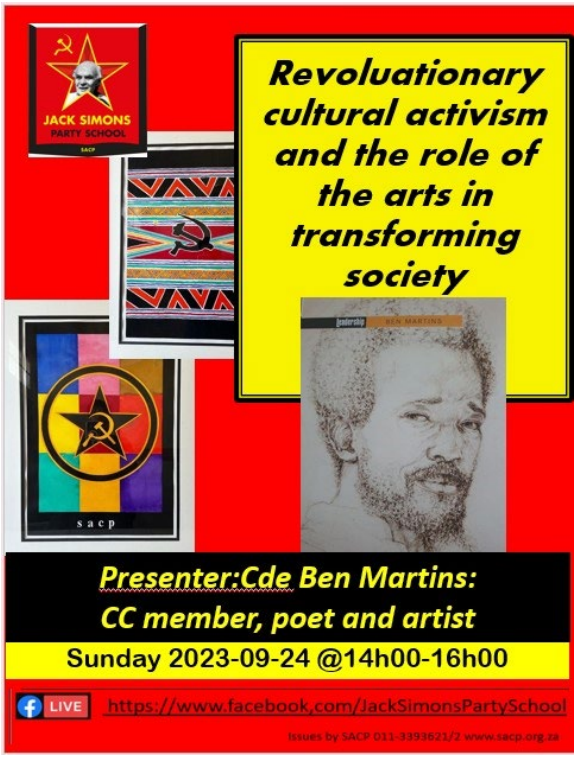

REVOLUTIONARY CULTURAL ACTIVISM AND THE ROLE OF THE ARTS IN TRANSFORMING SOCIETY
Presenter Cde Ben Dikobe Martins

The definition of 'culture' before the transitions in its meaning, referred to the growth and tending of crops and animals, and by extension the attending growth of human faculties.

In two of the several senses in which culture is defined in The Webster's 20th Century Dictionary, the meaning in one sense is:
" to cultivate, to refine, to educate "
and in another sense:
" the concepts, habits, skills, art, instruments; institutions etc. of a given people in a given period."

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles, on the other hand, defines culture in one sense as:
" Improvement or refinement by education and training;"
and in another sense as:
" The training and refinements of the mind, tastes and manners; "
and yet in another sense as:
" the condition of being thus trained and refined."

Culture, like Marxism then, is persistently active, developing and variable.
Culture in itself, through variation and complications, embodies not only the issues but the contradictions through which it develops.

Culture when seen in the broad context of historical development was a crucial step beyond the relatively static / timeless conception of history which had depended on religious or metaphysical assumptions.

In terms of Marxist theory on culture, an understanding of culture should begin by considering the proposition of a determining base and a determined superstructure.
That is, the proposition that social being determines consciousness.

The source of this proposition is commonly taken to be a well known passage in Marx's 1859 Preface to: 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy '

In it Marx states:
" In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces.
The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.

The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general.
It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but; on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.
At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production or-what is but a legal expression for the same thing-with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto.
From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters.
Then begins an epoch of social revolution.
With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.
In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic - in short, ideological - forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. "
(Marx and Engels, Selected Works 1 . 362-4)

Marx, as can be seen from the aforegoing quote had observed a distinction between analysing ' the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science ' and the analysis of ' ideological forms ', for which methods were evidently less precise.

In 1857 Marx had noted that:

" As regards art, it is well known that some of its peaks by no means correspond to the general development of society; nor do they therefore to the material substructure, the skeleton as it were of its organisation. "

Marx's phrase in the quotation above, namely:
" by no means correspond "
is a characteristic practical recognition of the complexity of real relations.

Furthermore, Frederick Engels in his essay:
' Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy ' argues that:
" the complexity of real relations, that are removed from the material, economic basis like philosophy and religion become more and more complicated, more and more obscured by intermediate links. But the interconnection exists."

What has not always been very clear in theoretical formulations of Marxists is any adequate recognition of the indissoluble - lasting and unable to be destroyed - connections between material production, political and cultural institutions and consciousness.

A classic summary of
' the relationship between the base and the superstructure ' is to be found on page 27 in George Plekhanov's
' Fundamental Problems of Marxism ' published in Moscow, in 1922.
Plekhanov held that there are five elements in the relationship between ' the base and the superstructure, ' namely

i) the state of productive forces;
ii) the economic conditions;

iii) the socio-political regime;
iv) the psyche of social man;
v) various ideologies reflecting the properties of this psyche '

The critique of Plekhanov's view has been that his description of these 'elements as sequential' , when they are in practice indissoluble: not in the sense that they cannot be distinguished for the purpose of analysis, but in the decisive sense that these are not separate 'areas' or 'elements ' but the whole specific activities and products of real people.

Meaning that, the analytic categories, as so often in idealist thought happen, have, almost unnoticed, become substantive descriptions, which then take habitual priority over the whole process to which, as analytic categories, they are attempting to illustrate.

Orthodox analysts began to think of 'the base' and ' superstructure ' as if they were separable concrete entities. In doing so they lost sight of the very processes - not abstract relations but constitutive processes - which it should have been the special function of historical materialism to emphasize.

The process that was outlined by Marx is secular - not connected with religious or spiritual matters - and thus developmental, and in that sense historical.
It offered a different sense of human growth and development,
which reached a critical point during the rapid development of industrial society and its prolonged social and political conflicts.

