REVOLUTION AND THE CULTURAL TASKS OF THE PROLETARIAT*

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It was raised long ago. About ten years ago a literary group of Bolshevists was formed abroad which advanced the thesis that to achieve greater success in political and economic struggle, the proletariat must develop its own culture, its own proletarian world attitude, which would give greater ideological independence to all forms of proletarian struggle. Analyzing the results of the 1905 revolution, comrades came to the conclusion that the propaganda and revolutionary slogans of that time were not sufficiently permeated with socialist ideology, but were of a rather democratic character. Our defeat then can be partly explained by this. In order to avoid other defeats, it was necessary to gather and unite elements of proletarian culture, thus giving greater pithiness to the political and economic struggle, which, although a component part of proletarian culture, took shape earlier than revolutionary-cultural construction itself, thanks to historical conditions.

When we advanced our program, many comrades thought of it not only skeptically, but even with hostility. They declared that it was impossible to create proletarian culture in a capitalist society, that it was possible only under socialism. We, on the contrary, held that elements of a future culture have roots in the culture of preceding generations. We have observed an analogous process in the past. After the great revolution of 1789, France entered into history under the mark of bourgeois culture. But we know full well that the elements of bourgeois culture had been laid much earlier. The French philosophers of the Enlightenment in their Great Encyclopedia put it down only theoretically. In the course of thirty years the ideologues of the great French revolution, Diderot, Voltaire, d'Alembert, Holbach and others, published thirty-five big volumes. Another collective work, The System of Nature, supplemented this gospel of the bourgeois revolutionary movement. Both these works gave answers to all the combative and burning questions of that epoch. They laid the foundations of a new science, ethics, law... in a word, all contemporary bourgeois culture, which then, as the most advanced cultural form, conducted a merciless struggle with the religious culture of a medieval society. In the same way our proletarian culture is being born in the capitalist world, but it presents sickly, pallid sprouts which we must make grow into a mighty tree.

Jean Jaures, the great parliamentary tribune, castigating bourgeois France in one of his inspired parliamentary speeches, characterized the new task of the proletariat in this way, “In my view the hour is approaching when the revolutionary socialist proletariat must master an organized doctrine of the universe and of life. The revolutionary bourgeoisie created its Encyclopedia, and we also need a new encyclopedia, infinitely wider and more daring, a proletarian one. It is necessary once again to review the progress of human thought. It is necessary to review the entire history of science and give its chief results to the proletariat, to that class which wishes to live a full life and to brighten the universe with a clear light, where rays of individual thought will lose themselves in the glowing dawn of social life. This living organization of the socialist encyclopedia is one of the highest tasks which the future will place on our party and on mankind.”

I say that the hour has struck, and the proletariat is charged with this highest task.

Earlier they even reproached us for opportunism. Now that the proletarian revolution has taken place, this view has fundamentally changed. The question of proletarian culture has become a reality, not a dream.

In many cases in contemporary life, the Russian proletariat senses in itself bourgeois habits, moods and an insufficiency of socialist upbringing, which often interfere with fulfilling the tasks set forth by the revolution. If it wishes to be triumphant, the contemporary proletariat must educate itself to be socialist not only by conviction, but in its psychology. It must develop all creative capabilities in order to defeat petty bourgeois anarchistic elements. The latter can be fought only with the development, the creation, of a strictly class proletarian culture. If this idea seemed an empty fiction ten years ago, then now, in the course of a year, it has fully and quickly seized the attention of the working class, and there is no force which can stifle it. And this conference, the fact that we are gathered here, shows that the question is being advanced by life itself, and is not the fruit of the idle musings of comrades cut off from life.

