

Social Roots of the Arts

BY LOUIS HARAP



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New York

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TO THE MEMORY OF
CHRISTOPHER CAUDWELL

Preface

This book is offered at a decisive moment for culture. Under the impact of a social system in rapid decline, American artists are reacting variously—some in abject surrender to the lure of cash, others in evasion of the challenge of a new world struggling to be born. These artists are allowing themselves passively to reflect the insoluble contradictions in which capitalism is involved. Yet all over the world cultural workers are allying themselves with the truly creative forces, the working class protagonists in the gigantic conflict between those who would hold back human advance and those who would carry humanity forward. In this heroic struggle the artist has an important part to play. He can help the people to attain consciousness of realities of a changing world. If the artist is to fulfill this function, he must himself have that “consciousness of necessity” which is the essence of freedom.

If this book stimulates the artist and those who are devoted to culture to deepen their awareness of the social roots and goals of culture, it will be justified. This volume is not a definitive study of esthetic problems. At best this book signifies that we are on the threshold of a new understanding of art and culture, thanks to the fruitful Marxist method and philosophy. This book attempts to present certain known principles of Marxist esthetics and to suggest problems for further examination through collective effort of many scholars and thinkers. Engels was well aware of the magnitude of the tasks awaiting the Marxists. “The development of the materialistic conception in regard to a single historical example,” he wrote, “was a scientific work which would demand years of tranquil study, for it is obvious that nothing can be done here with mere phrases, that only a mass of critically

viewed, completely mastered historical material can enable one to solve such a task." (Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*.)

It remains for the writer to acknowledge the generous help received from many students and friends, too numerous to mention, who read and criticized the manuscript at various stages of its preparation. Without their helpful criticism this book would never have been completed. In particular, this writer wishes to thank Avrom Landy for valuable editorial help. However, final responsibility for the book rests with the writer.

L. H.

1. *Production as Foundation*

THE SOURCES of art are not to be discovered vaguely "in society" or in a number of material "factors." Specifically, art is determined by those related forces which, operating together, account for all social activities—government, science, law, religion, morality, and art. The bewildering diversity of human activities gives to each an appearance of independence, but in reality they all depend upon the same basic forces, the mode of production. Like any mental or material human activity, art is founded in production. Marx himself supplied the most succinct statement of the relationship of all forms of consciousness to production:

"In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the social, political and intellectual life processes in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social

revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, esthetic or philosophic, in short, ideological, forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social forces of production and the relations of production. No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed; and new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore, mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the task itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.”¹

Production is related to art as the soil is to the plant. Art can no more express feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and forms which do not grow out of the mode of production than a plant can grow without earth and water. Thus only by tracing its links with production can the history of art be adequately grasped. This statement, however, is in reality extremely complex and should by no means be oversimplified. It is certainly not intended as a strict “economic” interpretation of art, as will become clear. Engels decisively cautioned against such vulgar interpretations of historical materialism.

“Accordingly to the materialistic conception of history the determining element in history is *ultimately* the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. If therefore somebody twists this into the statement that the economic element is the *only* determining

one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure—political forms of the class struggle and its consequences, constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc.—forms of law—and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the combatants: political, legal, philosophical theories, religious ideas and their further development into systems of dogma—also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless *host* of accidents (*i.e.*, of things and events whose inner connection is so remote or so impossible to prove that we regard it as absent and can neglect it) the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary.”²

Nowhere does the dependence of art on production appear more clearly than in primitive art. Man’s all-absorbing preoccupation at this stage of society was production for bare survival. Relationships of man to man and man to nature were simple, naked, direct. Division of labor was at a low level—labor functions were mainly divided by sex. The means of production were simple tools, and so man’s own labor played a basic role in that society. Labor had not yet assumed a disguised form in machines that embodied and concealed it, as in more developed societies. The significance of this primitive form of labor for the origins of art can hardly be exaggerated. At the end of the last century, Karl Buecher, a German economist, formulated the theory that rhythm, song, and poetry emerged from primitive labor.³ He explained that bodily movements in labor were most efficient and least fatiguing if performed rhythmically. Work movements such as wielding an axe or flail naturally fall into rhythmical patterns. Furthermore, men doing manual labor in groups had to adjust their motions rhythmically to organize them efficiently. At the height of muscular tension in rhythmic work grunts or tones are emitted. Primitive man added words to these tones; then he filled in the spaces between tones with other words, and poetry and song resulted. Buecher also sug-

gested that the sound of tools as they struck resounding materials were imitated by the voice. Some of these tools were also developed into musical instruments. Buecher collected a number of such primitive work songs to strengthen his case that the formal and material elements of song and poetry originated in work rhythms. Even those scholars who do not fully agree with Buecher's theory affirm that he had hit upon a fundamental determinant of song and poetry.* Thus one profound influence of production on art is through the medium of the rhythm, a basic element of art, in primitive work.