The Marxist theoretician Raymond Williams, the author of 'Marxism and Literature ' developed an approach outlining a theory of 'cultural materialism' which integrates Marxist theories of language with Marxist theories of literature.

The Marxist theoreticians Max Raphael and Antonio Gramsci held the view that creative and intellectual work were not the preserve of traditionally delimited professional circles but capacities in every person.
In Raphael's view, it is the task of progressives to incite capacities to increase activity, and not to conduct to passivity.
The object of what Raphael calls
'active analysis of art' is to equip an audience with the intellectual tools to understand their own analysis.
No text he avers, can tell readers how to apply the understanding of art they had gained.
Or how to transform their lives or that of their communities in the light of new insights or sources of energy opened to them.
But a clearer understanding of processes of conceptual production, turns us from readers or spectators into activists; turning our struggle to understand art into:
the struggle for a social order in which everyone will have the fullest opportunity to develop their creative capacities.

Culture and cultural practice are tightly bound up with political beliefs and ideological values.
Indeed, culture and cultural practice are less objects of intellectual enquiry in their own right than a particular perspective in which to view the history of our times.

Any discipline or study concerned with human meaning, value, language and experience will inevitably engage with broader; deeper views about the nature of people, society, power relations, interpretations of history, versions of the present and hopes of the future.

I will speak subject to correction,
in appraising the current cultural situation in South Africa, by contrasting it with the situation that prevailed during the
anti - apartheid struggle.

My contention is that cultural workers were then, a more organised and clearly defined contingent of the progressive motive forces.

I am of the view that, as we take a backward glance, the past must address its present.

During the struggle against apartheid the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) made considerable headway in the field of culture.
It asserted its significance through visibility at worker, community and national gatherings, as witnessed for example
during the 'Samcol' workers strike in Howick, Pietermaritzburg. Workers staged a play in Mpopomeni township outside Howick. The play depicted the reasons for the strike and foregrounded the importance of the community's support for the strike.

Other worker shop-floor inspired plays like 'The Long March' and
'Bambata's Children' received popular acclaim throughout South Africa.

The COSATU journal which was titled 'Cultural Worker', also had a substantial readership, as the edition proved that carried the poem by the Angolan poet Jorge Rebello. The two stanza poem read as follows:

' forge simple words
that even children
can understand

words
that will enter
every house
like the wind. '

COSATU locals at the time, worked closely with The Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) and other groups of writers, to assist workers to release the forceful originality in expression of their own life experience both personal and in their unions.

In the broader literary field, magazines like 'Staffrider' and others played an important role in the struggle to end apartheid and to establish a non-racial democratic society.

'Staffrider' magazine published:
* stories and essays by novelists, short story writers and essayists like Nadine Gordimer; Rose Zwi, MS Qwesha, Deena Padayachee, Stephen Gray, Karren Visser et al;
* poetry by:
Mafika Pascal Gwala, Barbie Schreiner, Lesego La Ramlolokeng, Tyrone August, Lebogang Maripe et.al.
* editorials, reviews, interviews, memoirs, photographs and graphics by:
AW Oliphant, Ivan Vladislavic, Njabulo S Ndebele, Paul Weinberg, David Koloane, Bongiwe Dhlomo, Mpikayipheli Figlan, Christopher van Wyk et al.

Community based organisations were also formed by concerned individuals, as the formation of the Progressive Arts Project (PAP) showed.

In 1987 a group of artists, poets, musicians and dancers who were concerned about the lack of cultural organisation within the broad-based democratic movement formed the Progressive Arts Project to fill that void.
At its launch representatives of writing, music, performance and photography sub-groups were elected. Among those elected were Barbie Schreiner and Mzwakhe Mbuli.

In Saxonwold, Johannesburg; Bill Ainslie opened the doors of his Johannesburg Art Foundation to back artists defiance of apartheid laws.

In Mpumalanga township, Hammersdale in Kwa Zulu - Natal, Mafika Gwala, Nkathazo Meyeza et al formed the Mpumalanga Arts Ensemble.

On the Cape Flats in the Western Cape artists and writers like Peter Clarke, Lionel Davids, James Matthews, Fatima Dike formed cultural units

In Alexandra Township and Garankuwa artists and writers like Billy Lengwati, Noel Sithole, Mahlabane, Johnny Ribiero, Lefifi Tladi and others did likewise.

I am of the opinion that there is currently a need to revive cultural practice as an integral part of social justice and freedom.

There is thus a necessity to widen and deepen the dissemination of knowledge and skills to workers and community members, who express a need for qualitative improvements in their cultural productions.

The accentuating of the rights of workers in general and those of women in particular remains important for the achievement of a equitable social dispensation.

The marginalization of women in processes of cultural production and their representation in publications and cultural forums remains a critical issue to be addressed on an ongoing basis.

The role of indigenous languages as vehicles for the creation and communication of aesthetics of liberation continues to require serious attention.

The challenges and organisational work, will have to be confronted in meeting the range of cultural tasks.
In doing so, it might be useful to remember Bertolt Brecht's 1935 essay entitled
' Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties '
In it he states,
" The writer must have:
1. the courage to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed;
2. the keenness to recognise it, although it is everywhere concealed;
3. the skill to manipulate it as a weapon;
4. the judgement to select those in whose hands it will be effective;
5. and the cunning to spread the truth among such persons.

End.