

From the Other Side of the Tracks

Julius Lester

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Of necessity, much of the black and white radical movements have been involved in a cultural revolution. For blacks it has led to an affirmation of blackness, an affirmation of self, for I must know who I am before I can know that I cannot be destroyed. For young whites, the cultural revolution has been a process of creating psychic liberation zones which embody the seeds of new values and new attitudes. A man cannot begin to be involved in the revolutionary process until he looks at himself, and thereby others, with new feelings and new ideas. The cultural revolution has been a dominant factor in this.

At the same time, however, it has to be realized that the cultural revolution can only serve as a part of the foundation upon which the revolution will be built. Unfortunately, many blacks, now in intimate contact with their blackness, act as if they had achieved the final goal. Many whites have become ensconced in their psychic liberation zones and are involved in trying to create institutions to preserve and protect their psyches. But as Rap Brown has pointed out, it's not possible to beat "the man" to death with your dashiki. And "the man" is not about to be asphyxiated from the smoke of a stick of grass. The means has become the end for all too many.

Last week the *Guardian* published a 12-page special supplement on Cuba. This supplement concerned itself with the many aspects of Cuban culture and, in and of itself, had great value. Nonetheless, when considered in the context of the movement here and what it can learn from Cuba, the supplement was a reflection of Western intellectuals trying to be revolutionary and not succeeding.

Culture in a revolutionary context must be an instrument of communication, which serves to raise political awareness and consciousness, as well as serving to further intensify the commitment of the people to revolution. Culture can also be an instrument which serves as a rock in a weary land and a shelter in a time of storm. Culture is the principal mass means by which attitudes and ideology are shaped in any society; therefore, in a revolutionary context, the responsibilities of the cultural worker are overwhelming. These responsibilities have different demands at different stages of the revolution and it is part of the cultural worker's responsibility to be so attuned to the needs of the revolution that he will not be articulating one thing when another is needed.

However, it is difficult for intellectuals and artists to make that change whereby they become cultural workers. As intellectuals and artists, there is a necessary and constant need to be concerned with form, i.e., how best to say what is said. In the Western intellectual artist, this has often led to an almost exclusive concern with form over content. The revolutionary artist, of course, becomes counterrevolutionary when a concern with form overwhelms that which is to be communicated. In revolutionary societies, cultural workers are sometimes required to work in factories or in the fields so that they will learn in the very marrow of their bones what needs to be communicated and to whom (because intellectuals and artists have overwhelming tendencies to become their own best audiences).

In our society, the intellectual artist who wishes to use his skills in a revolutionary context has a fiendishly difficult job, because in most instances he must provide his own political direction. There is no revolutionary party or organization which is presently giving the intellectual artist the necessary framework in which he can use his skills. (Emory Douglas, revolutionary artist and Minister of Culture of the Black Panthers, is a notable exception.)

Thus the intellectual artist operates as best he can within the context of the cultural revolution, which has its own dynamic, a dynamic which is not necessarily revolutionary.

There is much the intellectual artist can learn from the Cuban culture of today, as he begins that journey to becoming a cultural worker. Yet the fact still remains that Cuban culture exists in the framework of a revolutionary society, not in the framework of an incipient revolutionary movement which has still to win its first battle.

Thus the demands made on the cultural worker inside the movement are entirely different from those made on the Cuban cultural worker who has the support and encouragement of the state. It would have been more worthwhile if the *Guardian* had examined the role of culture in the struggle of the Viet Minh against the French, the National Liberation Front against the U.S., the role of culture in the Cuban fight against the U.S., the role of culture in the guerrilla struggles in Mozambique, Portuguese Guinea and other places in Africa. The intellectual artist of the movement can best identify and learn from the intellectual artist of other struggling movements. The *Guardian* supplement, while containing valuable concepts and ideas, still has the end effect of making you wish you were in Cuba, where it is easier to be a cultural worker.

If the *Guardian* wished to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Cuban revolution, it would have been more valuable to have printed 12 pages of excerpts from the writings of Jose Marti, a Cuban who is one of the most important revolutionary intellectuals in the Western hemisphere, a man who lived in a pre-revolutionary period and died in an unsuccessful attempt to take power. How did Marti deal with the psychological problems the revolutionary artist in a pre-revolutionary period faces? Marti is a man practically unknown in the movement, and remains one of the most important men to know, particularly for those who aspire to be cultural workers.



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