Politics and Working Class Culture: A Response

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In their response to a previous article of mine, (1) the Naledi Writers' Unit argue against my "populist" definition of both Black Consciousness and "progressive" literature in the last decade and a half. They say:

> Our aim, as cultural workers, is to build the culture of resistance of the people of Southern Africa. Throughout Southern Africa...years of colonialist oppression and South African aggression and repression have shaped our culture; we know that to survive, we must resist...we talk about building a "culture of liberation" out of the "culture of the oppressed" and the "people's struggle." In Mozambique and Angola we look to the resistance traditions and expressions of the peasantry, of the cotton workers, of the guerilla struggle of MPLA and FAPLA; from these traditions we can talk of developing a new society, based on the as yet infant working class.

and they go on to describe the cultural initiatives Medu Art Ensemble (to which Naledi belongs) is taking and to clarify their position on the relationship of working class culture to the "culture of resistance" they advocate.

Dismissing the approach which looks at all cultural activities engaged in by the working class as that of "Western sociological theory", Naledi argues for a determinedly political and vanguardist approach to working class culture. Workers, they say, are often corrupted in their behaviour by the bourgeois culture they have picked up from newspapers, the educational system, television, radio and so on, but "progressive cultural workers have distinguished between imposed culture forced upon the working class by the bourgeoisie...and the developing strands of "working class culture", those expressions which actively promote the workers' consciousness of their own objective conditions of existence". Therefore they argue that working class culture can best be defined as those cultural activities that build and direct the workers' awareness in the best interests of the working class. They emphasise the need for purposeful cultural activism in order to

achieve this goal: "beyond ideological commitment, it is essential that we also create institutions and structures that will reinforce and build upon this strong working class culture". In addition, they stress the building of a culture that will forge a unity of the "oppressed class", who will in turn come to "remember its history, identify its heroes, write new songs and sing them, start newspapers and discussion groups and literacy circles and theatre groups".

I would like here to briefly further address the question of working class culture. My response will not only try to answer Naledi's ideas, but will extend the debate by bringing up points which I think are essential to consider further. Thus, not all of the following are aimed at Medu or Naledi. Neither are any comments made in the course of my argument an attempt to belittle or deny the considerable achievements that organisation has made in the cultural sphere in the last eight years: rather, what is meant is a free and open discussion. Furthermore, in the process of discussion I will confine my remarks to South Africa. This is because my knowledge of the culture of other Southern African countries is extremely limited, and because South Africa has its own political, socio-economic and cultural specifics - such as a much larger and better established working class, and the virtual absence of any sort of independent peasantry. (2)

The question of populism

Despite their political differences, the two most important contemporary opposition movements inside the country (the UDF and National Forum) are structured at this point in time as popular fronts of various organisations. These popular fronts comprise a coalition of different classes united in their opposition to apartheid. Therefore, when I describe them as populist, it is meant as a widely descriptive term of the language in which both movements tend to mobilise and speak about ideological struggle. (3) When speaking about culture, both often use terms which do not refer specifically to class. When Naledi says, for example, "we talk about building a "culture of liberation" out of the "culture of the oppressed" and the "people's struggle", it seems to me indisputable that they are using a cultural definition based on populist language.

However, both the UDF and the NF state that in their popular

fronts the working class must come to play a leading role, although it is arguable that the leadership of both movements is at the moment weighted outside of the working class (ie. is in the main petty bourgeois). Obviously both movements have a significant political presence in South Africa today. But their use of populist language can blur (and even disguise) several crucial poltical distinctions of a class nature, which have a bearing on cultural activity. These distinctions deserve to be highlighted as they are important to questions of leadership and democracy.