Our proletarian culture is replacing bourgeois culture. And it is natural to assume that it will be its opposite, just as the capitalist system in its economic aspect is the opposite of the socialist. The capitalist system is anarchistic and its ideology is individualistic. The socialistic system bases itself on collective creative labor; its ideology will be strictly monistic, integral. The content of contemporary experience is so great that it is not only inaccessible to individual knowledge, but does not even fit into

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* Report and discussion at the first All-Russian Conference of Proletarian Cultural-Enlightenment Organizations, September 16, 1918, from Protokoly pervoi pervoi vserossiiskoi konferentsii proletarskikh kulturno-prosvetitel'nikh organizatsii, 15-20 Sent. 1918, Moscow, 1918, pp. 17-29.  
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existing forms of cognition. New forms are needed, which can freely embrace and combine the entire content of experience in its constant development. The new forms in all their grandiose complexity must be harmonious. Capitalist culture, as an anarchistic one, is not able to produce strictly monistic new forms. Only the proletariat will be able to fulfill this colossal creative work.

Bourgeois culture has gone through stages of revival, flowering and decline. Now this culture has become counter-revolutionary. And our [proletarian] culture must pass through various stages of development; this it cannot avoid. The proletarian culture will become the culture of all mankind, when class boundaries disappear in the social structure. This does not mean that it will change in its basic principles. No. It will merely pass to the highest form of an inevitable historical process, Whatever stages of development our proletarian culture passes through, the principle of collective labor must always be its foundation. This is its characteristic trait. It is in labor—by the blast furnace, to the noise of running machines and stamping tools—when formless substance is being turned into a harmonious whole, that the methods of creativity and practical logic take shape, not abstract logic, but the logic of labor, struggle and thought, in the living unity of the proletarian army, in its workday solidarity, the collectivism ideal and the socialism of feeling take shape. The second no less characteristic trait is that proletarian culture is always constructive. If the proletariat destroys the values of the past, then it does so only to the extent that it is necessary for our future, for our “tomorrow.” We accept this destruction, but will always understand that our culture must be born in collective labor. The proletariat must fortify its political victory in definite cultural work. Our opponent is strong. But we know that the culture of collective labor must triumph. In the given situation it is entirely unimportant that our undertakings and efforts do not always end with success; what is important is that the working class feels an organic need to imprint its life experience and its emotions in formal systems and images, and to oppose them to the bourgeoisie, with its dying culture.

Before us is the question, how will proletarian culture be created? Up until now the broad proletarian masses have been remote not only from an understanding of bourgeois culture, but even from elementary knowledge. Therefore, in the first place, we must master and surmount our bourgeois heritage, in order to use all the social experience of preceding generations.

But since bourgeois culture is hostile to socialist culture, our attitude toward it must be a critical one, so that theories and tendencies alien to us do not seize us. We all here consider ourselves socialists, but if each of us were to analyze his own life, he would find in himself much that was bourgeois. This is our misfortune, and it is an inevitable one. Bourgeois culture has enmeshed us for many years, and it is too difficult for our generation to break the net right away with one burst. The future generation, brought up in new conditions, will avoid bourgeois fetters. But we cannot place our hopes only in the future generation. History obligates us to strengthen our political liberation ourselves. We must review the old culture, subjecting it to the test of class consciousness, and everything that passes this test, we will accept as valuable in the new building. We must approach everything from this point of view.

Let us take science. In contemporary society, the greater the division of labor, the more there arise specialists who are so profoundly detached organizationally and ideologically, that they frequently cannot even understand one another, since science is built upon various methods. And we must review other values of bourgeois culture, the values of art—music, poetry, painting, etc. This critical re-evaluation is the best means for creating a new proletarian culture. If art for the bourgeoisie was merely a diversion in life, then for us it is the means to organize life. The proletariat will better understand its ideal when it experiences its beauty and grandeur under the influence of an art form: literary, musical, in painting or in architecture. We will take an example from the distant past. A worker feels himself incapable of participating in an upcoming demonstration. Personal apprehensions keep him from doing it, but the strains of the Marseillaise penetrate his wretched hut and seize him. Giving way to the call of those strains, he joins the demonstrators and is no longer able to cut himself off from this collective. No arguments—home, wife, children, prison—can stop him. Perhaps afterwards he is sorry, but at this moment he forgets everything. Has not each of us felt the influence of music, painting or poetry? In a word, the new culture must embrace all areas of life and creativity, embrace them not superficially or piecemeal, but profoundly and entirely. This defines our task: the proletariat must gather up the elements of socialist culture, organize them into a strict system which can be applied in all spheres of existence and human thought.

