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Harold Barnette
Atlanta University

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CRITERIA FOR CULTURAL CRITICISM

One of the most arresting features of intellectual life in the United States is the distinct absence of a continuous and coherent body of radical social criticism. At first glance it seems strange that a society so overdeveloped economically, whose incredible private fortunes have been wrought so mercilessly from the living flesh of its largest minority as well as other oppressed peoples of the world, is also the society which seems most immune to the troublesome germs of radical infestation. But a more than superficial assessment of these circumstances may perhaps yield some clues as to areas of vulnerability in America's steel-and-glass armour. It is even conceivable that such an effort may engender ideological and theoretical activity which will contribute ultimately to the human transformation of this, the perfect predatory plastic society.

I propose in this essay to take the function of cultural criticism as an area in which at least some preliminary work can be done which may be important for subsequent political theory and social action. And I should make it clear right away that by cultural criticism I do not mean the fanciful preoccupation with hidden themes in novels. Nor do I mean sterile bantering about the merits (or more likely demerits) of this or that form of popular entertainment. Cultural criticism here refers to a comprehensive critique of everyday life in America, and an analysis of the particular relationship which everyday life has to creative imagination, aesthetic theory, and the diversity of cultural expressions.

I begin from the premise, suggested by a colleague, that a basic responsibility of the critic is "to make explicit, in the process of analysis of social life, our assumptions and preferences about fundamental philosophical problems having to do with the nature of human society" (emphasis added). The above quote originally alluded to "black social life" rather than to social life in
general, as I've altered it to read. But I hesitate to refer to a "black social life" in the reality of monopoly capitalist America. In the consumer society, social life is essentially standardized.

The folk culture of a once rural black populace has increasingly been transformed as the urbanization of our people enters its final stages. The result has been an increasing universalization of aspects of that culture as commodities and a non-regeneration of those features not appropriate to urban life. It is no wonder then that popular music has effected the merger of black and white trends and that the same banalities are evident in both black and white oriented movies. It is no wonder because in consumer society the tendency is toward the universalization of every particularity, the mode of that universalization being the commodity.²

The responsibility of the critic under these cultural conditions is to agitate for a return to true particularity of expression and hence, to cultural diversity. This return cannot, obviously, be a reactionary kind of (literal) reversal to agrarian folk culture (nor to African mythology) which characterizes the positions taken by most of our "leading" cultural spokespeople. Instead, the return to cultural diversity must be on a higher level than any previous form. It must negate the universalizing effect of commodity production and the entire social structure upon which it is based. Thus the responsibility of the critic of culture is but a specialized reflection of the function of any revolutionary. He must be cognizant of his individual contribution to the transformation of society.

The Critique of Everyday Life

One of the most glaring contradictions of life under the bourgeois regime is the absolute opposition between the "beauty" of culture and the "ugliness" of human existence. This opposition, which we all acknowledge daily, even if
unconsciously, forms the cornerstone for bourgeois theories of aesthetics and is the most important factor in unrevolutionizing the social impact of art. Because art, in its general sense of culture, is so different from everyday real life, it must also be separated from everyday life. But the separation of the strictly artistic from the strictly social is a temporary phenomenon. and "should not be made into an ontological fact; it is not eternal but rather represents the form taken by the historical development of repressive civilization." From this unnatural separation develops a strange dialectical relationship between human beings and their relationship to reality and illusion, respectively. Marcuse has captured the essence of this dialectic succinctly:

When the reproduction of material life takes place under the rule of the commodity form and continually renews the poverty of class society, then the good, beautiful and true are transcendent to this life.

And further,

What is of authentic import to man, the highest truths, the highest goods, and the highest joys, is separated in significance from the necessary by an abyss.