The "conscience" of the people

There is a similar attribute to be found in a great deal of the work of both Black Consciousness and progressive cultural activists - the desire to act as the "conscience" and "spokespeople" of all those oppressed (with increasing attention being paid to the working class). This belief is very clear in writers of a Black Consciousness bent. The poet Maropodi Mapalakanye, for instance, says:

> We, the writers/artists and educationists, are the people who must play a major role in the liberation of our people's minds. (4)

A similar attitude can be seen from these (generally) urban writers with regard to those people who still live in rural South Africa. Here, rural people and migrant workers tend to be seen as the mere recipients of political exhortations supplied by black writers: which will then enable these lower class people to act as a kind of "protest fodder" for already decided political ends. Risimati j'Mathonsi, commenting on the indigenous/english language question, says for example:

> Let those who write in foreign languages do so; but they should not scorn their brothers who are battling to bring the peasants abreast with what is going on. By so doing the masses can contribute. (5)

It seems to me that Naledi Writers' Unit would probably stress a more dynamic interaction between cultural activists and lower class people - activists have as much to learn as to teach in such a relationship. Nevertheless, their reply is not entirely free of the above type of formulation, although I am sure they would disagree with its elitist tone. For instance, they make statements like, "cultural work should be

done directly for the organisations of the working class, both at the work place and in the community" (my emphasis); they speak of the need for "a conscious effort by progressive cultural workers to use symbols and imagery that reinforce the awareness and direction of the working class". In such statements, it is made clear that working-class culture can, and should, be directed by politicised activists of other classes.

Outside of Medu, many other progressive commentators also agree that cultural and political activists should play a directive role in forging links between work place and community struggles on the one hand and the national struggle on the other: in fact, that they should act as a type of linking-up and unifying mechanism for popular front politics. The musician Barry Gilder is an example of this when he puts forward music "as a form of education and mobilisation, as a form of uniting different communities and struggles into one irrepressible whole". (6)

While the attempts of cultural activists from other classes to reach the working class and incorporate working class experiences and issues at the moment must be seen as relevant and important, what is more dubious is the concomitant tendency at work to downplay the ideological and political limitations class positions place on people. While they point out that each class has a rather different perspective on and set of assumptions about society, Naledi does not follow through the logic of their argument. Members of different classes in South Africa do not necessarily have the same everyday experiences, or the same perceptions of what their political goals are. This is true even among black people who are in some ways uniformly oppressed by apartheid laws. Thus, petty bourgeois activists need to be careful when they think they can, through an act of will or commitment, easily speak for the working class. The notion of "class suicide" is often used to justify this identification with the working class by activists in Africa: I would argue that in itself the term does not satisfactorily solve the problem it tries to, as there are very real material difficulties involved that an act of will cannot easily overcome. This is not to suggest that economic determinism is all that exists, and that human will plays no bearing on politics and history. But still, "class suicide" often remains at the level of gesture.

The presence of working class culture

Naledi correctly points out that the "culture of resistance" they advocate contains strong elements of working class culture, especially in more oral forms such as dance and song. However, this culture of resistance is a popular culture, in the exact sense of the phrase. It stresses the solidarity of all those - of whatever class - who are oppressed by apartheid (as in Black Consciousness) or who oppose apartheid (as in the progressive movement).

It would be a mistake to try and completely separate popular from working class culture (or believe either of them can be completely isolated from capitalist culture). But it would be mistaken to completely identify the two as Naledi occasionally tends to do. For instance, they use the songs of trade unionist Vuyisile Mini as an example of the working class voice within resistance culture. However, they go on to say that the freedom songs used in the culture of resistance "unmistakenly carry the musical style and forms developed by the working class, without electronic equipment and instruments, using the structures of work chants". This is only partly true. They forget the extent to which the makwaya style in which many of these songs are performed is the result of the conscious reworking of Christian and traditional styles by, amongst others, middle class composers such as Caluza, Tyamzashe and Mohapeloa in the early part of this century. (7)

It is true that working class cultural forms and content have constantly injected vitality into the culture of resistance. It is also important to consider, though, that these forms have often been used by a middle class leadership to further their own interests. The "African National Culture" debate of the 1930s remains a classic example of this type of appropriation:

> There is no objection to war dances, provided they are staged by the enlightened Bantu. When they are staged by the uncivilised, it is a sign of retrogression, because... he has no inducement to progress. (8)

It is very difficult in these circumstances to isolate a working class culture from a wider popular culture, when looked at historically. There has generally been a great deal of cultural interconnectedness and influence at work, as well as a ten-

dency for people to be socially mobile across class lines during their lives. Modikwe Dikobe, author of The Marabi Dance, is an immediate example of this: during his life he has been employed in such different jobs as hawker, clerk, nightwatchman, domestic worker and schoolmaster. Nevertheless, there have been class forces at work that make it impossible to simply remain at the level of popular culture and be accurate. Middle class black people in the 1930s, for instance, constantly denigrated the marabi culture of the slumyards and extolled the eisteddfords and other forms of "civilised" recreation: mine workers of an earlier era took the amatimiti of black mission ladies and radically changed these tea parties to suit their own male, working class needs. Popular types of cultural activity, therefore, are often used differently to suit different material circumstances and class needs.

Working class leadership

Commentators from various political positions seem to generally agree that the black petty bourgeoisie has had a political coherence and importance in South African history far outweighing its numerical strength. (9) A great deal of black political organisation in this country has historically been centred around nationalist and populist demands, and political leadership has often (but not always) been the prerogative of the more privileged classes. These demands have, in the context of the apartheid state, been in the interests of the black lower classes; but they have seldom been organised or articulated by these lower classes. It must be remembered too, that working class interests go beyond the destruction of apartheid to the transformation of the social and economic system as a whole. If working class forms are appropriated in the cause of the national struggle, this does not necessarily mean that working class cultural hegemony in the nation itself is assured. Thus, for Naledi to speak as if working class political and cultural demands have constantly been to the forefront of the national struggle is too quick a judgement. (10)

In my opinion, the admiration activists feel for lower class forms of culture is a relatively recent phenomenon. Consider the more oral, rurally-derived cultural forms used by the black migrant workforce, at present one of the largest and most militant sections of the working class. As recently as the early 1970s, many activists dismissed these forms as mere

"folklore" and "caricature". Therefore we get amazing statements like this one, made about black cultural life in the 1970s: "the traditional cultures had long since ceased to be capable of sustaining or developing artistic forms". (11) Now, ten years later, a working class poetry based on and transforming traditional historical and praise poetry is finally becoming visible. (12)

For a long time after the upsurge of trade union activity in 1973, a belief also persisted among some black writers that the working class was "depoliticised". In the black literature that has actually been produced during the 1970s, one can see more privileged class perceptions at work. A great deal of this literature came from a radical petty bourgeoisie - and there is very little of it which deals with or uses shopfloor experiences, or everyday working class community issues of an immediate nature such as rents and housing. (13) And it was this very literature which saw itself as "political" and tended to regard the black working class as in need of political education about their oppression!

While the need for the working class to form political alliances with other classes at times when it is advantageous for them to do so cannot be questioned, and while the working class must strive to present a democratic social alternative attractive to sympathetic members of the intermediate classes in order to combat capitalism, it is difficult to see how these goals will automatically be achieved without making working class leadership a reality rather than a principle, and without taking note of working class forms of culture. Not only should institutions and structures be set up to promote working class culture: the working class should be allowed to do this task for themselves. It is in the grassroots organisations of the working class (trade unions, factory committees, tenants' associations etc.) where this is perhaps most immediately possible. It is noticeable that in the list of activities Naledi gives at the end of their article, many are artifacts which can be created outside of a community and brought in - t-shirts, posters, plays, banners etc. This type of culture, as they themselves point out, cannot take predominance over a democratisation of culture to allow as many people as possible to participate.