True, proletarian consciousness is still young. The elements of its logic, practical and cognitive, have only been partially formulated and have not been put together into one harmonious system. The old logic, more complete and for a long time holding sway in bourgeois economics, politics, law, morals, science, philosophy and art, shakes the proletariat from the correct path of knowledge.

But who can nevertheless resolve the problem of proletarian culture? Only the proletariat. Only it, by way of independent search, by the path of revolutionary creativity. Other classes—better to say groups of society—close to the proletariat cannot resolve this problem. In separate instances they may be of temporary assistance, but only that. Whom do we have in mind? Primarily the socialist intelligentsia. It has come over to us and has a record of cultural service. But we will take from it only its special skills, putting its cultural influence under strict control. If the workers themselves are not free from bourgeois habits, even when they are at their most
revolutionary, then the socialist intelligentsia has in itself a bourgeois ferment to an even greater degree. The proletariat must manifest a critical spirit in its relations with assistants from other social groups.

Let the working class itself direct its greatest energies to the creation of that which it so lacks; let cultural independence be its next, and from here on, its constant slogan.

We distinguish two points in our problem—a simple educational one and a creative one. The Proletkult, not denying the first point, directs its attention chiefly to the creative side of a matter, entrusting the educational part largely to Narkompros [Commissariat of Enlightenment].

At this moment power belongs to the proletariat and the poor peasantry. State institutions, however, despite their efforts and wishes, are not able to reflect a fully proletarian worldview in their work. First of all, they are forced to a significant degree to use the bourgeois intelligentsia which, of course, introduces bourgeois ferment into their work in one degree or another. Then, the very range of activities, its breadth and immensity, requires considering the psychology of other strata of society, often revolutionary, but completely alien to the communist ideal.

The Commissariats of Enlightenment serve the entire mass of the population, the peasantry, the urban poor, etc., and not the proletariat alone, and I repeat that this interferes with the establishment of a strictly class point of view.

Proletkult, as the type of organization free in its work from petty bourgeois allies, gives to the proletariat maximum opportunities for purely creative work. Proletkult does not compete with Narkompros and does not contradict it. On the contrary it supplements the work of the Commissariats. Proletkult exists under the Commissariats, like the laboratory of a well-equipped factory, in which strenuous, intense creative work aiming at improvement in the performance of production takes place. Proletkult and Narkompros accomplish colossal creative work; they strive for a single great aim. The former, by way of direct intercourse with the masses, consolidates the creativity of the proletariat and deposits everything of value into the treasure house of the latter, so that the latter may in one form or another make proletarian achievements the property of the entire worker-peasant mass.

The comissariats is forced to issue directives, often in hurried and imperfect form. Due to their position state institutions give the masses not only ready-made organizational forms for one or the other aspects of life, but also fill these forms with ready-made content. Proletarian culture, on the contrary, must be forged independently, from below, among the broader working masses. Only they can fully express their own world concepts. Therefore Proletkult does not give directives; in its essence it must only furnish the independent activity of the proletariat with the best form, strengthening and consolidating everything which is brought into life on its own, without ordaining this process by decrees. “Cultural independence of the proletariat,” the slogan of the day, arises from life itself.

In coordinating our work with the Commissariats of Enlightenment, we have in view not the principle of subordination of a lower institution to a higher one, but rather friendly free cooperation.

In the provinces Proletkult and departments of education are often indistinguishable. We must strictly delineate these institutions as different types of organizations, created according to the principle of a definite division of labor in the struggle for future culture.