Another basic relationship between primitive production and art was observed by Franz Boas, who noted that literature—songs and tales—were universal among primitive peoples. Literature requires a period of quiet for composition and all societies fulfill this condition in one way or another. Work in agricultural societies in which food is acquired and stored in one season leaves time for leisure and composition in off-seasons. In hunting or fishing tribes, such leisure periods occur while the hunter is waiting for his prey or while the fisherman is waiting for fish to bite, as in the case of the Eskimo, who waits for hours for seals to appear at breathing holes. Primitive production also enters into the creation of literature by its reflection in the content of songs and tales.

Mimetic magic among primitive men played an enormous role in their psychological adaptation to the needs of production. With the aid of magic they were put in a frame of mind the better to hunt, fish, cultivate the land, or wage war. Magic pervades primitive arts. Early man thought that he could gain overwhelming power over animals, other men, or natural processes by mimicking them. To a great extent his art consisted of symbolic representations of animals, men or natural phenomena, or in imitating them realistically in his own person

*For example, Ernst Grosse, in his review of Buecher's book, wrote: "We cannot grant that Buecher has proved that the formal and material origin of poetry is to be found in work; but we must recognize that work has had quite a significant influence on the material as well as formal development of poetry and that he was the first clearly to recognize and adequately elaborate this."⁴

or in drawings. Most of his dancing, his primary art, was mimetic.* The content of mimetic dance among hunting or agricultural peoples varies with productive needs. The hunting tribe cast a spell over the animals to be hunted by imitating the hunt and killing them symbolically in a dance. Agricultural peoples have their harvest dances in which the success of the harvest is depicted. The most important events of primitive life were celebrated in dance either to ensure success beforehand or to confirm success after it had been achieved. But all dances derive their meaning from the struggle of primitive man to survive and are based on his mode of production.

Among agricultural peoples enough rain is the central social need. Ceremonies around the rain charm are therefore most important. In northwestern Australia, for instance, the rain-making ceremony consists in placing a magic stone on a pile of stones. The rain-maker dances around this pile for hours until he falls exhausted. Or among the extinct Tahitians the dancers threw themselves upon the ground, rolled around and around and struck the ground with their hands and feet. These motions represented lightning and thunder, and the stamping of the feet was the act of taking possession of the ground. Among some peoples the leap dance was practiced, and the higher the leap, the higher the corn would grow. In dances of hunting people the dancers become momentarily the animals or objects which they mimic. The gait, the howling or roaring of edible animals are mimicked. In this way fish, bears, birds, buffaloes, turtles, and other animals are enticed toward the hunter.⁶

The sculpture and painting of primitive peoples, too, are dominated by magic. A major form of sculpture is the totem. Totemism is the widespread practice of identifying a family, village, or tribe with an animal or earthly spirit which gives the human group power over the environment. The totem is

* A significant observation on the vital relation of production to art was made by Ernst Grosse in the case of the dance: "The modern dance presents itself to us in every respect as a vestigial organ which has become useless in consequence of changed conditions of life, and has therefore degenerated."⁵ Although Grosse perhaps exaggerates the "uselessness" of the dance in modern life, there can be no question that it is far less vital to the life of contemporary than to primitive man.

a symbolic image of the sacred animal or spirit in sculptural form of wood or stone. If the proper ritual is observed, the totem will protect the family or tribe in its struggle for survival. In many parts of the world totemic masks are worn during the hunt or in ceremonial dances. While the mask is worn, the dancer possesses the power of the totem and controls the outcome of the prospective hunt or harvest. Totemic symbolism dominates the art of the North American hunting or fishing tribes. These tribes use symbolic figures of the hawk, eagle, bear, whale, and fish of all kinds to help them obtain their means of existence.