There is, however, a general tendency at work in South Afri-

can political life today to enshrine this notion of working class leadership and to romanticise working class culture. Working class leadership should not be seen as an abstract principle: what is important is the structures of participation and forms of democratic organisation which will enable this leadership and hegemony to happen. (14) Neither should the working class be romanticised as having some sort of moral superiority to other people. Rather, the working class is important in social transformation because it is one of the two major contending classes in capitalist society with access to the means of production, and the only one structurally in a position to alter the relations of production.

Problems of cultural and political leadership in South Afric today are not easily solved. It would be utopian to believe that the black working class can generate a leadership and hegemony spontaneously and without education and organisation. It would be just as foolish, however, to believe that working class hegemony can be guaranteed by individuals and political organisations in which the working class does not have an active leading role, as a type of "act of faith" by middle class activists. In the latter approach, it has been observed:

> Power would devolve to the workers' own organisations only after the workers were fully trained and competent...in this approach the proletariat is locked into a sort of nursery school of history where, whichever way it turns, it is always the student "who does not know" of one educator or another. (15)

Objective class interests

The view that the political role of cultural activists is to inject the working class with a true idea of its objective class interests is closely related to the view that working class interests can be advanced and guaranteed by a political party which has these interests at heart. Obviously, this process is open to a variety of different actions and interpretations. Sometimes the process of middle class activists working in the field of working class culture can be fruitful. But there is an implicit assumption often found in this type of thinking that only those cultural manifestations which advance the "objective class interests" of the working class are worth considering. Working class culture becomes simply functional to political programmes, and activists who should

have better things to do spend considerable time and energy agonising whether forms like mbaqanga are "suitable" or not. (16) Furthermore, an assumption is made that writers and performers must be exemplary in their political conduct and allegiances, as others look up to them and might follow their political mistakes. (17) (Such a point is arguable: I would argue that it overemphasizes the immediate and direct political relevance of many forms of culture.) The obvious questions to ask in response are: who decides what the "objective class interests" of the working class are at any point in time? Who can accurately decide beforehand what is politically and culturally expedient to achieve these interests?

There is possibly a distinction that should be made when one looks at this type of middle class cultural activism. There is a difference, it seems to me, between injecting political ideas wholesale into the working class, and giving shape and direction to the working class perceptions that are found.(18)

The idea of "objective class interests" embodies a belief that socialism is the essential ideology of the working class - therefore, if the cultural expressions of working class people do not conform to this standard, they are a form of "false consciousness". It presents a curiously linear, teleological view of the way working people think and act. Its failure is "the assumption that everybody knows exactly what socialism is, knows that they want it and knows how to get it". (19) The general idea seems to be that certain activists and "advanced" workers lead and prod the rest in stages along an already fully-determined political path by education and organisation from the outside, until true socialist consciousness is achieved once and for all. But consciousness is not a linear process: once people are politicised, they do not necessarily stay that way once conditions alter. Cultural activity among working class people usually accelerates during strikes and other times of conflict - the Frame play, Ilanga and (outside of a union context) the play by women of Crossroads Imfuduso were all generated in such a manner. Such plays seem to have been used for building up awareness and consolidating organisation around political issues.

Workers' consciousness of necessity contain a variety of identities, not all of which are class-specific. These identities - of sex, of race, of region and ethnicity - help make up

the way they perceive the world. While black workers share some of their identity with their middle class counterparts, they often have different and more oppressive experiences of life. In the self-identities of the migrant workers of Vosloorus Hostel on the East Rand for example, "Zulu and race metaphors, the land question and Christianity, but also a working class position are all enmeshed." (20) The nationalist and popular symbols and traditions that make up part of the identity of black workers are available for a variety of political ends, not all of these in the eventual political interests of the working class (the fate of white workers in South Africa is an immediate reminder of the ambiguity of militant nationalism directed from above). Furthermore, these identities will of course persist in (one hopes) a transformed manner once "socialist consciousness" has been achieved: the recent war between China and Vietnam should be a reminder that the advent of socialism doesn't mean the withering away of nationalism. (21)

