DEBATE: Working Class Culture and Popular Struggle

In the July 1984 South African Labour Bulletin Kelwyn Sole challenges the cultural workers aligned to the non-racial democratic movement in South Africa to take a clear stance on working class culture. He uses Medu Art Ensemble, "a group formed by South African artists in exile in Botswana" as his main example of these cultural workers.* He claims our efforts demonstrate a vague populism, similar to black consciousness in that "...the phrases the people or the struggling masses are substituted for blacks or black people; but the level of generality remains in many cases much the same." He warns that without clarity on the role of working class culture "there is a possibility that their populist conceptions will actually obscure some dimensions of social experience and struggle."

Before responding to this challenge, we should first explain what Medu's perspective actually is at this time. Medu is a community organisation of cultural workers. We do not use the term "cultural workers" in some kind of attempt to fool the masses that by calling ourselves "workers" "...politically orientated writers and performers of a more privileged class become unproblematically joined to the people again", as Sole suggests. Rather we believe it to be an accurate description: we work in the field of culture. It is time to rid ourselves of the elitist concept of the artist creating great works of inspired genius in some isolated garret, probably under the influence. Cultural work requires skill and technique and equipment and a lot of hard work - as does carpentry or motor mechanics; and very few cultural workers own the means of production necessary to mass-produce their work, to bring it to their audience (publishing houses, printing presses, theatre, recording facilities, often even good sound systems). Indeed we see a need for unions for cultural workers to enable us to deal collectively with the owners of such

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* We prefer in this paper to continue the debate on working class culture rather than to correct several misconceptions Sole appears to have acquired. But Medu is a Botswana organisation, including Batswana, expatriates and Zimbabweans as well as South Africans.

means of production. Thus we see Medu itself first and foremost as a cooperative for producing art work.

Our aim, as cultural workers, is to build the culture of resistance of the people of Southern Africa. Throughout Southern Africa - in Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Lesotho and Namibia as well as South Africa - years of colonialist oppression and South African agression and repression have shaped our culture; we know now that to survive, we must resist. Thus, in one paper that Sole quotes (as an example of our "populism"), we talk about building a "culture of liberation" out of the "culture of oppression" 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 the MPLA and FAPLA; from these traditions we can talk of developing a new society, based on the as yet infant working class. The Mozambique Minister of Culture explained in 1979:

> The Mozambican personality is the product of resistance that our people always showed to occupation, exploitation and oppression. Such resistance is fundamentally cultural. At any given moment it takes a political, economic and armed form, so as later to be transformed into people's revolutionary war.
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> Throughout this transformation the Mozambican personality assumes new values, the values of the worker and peasant class...At this stage in the People's Republic of Mozambique, we are fighting for the triumph of worker/peasant power, at the level of state apparatus, the economy, education and society.

In the more industrialised South Africa, the main demand of the oppressed population - workers, peasants, students suffering under bantu education, women with broken families facing starvation in the bantustans - remains the call for a non-racial democratic and just society. The long and historic tradition of struggle behind this demand lies at the cultural roots of the people of South Africa, workers as well as others. It is from these roots that we address the challenge Sole directs at us: what do we see as the role of "working class culture" in South Africa.

Since the development of cultural activities linked to the emergent trade unions, the question of "working class cult-

ure" has received some quite positive and potentially fruitful focus. The Fosatu Education Workshop gave some very welcome exposure to worker choirs and plays; the July and November Labour Bulletins have begun a debate on the subject. But encouraging as this tendency is, we find it disturbing to see "working class culture" discussed as if it were a new concept among the democratic forces (which seems to be the approach of both Kelwyn Sole and Richard Harvey). The South African working class is the largest in Africa, with a history of oppression and resistance stretching over a century; expressions of this awareness and resistance have long been an internal part of the "culture of resistance" and this is where we must look to find "working class culture".

Before looking more closely at this statement, however, it would probably be useful to clarify what we mean by "working class culture". There are two basic approaches used today. The approach advocated by Western sociological theory is to define "working class culture" as any cultural activities engaged in by the working class, from tribal dancing on the mines to chibuku drinking to trade union choirs. Sole, for example, defines working class literature and performance "...in relation to 4 factors: author(s), content, audience, and proletarian world view", and limits what he is willing to call "working class" to plays by trade unionists about shopfloor situations. Even one of these plays, he describes as "problematic" and "unspontaneous" in its class nature because it had been workshopped by the "petty-bourgeois" Junction Avenue Theatre. The class background of the author and the subject matter appear to be his basic criteria.