Primitive painting is generally acknowledged to have magical significance. Paleolithic drawings depict bison, deer, the wild horse, the wild boar, and other hunted animals. The same is true of the painting of Bushmen and Australian hunting tribes. These paintings represent the hunted animals; some depict masked dancers as well. Arrows are painted in some pictures, and other paintings appear to have been shot at. These paintings are sometimes found in ceremonial sites. All these features point to the magic purpose of the art.

It is of the highest significance that hunting peoples generally depict only animals and men in their paintings and neglect plants. This phenomenon has been observed in various parts of the world, which leads to the conclusion that similar modes of production account for similarities in primitive art. It appears that usually hunting tribes are exceptionally proficient in naturalistic representation. Grosse points out that Bushmen, Australian tribes, and Eskimos, all hunting groups whose existence depends on sharpness of observation and manual skill in carving weapons, excel in representational art, which can be attributed to their mode of production. Conversely these talents are rare among lower farming and herding groups.⁷ The North American Indians, a hunting group, are an exception. Their art is largely symbolic rather than naturalistic. But even here the subject of their art is restricted to men and animals and does not include plants.

Among hunting groups there is generally a single major division of labor between men and women. Men do the hunt-

ing and women work at home, including food-gathering. A corresponding division exists in their art. The typical hunting arts are the province of the men, while the women engage in ornamental and decorative arts. This sharp division occurs among North American Indians. The woman pursues a geometrical decorative art in weaving, basketry, and embroidery. This woman's art is the link with the typical art of agricultural societies. One of the best studied of these is the Bushango of Africa, who practice highly developed arts of weaving and embroidery, as well as wood and metal carving. Their fine formal decorative motifs probably derive from leaves and other conventionalized plant forms. As among agricultural peoples, the human form is rarely found in their art, except for a succession of finely carved naturalistic figures, probably of their rulers. Some animal figures do appear in their art, but characteristically they are not hunted animals, but the antelope, lizard, scarab, weevil, and insects.

The beginnings of art thus show that art results from the intricate interplay of forces both within and outside of it, and that the source of all this complex activity is in production. We have seen how relatively simple and direct is the connection between the mode of production and the creation of art in primitive societies. But this relationship becomes more intricate as society itself becomes more highly differentiated. As society develops, it absorbs and integrates elements from the past, so that more and more possibilities of human expression are continually realized. Despite the growing inner complication of production, the interaction of the two main aspects of production, the forces of production and production relations, remain the prime movers of history. The forces of production are the experienced, skillful people who produce material values and the instruments and materials they use. The production relations are the sum of those relationships between the human beings involved in production—after the rise of private property, the owners of the means of production and the workers whose labor they exploit. The inevitable antagonisms between these two groups of people, the exploiters and the exploited, are

manifested in the class struggle. Since all the productive forces and relations in a given society are continually interacting, the various aspects of production which influence creation are hard to separate from one another. It is therefore necessary to abstract elements of this complex for study in order to see how the productive influences fit together.

Although "religion, family, the state, law, ethics, science, art, etc., are only *specific* forms of production and fall under its general laws,"⁸ there are important distinctions between this type and the production of material goods. The latter are man-made objects directly used in the course of living, and include such articles as utensils, household goods, furniture, clothing, food, and the range of useful things that society is able to produce at any given stage of its development. No question of what these objects "mean" arises, for they are primarily functional; only the question of how they are used can arise. But art is qualitatively different, for it is a "representation," symbolical or naturalistic, of something, and it is made to "mean" something. In other words, apart from its physical existence, art is a form of ideology. It is to one degree or another an interpretation of life and the world and thus has an indirect relation to reality. Ideology may or may not be true, may or may not represent reality, while a material product simply is, and may or may not be useful. Ideologies do not arise spontaneously but are a reflection of the material and social conditions which determine their existence. They are "reflexes and echoes of this life-process," as Marx put it. Another way of contrasting these two types of production is to say that one is material or physical and the other mental or "spiritual."

In primitive society, as we saw, mental and material production are difficult, if not impossible, to separate because of the low degree of the division of labor. Not only were mental and material products inextricably joined in the same objects, but they were made by the same person. Only as society developed did mental production become severed from material production in the separation of material producers from thinkers and artists. But these functions have never become separated so absolutely that useful objects may not also be regarded as art