirely upon the success of the revolution. Is it not amazing that one can forget this and place the proletarian cultural epoch on the same plane with that of feudal and bourgeois culture?

But if this is so, does it follow that we have no proletarian science? Are we not to say that the materialistic conception of history and the Marxist criticism of political economy represent invaluable scientific elements of a proletarian culture?

Of course, the materialistic conception of history and the labor theory of value have an immeasurable significance for the arming

of the proletariat as a class and for science in general. There is more true science in the **Communist Manifesto** alone than in all the libraries of historical and historico-philosophical compilations, speculations and falsifications of the professors. But can one say that Marxism represents a product of proletarian culture? And can one say that we are already making use of Marxism, not in political battles only, but in broad scientific tasks as well?

Marx and Engels came out of the ranks of the petty bourgeois democracy and, of course, were brought up on its culture and not on the culture of the proletariat. If there had been no working class, with its strikes, struggles, sufferings and revolts, there would, of course, have been no scientific communism, because there would have been no historical necessity for it. But its theory was formed entirely on the basis of bourgeois culture, both scientific and political, though it declared a fight to the finish upon that culture. Under the pressure of capitalistic contradictions, the universalising thought of the bourgeois democracy, of its boldest, most honest, and most far-sighted representatives, rises to the heights of a marvellous renunciation, armed with all the critical weapons of bourgeois science. Such is the origin of Marxism.

The proletariat found its weapon in Marxism not at once, and not fully even to this day. Today this weapon serves political aims almost primarily and exclusively. The broad realistic application and the methodological development of dialectic materialism are still entirely in the future. Only in a socialist society will Marxism cease to be a one-sided weapon of political struggle and become a means of scientific creation, a most important element and instrument of spiritual culture.

All science, in greater or lesser degree, unquestionably reflects the tendencies of the ruling class. The more closely science attaches itself to the practical tasks of conquering nature (physics, chemistry, natural science in general), the greater is its non-class and human contribution. The more deeply science is connected with the social mechanism of exploitation (political economy), or the more abstractly it generalises the entire experience of mankind (psychology, not in its experimental, physiological sense but in its so-called philosophic sense), the more does it obey the class egotism of the bourgeoisie and the less significant is its contribution to the general sum of human knowledge. In the domain of the experimental sciences, there exist different degrees of scientific integrity and objectivity, depending upon the scope

of the generalisations made. As a general rule, the bourgeois tendencies have found a much freer place for themselves in the higher spheres of methodological philosophy, of *Weltanschauung*. It is therefore necessary to clear the structure of science from the bottom to the top, or, more correctly, from the top to the bottom, because one has to begin from the upper stories.

But it would be naive to think that the proletariat must revamp critically all science inherited from the bourgeoisie before applying it to socialist reconstruction. This is just the same as saying with the utopian moralists: before building a new society, the proletariat must rise to the heights of communist ethics. As a matter of fact, the proletarian will reconstruct ethics as well as science radically, but he will do so after he will have constructed a new society, even though in the rough.

But are we not travelling in a vicious circle? How is one to build a new society with the aid of the old science, and the old morals? Here we must bring in a little dialectics, that very dialectics which we now put so uneconomically into lyric poetry and into our office bookkeeping and into our cabbage soup and into our porridge. In order to begin work, the proletarian vanguard needs certain points of departure, certain scientific methods which liberate the mind from the ideological yoke of the bourgeoisie; it is mastering these, in part has already mastered them. It has tested its fundamental method in many battles, under various conditions. But this is a long way from proletarian science. A revolutionary class cannot stop its struggle because the party has not yet decided whether it should or should not accept the hypothesis of electrons and ions, the psychoanalytical theory of Freud, the new mathematical discoveries of relativity, etc. True, after it has conquered power, the proletariat will find a much greater opportunity for mastering science and for revising it. This is more easily said than done.

The proletariat cannot postpone socialist reconstruction until the time when its new scientists, many of whom are still running about in short trousers, will test and clean all the instruments and all the channels of knowledge. The proletariat rejects what is clearly unnecessary, false and reactionary, and in the various fields of its reconstruction makes use of the methods and conclusions of present-day science, taking them necessarily with the percentage of reactionary class-alloy which is contained in them. The

practical result will justify itself generally and on the whole, because such a use when controlled by a socialist goal will gradually manage and select the methods and conclusions of the theory. And by that time there will have grown up scientists who are educated under the new conditions. At any rate, the proletariat will have to carry its socialist reconstruction to quite a high degree, that is, provide for real material security and for the satisfaction of society culturally before it will be able to carry out a general purification of science from top to bottom. I do not mean to say by this anything against the Marxist work of criticism, which many in small circles and in seminars are trying to carry through in various fields. This work is necessary and fruitful. It should be extended and deepened in every way. But one has to maintain the Marxian sense of the measure of things to count up the specific gravity of such experiments and efforts today in relation to the general scale of our historic work.

Does the foregoing exclude the possibility that even in the period of revolutionary dictatorship, there might appear eminent scientists, inventors, dramatists and poets out of the ranks of the proletariat? Not in the least. But it would be extremely light-minded to give the name of proletarian culture even to the most valuable achievements of individual representatives of the working class. One cannot turn the concept of culture into the small change of individual daily living and determine the success of a class culture by the proletarian passports of individual inventors or poets. Culture is the organic sum of knowledge and capacity which characterises the entire society, or at least its ruling class. It embraces and penetrates all fields of human work and unifies them into a system. Individual achievements rise above this level and elevate it gradually.

Does such an organic interrelation exist between our present-day proletarian poetry and the cultural work of the working class in its entirety? It is quite evident that it does not. Individual workers or groups of workers are developing contacts with the art which was created by the bourgeois intelligentsia and are making use of its technique, for the time being, in quite an eclectic manner. But is it for the purpose of giving expression to their own internal proletarian world? The fact is that it is far from being so. The work of the proletarian poets lacks an organic quality, which is produced only by a profound interaction between art and the development of culture in general. We have the literary works of

talented and gifted proletarians, but that is not proletarian literature. However, they may prove to be some of its springs.

It is possible that in the work of the present generation many germs and roots and springs will be revealed to which some future descendant will trace the various sectors of the culture of the future, just as our present-day historians of art trace the theatre of Ibsen to the church mystery, or impressionism and cubism to the paintings of the monks. In the economy of art, as in the economy of nature, nothing is lost, and everything is connected in the large. But factually, concretely, vitally, the present-day work of the poets who have sprung from the proletariat is not developing at all in accordance with the plan which is behind the process of preparing the conditions of the future socialist culture, that is, the process of elevating the masses ...