The problem with such an approach is that in capitalist countries the main cultural institutions - newspapers, the educational system, film, radio, television - are controlled by the ruling class. It cannot surprise anyone that many of the ideas and behaviour soaked up from these sources by workers are in direct contradiction to their objective class interests. The commercial media encourages elitism, individualism, the profit motive; they portray workers as helpless cogs whose only escape from their class oppression is by individuals joining the ruling elites.

In contrast, progressive cultural workers have distinguished between imposed culture forced upon the working class by the

bourgeoisie, on the one hand; and the developing strands of "working class culture", those expressions which actively promote the workers' consciousness of their objective conditions of existence, on the other. Thus we prefer to define "working class culture" as cultural activities that build and direct the workers' awareness in the best interests of the working class.

In a society composed of classes irreconcilably involved in conflict, each class has its own perspective on that society. Each class responds to its position in the political and economic system by creating new cultural expressions, describing and advancing its own point of view within the framework of that society's culture (history, language etc.). As the oppressed class begins to resist, as it begins to develop the organisations and institutions of struggle, it must find its own cultural position - remember its history, identify its heroes, write new songs and sing them, start newspapers, literacy circles, theatre and discussion groups.

Again, we re-emphasise that the working class does not at this stage control the major institutions of culture; indeed it has been deprived of even light and space and leisure and such basic skills as literacy. Developing working class perceptions and awareness under these conditions must be a continual struggle. Thus working class culture cannot be taken as a "culture" in the sense of an isolated and self-contained system, but rather a direction within the society, built out of the particular understanding of the workers of their position within the economic, political and social structure.

To descend from this rarified air of theory to the hard South African dirt; the perspective of the working class in South Africa today is that of a labour force within an increasingly industrialised economy, created and reinforced by a complex system of national oppression. The working class grew out of sections of the colonised African population combined with imported Indian labour and skilled European workers; it was born under the heel of influx control, the apartheid laws, the bantustans, the townships. This national oppression and the need to resist it has been a basic element of working class experience in South Africa since its birth. And as workers developed an awareness of their class position, the consciousness of this experience has informed their cultural

expressions as well as their political acts.

Even a passing glance at the culture of the South African working class shows this fundamental interrelation with the culture of the democratic movement. History is a major aspect of culture, for instance, Fosatu Worker News pointed to the May Day tradition in South Africa - celebrated by white workers in the early 1900s, marked in 1950 by an 80% successful national stay-away organised by the national resistance movement against the Suppression of Communism Act; repressed by the government, and celebrated yet again this year by emergent unions and community organisations.

Heroes of the working class count also as heroes of the popular struggle. We look at J B Marks, at Neil Aggett, at Billy Nair and Francis Baard and Oscar Mpetha. In terms of "cultural products", we can recall the songs of the potato boycott, called in 1959 by the nationalist movement to protest the atrocious conditions of farm labour. We can cite the photographs of Eli Weinberg, a union organiser (before he was banned); much of the photographic record of worker struggles in the 1930s, 40s and 50s comes from his lens.

And at the apex of working class culture in South Africa stand the songs and poetry of Vuyasili Mini. Mini was a union organiser from Port Elizabeth in the 1950s and early 1960s. As a cultural activist Mini was not content to write songs and poetry. He formed a highly successful cultural club under the auspices of the union. He used his songs as an organising tool with tremendous effect at union meetings and demonstrations. In November 1964 he was executed, with fellow unionists Wilson Khayinga and Zinakile Mkhaba, for alleged sabotage and complicity in the death of a police informer. They went to their execution singing one of Mini's compositions: "Nants indoda nyama Vorster" ("beware, Vorster, the black men are coming") - now a standard "folksong" of the people's resistance.

