

SCIENCE and ART in WORKERS' RUSSIA

DURING September there was celebrated at Leningrad and Moscow the Bicentenary of the Russian Academy of Science—an event which is an important landmark, not only for the devotees of pure science, but also in the history of revolutionary Russia. The original foundation of the Academy followed on the attempt, started by Peter the Great, to “westernise” Russia as a move in opposition to the feudal power of the Church; and it was the start of a culture separate from and opposed to the old monastic and episcopal culture. In the foundation of this new culture much had to be borrowed from abroad, especially from Germany; and as a result most of the early academicians were foreigners. But in their laboratories worked young Russian students who learned from foreign scientists and then proceeded to build a specifically Russian culture.

To-day we have a Workers' Russia which has broken with the bourgeois culture of the past, and is strong to build up a new culture, adapted to a society where all shall be workers, and leisured exploiters shall be no more. For the present, much in the way of raw material and personnel is having to be borrowed from the past. But at the same time there are being developed among the worker-students of the new generation those who will be the builders of the new culture that is to be.

Writing about this new culture in *The PLEBS* of October and November, 1920, Lunachaski protested both against the attitude of “those serious-minded ones who take no pleasure in the ‘toys’ of Art (and) will waste no time to obtain knowledge which does not bear directly upon the facts of life,” and the attitude of those “prone to declare that Socialism must destroy the old temple and build up a perfectly new one.”

“The first,” he says, “is the result of the narrow-mindedness of the *backward* section of the proletariat. The second is the outcome of the romantic sweep and self-confidence of the *advanced* section, full of energy and adventure, but still heedless of that immense and abundant inheritance bequeathed to us by former ages, an inheritance which calls for a process of sifting because it is a medley of both beautiful and ugly. . . . The proletariat must use all the nutriment of the soil tilled and dressed by a long line of ancestors.”

Says Trotsky in his *Literature and Revolution*: “The proletariat cannot begin the construction of a new culture without absorbing and assimilating the elements of the old.”

The carrying out of this very important principle is what strikes one's attention, perhaps, first of all in the cultural policy of Soviet Russia, and one thing which the Bicentenary celebrations, attended by hundreds of visitors from foreign universities and scientific institutions, showed, was the extent to which Workers' Russia is cherishing and assimilating this "inheritance" bequeathed from the past. The heads of the Academy and its various departments are the old academicians who were there before. Scientists are given every encouragement and aid to continue their researches. At Leningrad the famous Prof. Pavlov continues his researches into the inheritance of acquired characteristics in laboratories built and equipped for him by the Government. In Moscow there is the excellently equipped Institute of Biological Physics, financed by the Commissariat of Health and directed by the well-known Prof. P. Lazarev, and similar institutions such as the Microbiological Institute, the Institute of Experimental Biology, the State Venereal Institute, the Darwin Museum, the Thermo Technical Institute, the Sergiev Museum of History and Art. Art Galleries are not only preserved in excellent order, but are added to from nationalised private collections, and in many cases re-arranged to great advantage. For instance, there is the famous Hermitage at Leningrad and the Museum of New Western Paintings at Moscow—to mention only two. The former Rumiantsev Museum in Moscow is now the Lenin State Library, excellently equipped with books on every subject, and crowded with worker-students in its reading-room. Former palaces and churches, with but a few exceptions, are in excellent preservation, and are open as museums; and in the case of some of the exquisite Byzantine churches of the Kremlin, mosaics and wall paintings, formerly hidden, are being uncovered and cleaned.

As for drama and music, the old opera flourishes and is as good as or better than in Vienna. Orchestras composed of the best musicians from the Conservatoire play nightly in the public gardens in Leningrad; the First Moscow Art Theatre gave a superb performance of an historical play by Tolstoy for the Academy visitors; and the famous conductorless orchestra of 85 instruments played Scriabin's Second Symphony in the Grand Hall of Moscow Soviet House considerably better than a Queen's Hall orchestra. For a country where civil war and invasion and famine have forced the elementary "bread and butter" needs so predominantly to the fore, the "inheritance" from the past is being treasured to a quite surprising extent.

In industry generally use is being made of educated members of the bourgeoisie as experts, often receiving special non-worker salaries up to £700 a year. The managers of factories are often of this kind; and even where this is not so, bourgeois specialists are usually employed as technical advisers. In the universities, though only

Marxists may lecture on economic theory, social development and philosophy, the services of former professors are still utilised for specialised branches (e.g. in economics for money, public finance, statistics, etc.); and old professors are attached as economists and statisticians to Gosplan and the Supreme Economic Council, which govern industry, and to the Institute of Economic Research which advises the Finance Commissariat on all monetary and financial matters. Indeed, in the future even more use may be made of these "scarce" services of experts. Kamenev in a speech to the Russian Communist Party in September spoke of the lack of specialists in Russia and the need for them if industry is to develop quickly. "We must pay them," he said, "not only with a higher salary, which irritates the just feelings of the workers, but with different conditions of labour, with different hopes for the education of their children, etc." In fact, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that Soviet Russia knows better how to make use of experts than any other country in Europe.

