

Culture

written by Struggle - La Lucha

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Dictionary.com defines culture as “the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.” This definition is not necessarily incorrect, but it is wholly inadequate. Culture is all-encompassing. It is part of the superstructure. The thoughts, ideas, actions, language, arts — every human endeavor or expression is connected to a society’s culture. It is not something static, but evolves and is intimately bound to the real and material world.

But where do these “behaviors and beliefs” come from?

The great revolutionary theorist from Guinea Bissau, Amilcar Cabral, wrote: “Culture, whatever the ideological or idealist characteristics of its expression, is ... an essential element of the history of a people. Culture is, perhaps, the resultant of this history just as the flower is the resultant of a plant. Like history, or because it is history, culture has as its material base the level of the productive forces and the mode of production.”

Just as everything in nature goes through constant change, the thoughts and actions of human beings change to reflect the constantly changing world and how human beings interact with that reality.

Society is organized by that interaction — the manipulation of nature for subsistence. Karl Marx asserted, “By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.” Not every society developed at the same pace nor went through exactly the same stages in the same way, but how the needs of the society are met and the relation of the producers of the needs to the things produced is indeed what society is organized around. And, since it is from

production that human nature is derived, it too is not a static thing.

When Marx said capital came into the world “dripping from head to toe from every pore with blood and dirt,” he was speaking of the natural proclivity of the system. Private property, from which capitalism sprung, brought with it the subjugation of women, children, gender expression, and sexual identity necessary for the patriarchal system to perpetuate the bequeathing of capital.

The particular history of building up the productive forces in the U.S. — that is to say, the history of slavery, genocide, and theft of land — has left an indelible blemish on the conscience and consciousness of the society, and the people of the society. U.S. capitalist society built its foundation off the super-exploitation of Africans who were brought as slaves; the stealing of land from Indigenous and Mexican people; and the genocide of Indigenous peoples.

Forty years ago many whites did not want to swim in the same pool with Black people and many didn’t want their children to attend the same schools as Black children. There are many that still hold these racist views, but what changed to allow such strides as desegregation and other civil rights gains?

It was struggle that changed the equation. When oppressed people and working people struggle against conditions imposed upon them, it affects consciousness as a whole. Old prejudices crumble and people become socialized to see past backward ways of thinking.

Here in the U.S., culture is often thought of as artistic output. While artistic output is only one aspect of culture, examining the arts — in this case, music — is extremely useful to describe the peculiarities of U.S. society.

Jazz musician Miles Davis said of music: “Music is always changing. It changes because of the times and the technology that’s available.” Music is an important part

of most people's lives. Everywhere you go there is music.

In the U.S. the music that is most pervasive is that of the oppressed. The music of Indigenous people, of the peoples of Latin America and especially of Black people and of the African Diaspora is predominant. It reflects the struggles of the people. It too, though, is not free from the overarching culture of the capitalist system. While it speaks of the history of the oppressed, expressing their struggles and beliefs from earlier times, it suffers from the ideals that come with capitalist society, just as, in earlier times, it reflected the ideals that came with the modes of production, productive capabilities and social relations of those earlier societies.

Oppressed culture is always under attack and faces a great deal of scrutiny from capitalist media and the society as a whole. Hip-hop music is made the scapegoat for the sexism, racism and homophobia rampant in the U.S.

Whatever contradictions exist in rap music or any of the other elements of hip-hop, the culture is neither the greatest purveyor of the contradictions nor the initiator. It is merely subject to infiltration from the culture that comes with capitalist society.

Hip-hop began not just as party music, but as social commentary. What was then known as a counterculture — partly because hip-hop in its early days was underground — was a response to the conditions imposed upon Black and Puerto Rican youth in New York and across the country in inner-city areas in the late 1970s and 1980s. Those conditions included white flight from city areas, the beginning of deindustrialization and the decline of the great social movements of the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the boom-and-bust cycle of capitalism.

If the perpetuation of capital requires greater and greater exploitation, especially of oppressed nationalities, then it is natural for countercultures of the exploited — the oppressed and workers — in bourgeois or capitalist society to exist. The well-spring, in this period, of the counterculture, show the desire for freedom from exploitation.

The artistic expression of pop or mass culture can be a gauge of the willingness of the masses to struggle, expressions of the conditions the masses are faced with, or both at the same time. The same goes for the culture of the oppressed — those workers who face added discrimination, repression and hardship because of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, so-called legal status and/or disability.

However, the culture of the oppressed not only faces infiltration from the ideals of the ruling class, but also from the dominant layer of society. In the U.S. that layer is white. Because of the history of genocide, land theft, and slavery — part of “the original accumulation of capital” denoted by Marx — race is always a factor. The historical development of the U.S. and the world has deemed that the lens of race is always firmly fitted.

When capitalism is abolished from the Earth, new ideas and beliefs will come and human nature will evolve to reflect the changed social relations and the changing material life.

Additional reading

[National Liberation and Culture](#) — Amilcar Cabral

- Return to [What is Marxism?](#)