Indeed, the largest body of working class culture within the culture of resistance lies not in written literature but in song. Freedom songs live wherever mass resistance lives, from funerals to union meetings. And these songs unmistakably carry the musical style and forms developed by the working class, without electronic equipment, using the structures of

work chants. Sole has complained that in his view progressive culture tends to appear in written English, and thus miss the African working class audience; he ignores the fact that the most effective and widespread cultural expression of resistance is indeed not in English, or written.

Thus the South African working class has a long tradition of resistance to the conditions of their oppression, culturally even as politically. To ignore this tradition is to cut ourselves off from the mainstream of working class culture in South Africa. Sole demands that we "...show how the cultural expression of the working class is going to become an integral part of the popular culture/black culture (we) advocate." To use the phrase "is going to become", he must presume that working class culture is not already an explicit part of progressive culture. On the contrary, as we have said, working class culture already exists and indeed dominates within the culture of the democratic movement.

Sole however categorises all of the "culture of resistance" as populist and thus not "working class culture". But South African culture dealing with worker resistance to living conditions, to influx control, even to migrant labour, is unquestionably part of the national resistance culture. Thus in the end Sole only accepts within his definition of "working class" those plays specifically about the workplace. He admits "...in England at any rate, a great volume of what is called working class literature" goes beyond the factory floor to cover problems about family life (abortion, father/son conflict, etc), unemployment and homelessness and other facets of working class experiences." And he also admits that in South Africa "...when people go home at the end of the day or at the end of a contract, they do not enter a completely separate sphere of existence: workplace and domicile experiences and identities exist in a relationship of interconnectedness and influence." But having admitted this in theory, he cites Serote's short story "The Mosquito" as an example of populist "urban-rural solidarity", with presumably little to say about the worker's position. This despite the fact that "The Mosquito" tells of organising a work stay-away against the rural removals; the main organiser, "the timer", is a worker, a migrant from Sekhukuneland where the removals are to take place.

Sole fails to mention "Sizwe Bansi is Dead", one of South Africa's best-known plays, although it deals with a worker, in and out of the workplace, confronting the conditions of his oppression from a worker's point of view. Plays and literature that deal with worker's perceptions and struggles against the oppression of their communities, against those forces intent on keeping workers in their place, have flourished throughout community groups in South Africa. Yet Sole can only find a "paucity" of working class literature.

But to point to the already existing working class content in progressive culture may not fully answer Sole's difficulty. We suggest there is a danger that whatever elements of working class culture there may be will be "obscured" and "confused" by the petty-bourgeois culture he seems to believe predominates in the non-racial democratic movement: "Nevertheless in South Africa up to this time the dominant populist discourse among oppositional political groups hides the paucity of black literary expression with a knowledge of, or by, black workers; a paucity easily forgotten in the prevalent rhetoric about popular or mass-based literature."

Sole of course here primarily looks at cultural forms which are labelled "Art" by the society around us. Writing requires skills which tend to belong to the more privileged sections of this society, theatre demands time and skills and space. No one would deny that cultural workers in these fields at this point in time usually do not have working class backgrounds. But even in terms of "Art", explicit working class orientation - a "proletarian world view" to use Sole's term - has long been a conscious concern of progressive cultural workers. We can mention the conscious introduction and production of working class symbols and images in posters like "Boycott Red Meat", "Defend SAAWU", "United in Action", "The Workers Footsteps Will Crush Exploitation"; we can watch the film of the Neil Aggett funeral; we can cite "The Marabi Dance" and "Sizwe Bansi is Dead". That these are conscious directions can be seen in the Medu position paper "Opening the Doors of Culture" (adopted by a Medu AGM in 1982):

> Present in our cultural preoccupations must be those incipient manifestations of the proletarian culture of the future...our primary task is to foster those already existing elements of culture which are representative of the democratic future for which we are striving.

In other words, there has been a conscious effort by progressive cultural workers to use symbols and imagery that reinforce the awareness and direction of the working class. A resolution of the national launch of the UDF proclaims "the leadership of the working class in the democratic struggle for freedom"; this principle dyes the cloth of all progressive culture.