But at this point the Fabian may intervene. Government by experts—at relatively high salaries; preservation of the past, not its destruction—that is what he has been preaching for the last forty years. But this interjection, of course, is merely because of his non-Marxian habit of looking only at the surface of things. The crucial point about Leninism is that it is realistic enough to know how to utilise the bourgeois expert while keeping *power* firmly in the workers' hands. The Fabian, on the other hand, merely seeks to extend the function of the official expert, while leaving the whip-hand with finance-capital and the imperialist heads of departments. Soviet Russia knows how to use the cultural heritage of the past in going "one step at a time"; but it knows also how to sever it from the bourgeois ideology with which it is so hopelessly entwined, and to use it in the moulding of a new classless culture. The "Union of Science and Labour," which was the reiterated slogan of the Academy Bicentenary, is achieved by bringing Science to Labour, not by bringing Labour, cap in hand, to receive the crumbs of bourgeois science.

How, then, is this union of Science and Labour being achieved?

First, it is being achieved through the greatly extended facilities for the masses to participate in the joys of art and literature—trade union art clubs, distribution of cheap theatre tickets to factories, etc. But this is not to be taken in the sense of "university extension" and "welfare centres," as known in capitalist England. The atmosphere of the thing is completely different, the language in which it is couched, and the psychological response to it. In the capitalist world cultural values are inevitably entwined with class values; culture is valued as a hallmark of social position; the worker is made

to see in it an opportunity for advancement out of his class. Art and literature are treated as "means of escape" from the harsh realities of life. Contemplation is elevated above action, and knowledge and theory set over against and opposed to, practice and purpose. In Russia the workers receive, not "crumbs," but their rightful heritage. Education does not raise them out of their class—those who sought culture for that end would be despised, not applauded, by "herd" opinion. Those aspects of learning are valued which have an intimate contact with the problems of the world; and that art and literature is most loved which expresses most vividly the essence of the workers' life. Moreover, education is purged of all metaphysical elements and made consistent and realistic by the unifying principle of science.

Second, there is the definite policy of eliminating the *intelligentsia* as a separate class. At present the old intellectuals are being used to the fullest extent. But every attempt is being made to prevent them from reproducing their kind. The qualities of this *intelligentsia* are well shown in much pre-war Russian literature—such as Tchekov's plays, for example—a divorce from reality, a lack of all sense of proportion and an absence of practical ability, leisured dilettantism and contempt for man in the mass. By the policy of filling the higher schools and universities with workers (at present to the extent of about 80 per cent.), often to the actual exclusion of students of bourgeois origin, by giving to students' committees increased influence, and by ensuring that at any rate the "Rectors" of universities are always Communists, it is hoped that the new generation of educated workers will really have their roots in the working class, and be *workers* first of all. Under English conditions, if a worker goes to a university, he soon finds it necessary, if he is to be successful, to adapt himself to the manners and spirit and traditions of the place; and unless he be of exceptionally obstinate character, his whole psychological "make-up" will undergo a change, and he will no longer be a worker in anything but origin. And this is the tendency and aim of all "university extension." Russia is alive to this danger, and is seeking to ensure that the so-called "brain-workers" of the future shall not be a class apart, but shall be no more separated from the mass of workers than the cotton-spinner is separated from the metal-worker because he works under different conditions.

Moreover, the expert of to-day gets a "scarcity-price" for his work, because under capitalism only the bourgeoisie can afford to get education, and educated ability is consequently scarce. Everywhere in Russia one hears the confident hope expressed among the workers that in a few years a sufficient supply of educated workers will be available to make no longer necessary the payment of any higher salary than the highest wage-grade of the specially skilled. And

already there are many of these "red directors," promoted from the workers, proud in the fact that they earn no more than the equivalent of about £200 a year, whereas bourgeois experts who work with them receive three times that amount for the same work.

Third, every possible encouragement is given to working-class creativeness in the realm of culture—giving artistic expression to the workers' life and finding new forms and media suited to that expression. The result is the provision of an incentive to *create*, and not merely to *copy* bourgeois art and literature. Hitherto most literature has concerned itself with the problems of bourgeois life ; and even when it has treated of the ploughboy and the factory "hand," it has nearly always looked at them through the *pince-nez* of a bourgeois. And when workers on rare occasions have had the opportunity to take to literature, they have usually copied the conventional style and form, substituting merely a worker-hero and a worker's parlour as scenery. This contrast between old and new is most vividly shown in the Gallery of Modern Art in Moscow, when one passes from one room where former bourgeois artists, converts to the revolution, have attempted to represent the ideas of the revolution in the old static medium—the style of Matisse or Cezanne—to the next room where the new generation of artists are seeking to represent new ideas in new forms—the epic of the revolution, the spirit of the Red Army and of collective labour depicted in strong, dynamic lines and figures which are at the same time realistic and powerfully symbolic. There is a school of young writers steeled in the revolution like Libedinsky and those from whom selections appear in the recently translated volume, *Flying Osip* (Fisher Unwin). In the new drama and theatrical production, such as the experiments of Meyerhold, there is the attempt to use and represent machine forms and machine rhythms. Literary criticism comes to have a new keynote, purposely selecting for its praise what expresses the spirit of collective labour and the theme of the conflict of social impulses, thereby helping in the birth of a new literature which shall place on the historical shelf that which dealt only in the conflict of individualist motives and breathed the old leisure-class scale of values. As yet this may be immature, transitional, and perhaps far from the ultimate culture of a classless society. But it is something strong and pulsing with life, something in the process of creation, released by the shock of the revolution ; and from it we who still stumble on the early stretches of the road can take inspiration for the humbler educational tasks which we have to fulfil.

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