This is why, to paraphrase Marcuse, when one steps off the streets of Manhattan into the Metropolitan Museum of Art one has the feeling of entering another world. And similarly, it is why when one attends an exposition of "revolutionary" Afro-American art or when one hears a poetry reading by one of our new-found literary stars, one also has the feeling of being in a foreign place. Not only is the content of modern black art not revolutionary, but its very relationship to the society it supposedly addresses is predicated upon bourgeois principles. Those principles, as stated above, assume the separation of culture, the realm of artistic creation, from work-a-day life under capital.
The reconciliation of culture and society, the reunification into an organic whole of artistic production and enjoyment and social production is not possible under the cannibalistic conditions of capitalism. The responsibility of the critic is, in my view, to initiate the reconciliation of these estranged spheres precisely by pointing to the nature of their estrangement, i.e., that it facilitates the functioning of a repressive social structure. This is a theoretical activity which necessarily involves creation of criteria by which truly revolutionary art may be evaluated.

Affirmative Culture: The Bourgeois Tradition of Black Art

Marx's well known assertion that the real task of philosophy is to change the world rather than interpret it provides a useful assumption for our consideration of the relationship between art and society. The measure of durability which any work of art achieves, the basis of its ability to withstand passing time, is its closeness to the people which it represents, its ability to convey "a profound ideological content." For this reason, art always exhibits a bias, a "tendentiousness:"

...art is profoundly tendentious because it expresses the highest interests of a people in a determinate historical stage, but this does not mean that art can be dissolved in the political.

This is what Imamu Baraka (then Leroi Jones) means when he refers to Melville's MOBY DICK as serious white literature. Unfortunately, Baraka has not been able to provide for black America of his day a work of the same level of importance which MOBY DICK had for white society of Melville's time. The reason for this failure—in part at least—is that the relationship of culture to society in Melville's day did not hinder the ideological impact his novel was designed to have. The tragic metaphor of the great white whale and Melville's heavy moralizing easily fit into the framework of affirmative culture. On the other
hand, the "revolutionary theatre" which Baraka helped spawn was never able to develop an ideological thrust which lived up to its name because it relied upon the same mode of cultural apprehension which suited Melville's purposes in the 18th century. Since the "highest interests" of the great majority of black folk are not represented by the ritualized moralizing of a Baraka play, the ephemeral existence of "black revolutionary theatre" is clearly understood.

Because, as I have maintained, black cultural workers (artists and critics alike) accept the functional separateness, the non-identity of culture and social life, there arises the idea of black culture as a sovereign realm. This in turn removes the criteria for aesthetic valuation from the social sphere. The repository of aesthetic judgement then becomes the soul, that final refuge of spiritual existence in a world otherwise dominated by the relentless demands of capital accumulation. The following quotation from Marcuse should ring a familiar note:

In the realm of culture spiritual education and spiritual greatness overcome the inequality and unfreedom of everyday competition, for men participate in culture as free and equal beings. He who looks to the soul sees through economic relations to men in themselves. Where the soul speaks, the contingent position and merit of men in the social process are transcended. 11

The popular black ideological slogan which epitomizes this kind of thinking is the call for UNITY WITHOUT UNIFORMITY. We need not dwell upon that slogan here though since its bankruptcy has been demonstrated by the recent demise of ALSC. Looking further at spirituality, at this business of the soul, we see that,

Culture belongs not to him who comprehends the truths of humanity as a battle cry, but to him in whom they have become a posture which leads to a mode of proper behavior: exhibiting harmony and reflectiveness even in daily routine. Culture should ennoble the given by permeating it, rather than by putting something new in its place.12 (emphasis added)
The idea of the beautiful, in affirmative culture, does not have a concrete reflection in material life, in everyday social existence. The beautiful is instead "affirmed" by the individual's emotional acknowledgement of its worth. That worth is judged primarily by the basic contrast which the "beautiful" has to real life. The spiritual affirmation of beauty, which occurs in the sovereign and transcendent realm of culture, therefore relieves the individual of responsibility for changing social reality. Instead, the "spirit" the "soul" exhorts individuals to love each other, to become "beautiful" qualities which are possible only in spite of the predatory social intercourse which marks everyday life. So for the vast majority of the people, the impact of affirmative culture results in the apprehension of many social relations as magnificent illusions. We therefore are confronted with the spectacle of groups and individuals acting out a make-believe world of blackness, of collective African spirituality; a posturing which is facilitated by the prodigious creation of "black" oriented products by white American capitalists.