But beyond ideological commitment, it is essential that we also create institutions and structures that will reinforce and build upon this strong working class culture already present within the people's culture. In particular, with the tremendous strides in South Africa in organisation of workers at the point of production, it is important to look at ways of expressing the experiences and awareness gained in these organisations, standing upon the proud traditions of working class resistance. We see this happening in a number of ways:

First, cultural work should be done directly for the organisations of the working class, both at the workplace and in the community.* Thus we must work more consciously and consistently on the cultural content of posters, of banners for union meetings, of songs and performances with a direct use for such organisations. As cultural workers we greet with joy the signs that this is already being done, in the banners used in the 1984 May Day meetings, in graphics and poetry in community and union newspapers; in t-shirts and photographs; in plays like "Illanga" and "Time to Act". This cultural work again cannot occur in a vacuum, but rather only in full association with the organisation concerned. And, as a minor point, our own experiences show that the personal opinions of the cultural worker concerned become less and less significant in the final cultural product as it is more and more

* This principle of organisation is not restricted to South Africa. Along these lines, Medu has long been actively involved in community art projects in Gaborone; teaching art classes in the local "low income" areas, painting murals in a creche in Naledi, a squatter township, and in a local cooperative sorghum mill; bringing theatre and puppet performances to the community; working with a cultural group from a local co-operative. Obviously where trade unions are a dynamic force these would be very effective places to develop cultural groups.

collectively discussed within the organisation in question. Workers also "know what they like" and are quite competent and willing to identify elements in style as well as subject that they feel fail to represent their ideas and positions and emotions. But the cultural worker must humble himself, must ask for criticism. We must know that skill in execution gives no special say whatsoever over content, and that collective criticism is a basic requirement of cultural work, without which it is faulty.

Secondly, not only must cultural workers produce work for and with organisations of the working class, but there must be continued and stronger efforts to develop structures within the workers' community and workplace organisations to actively produce culture. Much cultural work requires skill, technique and equipment which are not made available to workers by the institutions of this society; we must find ways to make them available. Community and worker organisations should begin to control the means of producing culture; presses, music, theatre; and to educate their members in this production.

Thirdly, if working class culture is the expression of awareness of class position, deepening and extending that awareness is a major prerequisite of cultural development. Emerging community and worker organisations must find ways to educate people out of the passivity bred by the state.* Literacy circles and discussion groups are one of the most effective means of doing this, to expose history and current events, to teach basic literacy linked to developing new knowledge, to encourage participation and control over our own lives. The best way to ensure that "petty bourgeois" ideas do not dominate in the people's culture is to ensure that workers think for themselves, that workers build their

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* The present educational system, controlled by the state, is structured to create a workforce to fit this system's needs: passive, receiving what knowledge is needed but not encouraging participation in producing or comprehending that knowledge (except for a small elite); ignorant as to our own proud past and achievements; leaving many without even basic literacy with which to find their own knowledge. As the students protesting Bantu Education have underlined, no knowledge is value free.

own awareness, express their own ideas.

Linked to this need for worker education is the need for newspapers from emergent union as well as community groups. Workers need to know of similar experiences of other workers, of how other people conducted the struggle against their oppression, and the lessons of these struggles. Newspapers can form the basis for discussion and participation. Thus, we welcome the publication of the history of working class formation and resistance by Fosatu Worker News. We rejoice in the great expansion in trade union newspapers and the increase in directly worker-related content in community newspapers. Again, we also welcome the use of such papers for publishing poetry and writing by workers.

But above all we must remember that working class culture cannot thrive when control of the major educational and cultural institutions remain in the hands of a small ruling elite. It cannot thrive without the basic freedoms of the right to speak and publish. It cannot thrive without decent living conditions and leisure time and good education, for all the population. The demand for democracy lies at the heart of all working class culture; the fact that all progressive sections of the society also reverberate with this demand in no way swamps its crucial importance for the working class. The poet Agostino Neto in 1972 called for a popular state; "By popular, I mean democratic, where the people can participate fully, with assemblies and all the other organs that allow the people to express their opinions." The principle that "the doors of culture shall be open" is an absolute prerequisite for a blossoming working class culture. Until such conditions prevail, we are only sowing the seeds of working class culture.

But we are not starting with empty hands. The working class in South Africa has a long and honourable tradition, a massive cultural foundation upon which to build. Workers know the songs, they know their heroes, they are making their history now, today. In a future non-racial and democratic South Africa this working class culture will come to fruition.

(Naledi Writers Unit / Medu Art Ensemble, February 1985)