towards a revolutionary culture

Lyn Donaldson

In Australia there is a peculiar division between politics, economics, life, work and culture. Strangely enough, this phenomenon is also to be observed in most socialist or leftist thinking. You would imagine that people who consciously strive for political and social revolution would also strive for the integration and change of the arts. But this is not so. The high degree of specialization of function in industrial society is the cause. Role demarcation marked the end of pre-literate society just as the destruction of such demarcation underlies communism with the vision of men and women able to escape the regimentation of the assembly line and to live a whole and varied existence. The strength of capitalism lies in its increasing divisions of functions, tending to make the individual a sum of a number of partial relationships within his/her workplace, home and recreational organization rather than a fully integrated person.

One of the most incredible divisions of function is the setting aside of “Culture” as a separate and tangible industry. The end process of the separation of art from life is the “festival of arts” — expensive, unsuccessful pretences to restore the organic unity that links culture and life in primitive society. Patronised by professionals only, their most serious implication lies in that they lead to a lack of community.

In Australia and, more typically in America, adherents of neither capitalist thought nor of marxism or leftist belief have sought to correct the division between politics and culture. Rather the exponents of the counter-culture have been and continue to be the most articulate. The counter-culture is basically directed against the postponement of pleasure and respect for hard work; specialization of function or role demarcation; positivist, logical and rational patterns of thought, and the achievement-oriented and competitive capitalist society. Protestantism, authoritarianism and sexual uprightness and repression, restrictive morality and severe restraint on gratification of pleasure in the name of duty, responsibility and decency are characteristic of the Australian, American and most western industrial societies. Positivist thought, which upholds reasonableness, civility and rational dialogue is directed towards supposed objectivity and supposed lack of bias.

An analysis of the culture of the modern industrial state shows the situation as it existed in America and Australia up until a few years ago:

In the expanding, productive economy of the first half of this century, where the material benefits of alienated labor still appeared as a reward for a life well lived, the traditional mechanisms of repression could and did suffice to keep most people in line. The family and the church, the pressures exerted by the small towns or ethnic community were the primary instruments through which the values of hard work, self-sacrifice and sexual repression became the values by which people lived. And even though men and women were dependent on a job they hated, trapped into early marriage by personal insecurity, by denial of birth control and abortion, and by fear of sex, even though they were preparing for a future that never came, still it all didn’t seem so bad. After all, your kids went to the school you could never go to; you had the car your parents couldn’t afford; your wife didn’t show the crow’s feet your mother had, and most important of all, however badly paid, what you did for a living still seemed worth doing. So it was only at rare moments that the ideology of repression — the ideology of you can’t beat the system, security is more important than fulfilment, sex is dirty, people who demand too much end up with nothing or worse — suddenly seemed to deny everything you ever really wanted . . . (Leviathan, Volume 1, No. 8).

The counter-culture rejects not only the policies of the capitalist establishment, but also the whole spectrum of bureaucratic, technological society, of puritan, specialised, positivist, linear values that the Establishment shares with the “Old Left”. Against these it claims to pose, a vision of man, and woman, free from repression and the idolatry

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of material goods, communal in his/her orientation, non-linear in his/her thought processes, and sensual rather than intellectual in his/her outlook. Manifestations of the counter-culture are rejection of style of dress, use of drugs such as pot, communal living, music and sexual liberation. There is, however, a characteristic fascination with speed and the cult of violence, reactions to frustrations which could lead possibly to unconscious human wastage. There is a strange contrast between the personal dislike of violence that characterizes new cultural attitudes and the glorification of collective violence.

Theodore Roszak, combining this new view of society and the manifestation of a new sensibility termed them the counter-culture, of which he says:

This so rapidly rejects the mainstream assumptions of western society that it is scarcely recognizable to many as a culture at all . . . What the young are up to is nothing less than a reorganization of the prevailing state of personal and social consciousness. For a culture that has a long-standing, entrenched commitment to an egocentric and intellectual mode of consciousness, the young are moving towards a sense of identity that is communal and non-intellective . . . (Page 12, “Youth and the Great Refusal” in M. Brown’s The Politics and Anti-politics of the Young, p.12).

There is no deep analysis of the existing social and political climate, nor of the traditional political Australian situation on the part of the counter-culturalists. They assert the primacy of individual or self-liberation over social liberation, but see the former as necessarily conducive to social liberation. Many counter-culturalists laud uncritically all forms of oppositional culture, but some of them merely reproduce, in different styles and rhetoric, essential bourgeois values. To take the example of the musical Hair, which is on the doing-your-own-thing kick, it is nothing more than a reassertion of the bourgeois dichotomy between the individual and the state. Bourgeois culture is not a static but a dynamic thing, actively incorporating into itself all unspecific and compromised attacks upon it. The manifestations of new dress, music, sexual attitudes and drugs are assimilated into the prevailing bourgeois ethos, capitalism accepts them as economically feasible propositions. Just as the bourgeois system can tolerate alternative power bases, such as unions and leftist political parties which don’t threaten their position as a ruling class, the bourgeois culture can tolerate counter-cultures which operate as de facto alternative culture. But the bourgeois could not tolerate it if the counter-culture was transformed into revolutionary culture.

The capitalist Establishment, the Old Left and the Counter-culture all make the mistake of the severance of politics and culture. Yet, to the latter, culture is the way to salvation and politics is seen as a syndrome of power, organisation, violence and state coercion and repression. The mistake of separating the cultural and political revolutions is perhaps worse on the part of the counter-culturalists than of the socialists as the counter-culturalists are basing their change on a phenomenon which is characteristic only of members of the bourgeoisie.

Enjoyment of, and participation in the arts, that is, culture, is boxed, wrapped, commercialised and put away for the workers’ leisure time. Counter-culture talks of the quality of cultural life and categorically rejects the quantity and more importantly equality of man and leisure time.

It has been the specific contribution of the counter-culture to emphasise the relationship and unity between the political and cultural revolutions mainly by posing its rejection of organized politics to the marxists. Despite antagonistic polemics between the culturo-revolutionaries and the political-revolutionaries it is inevitable that their coalition will provide a triumphant assault on the capitalist bourgeois society.

It is to be hoped that the essential unity of the political and cultural revolution in Australia will produce a society in which the wholeness of man is attained by his equality, his assertion of humanitarian beliefs and actions above and beyond the present materialistic values.

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