Cultural activists and intellectuals can have some effect on the rearrangement and use of such symbols and identities for progressive ends - but an acceptance of socialism cannot be ensured once and for all by such vanguardist means. I would suggest, then, the following definition of working class culture as being more useful than the one Naledi offers:

> By proletarian culture we understand those ways in which the working class actively and consciously seeks to shape its own social identity as a class and, by so doing, differentiates itself from the values and principles of the dominant class. (22)

Such a definition allows us to recognise forms which are not so obviously "political" as working class culture. Moreover, while in South Africa such a definition would need to take into account the variety of identities which go to make up workers' consciousness, it does not blur these identities completely with, say, similar formulations adopted by the radical black petty bourgeoisie within the context of a national struggle. It recognises the self-definition of the working class when faced with other classes, and highlights the conscious activity of the working class itself. However, one of its problems is that it does not make clear enough that working class culture cannot exist in isolation in capitalist society.

Commercial culture

Naledi is possibly too dismissive of the potential that lies within some cultural forms of a more commercial nature. They argue that consumer culture and the electronic media are tainted past saving by bourgeois ideology. True, much of this culture is controlled by huge corporations and magazine and newspaper syndicates (SABCTV, Nasionale Pers, Ster-Kinekor, Egoli Films, the Argus group etc.) with enormous power and obvious ideological interests. But it is still possibly more productive to see some of these commercial cultural forms as areas to contest, rather than just give up. (23)

Blacks and whites alike are treated by commercial culture as consumers. Nevertheless, it is the one area where some sort of "non-racial" identity of any dimension seems to be emerging within South Africa itself. Music and sport, for example, are no longer areas of absolute racial separation (witness the recent pop concert at Ellis Park attended by 110,000, and the popularity of bands such as Juluka, Hotline and Brenda & the Big Dudes among black and white audiences alike).

Naledi strongly puts forward the building up of a counter-culture, and puts rather too little emphasis on transforming the existing types of culture. These are written off as massive, negative forms of control. However it seems to me that the single most negative feature of commercial culture is its treatment of people as passive receivers. Surely it is to the.point to use cultural forms people are already interested in, and to get them actively involved in the process of creating culture?

This would obviously be a process where one could have few prior guidelines which are correct once and for all. Indeed, the debate on working class culture seems to fluctuate between two extreme positions, both visible in the USSR just after the Revolution. On the one hand, the Leninist position believed that the working class must wholeheartedly appropriate and democratise bourgeois culture; on the other, the Proletcult advocated the development of an autonomous proletarian culture by extensive self-education of the working class and the use of working-class perceptions and traditions. This cannot be dismissed as a cultural debate between a small group of mad artists and a huge mass movement, either: in 1920 the Proletcult and the Bolsheviks had roughly the same number of

members. (24) The resolution of this crucial debate was, unfortunately, cut short by the Bolsheviks when they later forced the Proletcult to disband. (25)

The politics of criticism

One cannot separate culture from politics: culture is not a separately determined force, but one which is constantly present in people's consciousness during political struggles. Neither can it be denied that the struggle to achieve a free, democratic society "opens up new avenues, helps to enrich art and culture, and in the course of the...struggle finds new forms of expression". (26) There are nevertheless, many ways in which political concerns can be culturally expressed. At the moment a lot of emphasis in both the trade unions and the national movements seem to be on forging unity and a feeling of solidarity. Naturally this unity and the need to put forward cultural values denigrated by racism and capitalism are important. But this could, in some circumstances, lead to and overstressing of the need for a unified culture of resistance and an understressing of the simultaneous need to allow cultural variety to flourish, and for critical comment and democratic discussion. A political art and culture is not necessarilly one which denies contradiction and exhorts people to stick to a political line: it is one which makes available to people the means to critically examine their own lives and take control of their own futures. In fiction, the Angolan novel, Mayombe, seems to me an example of a work of political literature which encourages debate. (27) Sources of cultural conflict and political argument must be squarely confronted. Only in this way can a democratic, dynamic and participatory culture be developed in South Africa.