In our agonizing epoch, the majority of the workers, even in the most advanced countries, followed the bourgeoisie. Not out of fear, but out of conscience. It considered its national interests to be higher than its class interests, and made peace and alliance with the capitalists in order to annihilate enemies together—yesterday’s and tomorrow’s comrades. In both thought and feeling, the proletariat turned out to be unreliable and unsteadfast. Why was this so? Because they encountered a new question of unforeseen difficulty and did not possess a sufficiently deep and integral upbringing to decide it firmly and unwaveringly, on their own, from the point of view of their own goals and their own ideals. The working class subordinated itself to an alien resolution, to that which was forced upon it by the entire surrounding environment, the capitalist world.

Our task is to give the class an integral upbringing, indisputably directing collective will and thought. This can be done only during the process of working out an independent spiritual culture. The proletariat lacked this, and this was its weakness. Otherwise, whatever the new and difficult situation, the old world could not have whispered its thoughts to the proletariat, could not have inspired its feelings in it, could not have corrupted the proletariat with its poison and made it into a blind instrument.

Our prospective work is enormous. There are enormous difficulties and obstacles in the path of the work to which we call our comrades. But the proletariat did not come into the world for easy tasks. We believe that its collective strength in its mighty development and self-organization will overcome everything, will achieve everything.

Long live Proletarian Culture, the great instrument of victory of world-wide socialism! (Long applause) . . .

Concluding Words [following discussion]

I will try to summarize the criticisms made against me. The essence of the first series of criticisms is that it is not necessary to create a special
proletarian organization for the work of building proletarian culture, and that it is sufficient to be united into strong groups on a national scale. I also welcome the striving for unification, but one should never forget the tasks of one’s class and especially should never confuse peasant culture with the culture of the working class. They are contradictory, as are the interests of the social groups standing behind them. We are organizing our work in such a way that the Proletkult can dictate its will to the peasant masses. We are striving with our every fibre, if it can be so expressed, for a dictatorship of the proletariat in the area of culture. They argue that with the creation of Proletkult we destroy the work of Narkompros. It is not so. First of all I will point out that under Narkompros there exists the Section of Proletarian Culture. It does not contradict the structure of the Commissariat’s work, but rather supplements it, as a special type of organization, better preserving the independence of the proletarian cultural-educational organizations, better corresponding to their work. The representative of the Moscow Metal Workers’ Union argued with me. But let me ask him, why does the Union of Metal Workers exist since there is a Commissariats of Labor? From his point of view, it is an absurd question. I think otherwise. Trade unions are needed, despite the fact that their work in many particular questions overlaps with the work of the Commissariats of Labor. No one will deny this. Furthermore, at the present time the VTsIK [Central Executive Committee] consists entirely of communists, but is it sufficient from this fact that the communist party should cease to exist? No. Obviously in a social historical process there are moments which force the same social groups to create several organizational cells, striving for a single goal by different routes, in the process of creating proletarian culture there are also moments when Narkompros cannot satisfy the working class. The political bloc with the peasantry interferes with this. Narkompros, like we, stands on a strictly class point of view and is accomplishing colossal creative work, but it is not completely the work about which we who are gathered here are speaking. We are summoned by history not to contradict one another, but to supplement, coordinating work in comradely fashion without any constraint on the creativity of any side.

Not long ago at an expanded session of the Executive Bureau of Moscow Proletkult the following resolution was suggested by People’s Commissar for Enlightenment A. V. Lunacharsky, “Soviet power must in no way restrict the full freedom of such organizations of the proletariat (Proletkult first of all) but must, on the contrary, create for it the most beneficial circumstances, making available to it all the treasures of the past. Hence—the internal unity and full coordination of the enormous Soviet apparatus, state and local, and its cultural sections on the one hand, and independent proletarian cultural organizations, artistic, scientific, and creative, which Proletkult must be, on the other.”