Because the acting out of affirmative precepts in everyday life manifests itself ultimately as delusion, this mode of cultural apprehension is particularly susceptible to rightist (fascist) exploitation. Marcuse, writing in Germany in 1937 observed that,

The idealist cult of inwardness and the heroic cult of the state serve a fundamentally identical social order to which the individual is now completely sacrificed. Whereas formerly cultural exaltation was to satisfy the personal wish for happiness now the individual is to disappear completely in the greatness of the folk.13 (emphasis added)

Criteria For A New Critical Perspective

The pretentiousness of Old School Negro cultural criticism may be traced partly to the social importance which black folk formerly ascribed to persons of
their kind who earned a living by literary work. The sense of "knightly obligation" which Blyden Jackson attached to the "development of an energetic scholarly criticism" among black literary types seems to proceed directly from the presumption that work in the world of culture was somehow superior or more noble than mundane pursuits. It is just this propensity toward separating cultural and social functions which must be abrogated by a truly revolutionary culture.

The development of a revolutionary culture among black people in this society requires that (as a starting point) both the artist and critic grasp the reality of total social existence. That totality embraces life in its political/economic, ideological, aesthetic/linguistic and emotional fullness. The revolutionary culture must have a critical approach to the real, the concrete and the actual in order to be able to ferret out the illusory, encourage creative imagination, and visualize a more humane existence. From the critique of everyday life of the everyday man, woman and child it must develop its ideological essence—that natural tendentiousness.

No revolutionary culture can retreat to the ethereal world of bourgeois spirituality without abandoning its potentially transformative expressions to the boiling caldrons of capitalism.

And finally, there is no contradiction between the contemplation of social transformation and the maintenance of a distinctive, self-defining national mode of cultural expression. It is the failure of such contemplation which will result in the abolition of national distinctions as the realm of culture becomes more and more estranged from our lives only to reappear hideously, as the ubiquitous commodity.

Harold Barnette
NOTES

1. Alex Willingham. "Notes Toward Clarifying the Function of Culture In Social Life," (Unpublished), p. 3

2. Samir Amin. "In Praise of Socialism," (MONTHLY REVIEW, September 1974) - Amin does a good job of differentiating between culture as that sum of artifacts and creative expressions produced by a people in the course of their daily existence, and the "culture" of capitalist society which is no more than the commercial manufacture and exchange through market relations of songs, utensils, etc. In the former case there is no basis for the alienation and reification of culture. Therefore there is no basis for the separation of artistic production and social production, no separate and self contained cultural and social spheres respectively.


4. For an analysis of the discussion that has raged between black artists and critics over the years concerning this question see Willingham, op. cit.


8. Ibid., p. 269

9. Leroi Jones. HOME, (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966). In the essay "Myth Of A Negro Literature" it is suprising how perceptively Jones is able to spell out the quandary in which black "protest" literature found itself without being able to deal with that problem in his own creative work.... See his comment on page 112 about the emotionalism of Negro protest writing...

10. See BLACK WORLD (June, 1973) for an interesting article by Richard Wesley who admits the black theatre never had a meaningful following among the people. He attributes this to the fact that playwriting is a Western (or white) art form. He then goes on to suggest that money being plowed into that worthless project go instead into a black movie industry. One only has to recall that photography is also a basically white artistic area to see the silliness with which
black creative artists argue the relative merits of different art forms when the deeper question has to do with the nature of art itself.

11. Marcuse. op. cit., p. 110

12. Ibid., p. 103

13. Ibid., p. 129

14. See for example the tone of much of the "early" criticism and especially that designated as representative of the "Phylon Group" in Willingham, op. cit.

15. This seems to be the criticism leveled at black writers by Richard Wright, who noted the "hiatus" which existed between black workers and black writers. In spite of the evident "line walking" which shades Wright's political program the criticism seems to retain its validity. See Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Literature", in J. Williams, ed., Amistad II (New York: Vintage, 1971)