References

1 K Sole, "class and populism", SALB 9.8, July 1984; Naledi Writers' Unit, "Working class culture and popular struggle SALB 10.5, March-April 1985

2 For a discussion of the last point, see J Saul and S Gelb, The crisis in South Africa, New York, 1981, pp94-6

3 The objection has been made elsewhere that such a description is wrong, because "populist" movements tend to blur any notion of class difference altogether. This in itself ignores the use of populist language in popular front pol-

itics and the explanatory weight given to "the people" as the point of reference when mobilising.

4 M Mapalakanye, "No betrayal", AWA Newsletter 2.1, 1983 p1

5 R j'Mathonsi, "The less known voices", The Bloody Horse 5, 1981, p30

6 B Gilder, "Musicians are part of the people", Gaborone, 1982, (mimeo), p2

7 D Coplan, "The emergence of an African working-class culture" in S Marks and R Rathbone (eds.), Industrialisation and social change in South Africa, London, 1982, p370

8 M Radebe, Bantu World 16/4/32. Quoted in V Erlmann "Apartheid, african nationalism and culture", Perspectives in Education 7.3, 1983, p141

9 Marks and Rathbone, Industrialisation, p2; Saul and Gelb, The Crisis, p100; D Hemson, "Trade unionism and the struggle for liberation in South Africa", Capital & Class 6, 1978, p3

10 For a similar formulation, see R Davies and D O'Meara, "The workers' struggle in South Africa: a comment", Review of African Political Economy 30, 1984, p110

11 Mshengu, South African people's plays, London, 1981, pxii

12 For examples, see Alfred Qabula, "Praise poem to FOSATU", Fosatu Worker News 31, 1984; Mi S'Dumo Hlatshwayo, "The black mamba rises again in victory", Fosatu Worker News 33/34, 1984; and "Piet Dragonhoender's Lament", South African Outlook July 1984

13 For a fuller discussion, see K Sole, "Identities and priorities in recent black literature and performance: a preliminary investigation", Bellville, 1984, (mimeo), pp12-22

14 See remarks by workers in this connection in M Swilling, "The politics of working class struggles in Germiston, 1979-1983", Johannesburg, 1984, (mimeo), p47

15 C Sirianni, Workers control and socialist democracy, London, 1982, p305

16 M Andersson, "Song and struggle", Gaborone, 1982, (mimeo), pp3-4

17 See the remarks of the interviewer in "Juluka iyajuluka" (interview with Johnny Clegg), Medu 5.2, 1983, p15

18 For an example of the latter process, see A von Kotze, "Workshop plays as worker education", SALB 9.8, July 1984. I am not here suggesting that Naledi do not perceive and act on this distinction

19 Morley and Worpole (eds), The republic of letters, London, 1982, p94

20 A Sitas, "From grassroots control to grassroots democracy Johannesburg, 1984, (mimeo), p26
21 B Anderson, Imagined communities, London, 1983, p11
22 Burns and van der Will, "Working-class organisation and the importance of cultural struggle", Capital & Class 10, 1980 p170
23 This point is made on a more general level by H Enzensberger, "Constituents of a theory of the media", New Left Review 64, 1970
24 620,000 as against 500,000. P Wollen, Readings and writings, London, 1982, p66
25 For further information, see Sirianni, Workers control, pp261-305; B Brewster, "The soviet state, the communist party and the arts 1917-1936", Red Letters Autumn 1976; C Claudin-Urondo, Lenin and the cultural revolution, Hassocks, 1977
26 "The role of culture in the process of liberation", Education with Production 1.1, 1981, p38
27 some reviewers display uneasiness with the critical discussion of post-independence socialist parties and politi al bureaucracies contained in this novel, eg. "Also, by being so honest, Mayombe perhaps gives the liberals and weak-minded too much scope for seeing their anti-revolutionary prejudices vindicated in the book. But perhaps that is their problem, not the book's." Medu 6.1/2, 1984, p34