His point of view corresponds with ours completely, and after all, none of you would say that Comrade Lunacharsky is undermining the work of Narkompros. General cultural work is being performed by two types of organizations, the Commissariats and Proletkult. We know that the proletariat is conducting a struggle with the bourgeoisie, breaking off into political and economic organizations, despite the fact that it struggles for a single workers’ cause in both organizations. The economic organization is divided in turn into trade unions and cooperatives with the latter divided into production and consumption cooperatives. The representative of the Union of Metal Workers who argued against me may be simultaneously a member of the Sovdep [Soviet of Deputies], the party, a trade union, a cooperative, and a responsible worker of the Commissariats of Labor, but does that mean that his soul is made up of separate portions conducting an irreconcilable struggle with one another? No, they are rather in harmony, and serve one cause, though divided according to various organizational units. Since Narkompros in its creative work serves the entire population, all layers of society, it meets difficulties from the peasantry and the urban poor in carrying out a strictly class point of view. The Commissariats does not have the possibility of revealing this class point of view in its full brilliance, an idea that is developed in detail in the theses, in journal articles and in today’s speech. As a state institution, the Commissariats must every hour, every moment, give directives and orders to the localities, so that work does not come to a standstill, always in a hurry and sometimes allowing things which are far from tested and perfected. The Proletkult organizations are free from such difficult conditions. The results of their creative work are put into effect not by command, but by themselves, in an invisible manner, by means of an invisible social selection. If Narkompros wishes to improve its own state construction and overcome bourgeois culture more quickly, it must take care of its own laboratory, giving to the proletarian cultural-educational organizations every opportunity to work. Only this will speed up the victory of proletarian thought and proletarian art. I want to dispel the bewilderment of those comrades for whom it is still not clear what we have in mind by distinguishing between two aspects of work, the purely educational and the revolutionary-creative. The first comes down chiefly to knowledge of the cultural property of the past, from which the broad masses of the proletariat used to be removed. The second looks for new paths, to organize the heritage of the bourgeois world on new principles, to forge methods of creativity unique to the class of collective labor.

Comrades! If we first raised the banner of world social revolution and heroically are defending it on the difficult but honorable path to our ideal, then we will be brave to the end and will unfurl the Red Banner of Proletarian Culture. Let it wave over a new world born in grave torment.

Comrades! With a unanimous vote we will lay the first brick of a new
and great building which will be our pride, which will stand as a monument of the daring, noble, mighty, but joyful creative rush forward to universal happiness. (Prolonged applause)

Resolutions

The First All Russian Conference of Cultural-Enlightenment Organizations, holding:

(a) That the cultural-educational movement among the proletariat must occupy an independent place along with political and economic movements;

(b) That its task is the forging of a proletarian culture which will become universal with the destruction in society of class division;

(c) That the building of this new culture must be based on social labor and comradely cooperation,—

resolves:

(1) in order to achieve this stated task, the proletariat must comprehend all the accomplishments of previous culture, and adopt from it that which carries a universal stamp;

(2) all that is accepted [from the past] must be examined critically [by the proletariat] and reworked in the crucible of its own class consciousness;

(3) proletarian culture must bear the character of revolutionary socialism, so that the proletariat can arm itself with new knowledge, organize its feelings through the medium of new art, and reform its everyday relations in a new spirit, a genuinely proletarian one, that is, a collectivism one;

(4) in building a new culture the proletariat must display a maximum of its own class energy, its own independence, while also using the help of the revolutionary-socialist intelligentsia, so far as possible;

(5) laying the foundation for a new form of the workers' movement in ‘Proletkult,’ defending its organizational independence, so that it might display to a full extent a strictly class proletarian creativity, the Conference maintains that state institutions, central and local, must facilitate the new movement in every way, in order to strengthen firmly the gains of the proletarian revolution, in order to defeat the bourgeoisie not only materially, but spiritually as well, and in order to more quickly erect the new structure of the coming socialist society.

[Short debate over amendments, all of which are rejected. Followed by unanimous acceptance, with five abstentions.]