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Preface to Special Issue

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POLITICS AND CULTURE: INEXTRICABLE CONNECTIONS: SPECIAL ISSUE

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Why Should We Think about the Arts and Social Change

Generations of Wobblies, labor activists, anti-war activists, anti-racist and feminist activists have been animated in their vision and their action by music, mural images, powerful novels, and poetry. While this is a truism for almost all activists, there has been less theorizing about the importance of the arts and culture in the inspiration for and the actions around social movements. More importantly, theories of social and political movements rarely provide tactical guidance for movement activists about the importance of political culture and the “use” of the arts in building for social change. We hope that the essays below, the film reviews, the descriptions of how impactful literature has been, and the poetry can help rectify weaknesses in the literature. The writing in this issue covers questions including how important the arts are for building vibrant social movements and how can movement activists efficaciously “use” the arts for social change.

Theorizing about Social and Political Movements

Social science paradigms have for years been constructed around ideas about political and economic systems, class structures, dominant political institutions, and ideological justifications for these. Less attention has been paid to popular forces and the dialectical connections between the systems of control and resistance to them. The 1960s spawned, however, a rethinking of paradigms that historically have explained how societies maintain themselves and change. In the field of history, Howard Zinn, in his *People’s History of the United States*, developed and popularized an argument previously buried in history and social science that history is made by

masses of people, not just elites, and these masses often come together in movements to demand change. “Top-down” history must be complemented by “bottom-up” history.

Paralleling the emergence of the new social, political, and labor history of the 1960s and beyond was a plethora of writings in sociology and political science on social movements. Many of these theories sought to highlight the central causes of the emergence of social movements, who were likely to be participants, and for how long these movements survived and what were the achievements of these movements.

With the development of social movement theory, distinctions were made between “collective behavior” and social movements. Among these, most importantly, was the argument that social movements are organized expressions of dissent and demands for change. Some theorists emphasize why people participate in social movements, including “relative deprivation.” Participants see that they are being unfairly treated and at certain points, perhaps sparked by particular events, join together. Other theories emphasize “resource mobilization.” Given discontent, movements emerge when finances, organizations, and group capacities make such movements possible. Still other theorists emphasize the political process: the level of organization of groups demanding change, their level of optimism about the prospects for change, and concrete contexts for making such changes. An anti-war campaign obviously is more likely to be successful during a war. So-called new social movement theories emphasized uprisings; the expressions of outrage at a cruel and unequal world; growing concerns about racism, economic inequality, and the declining legitimacy of political institutions; and recognition of class exploitation, racism, patriarchy, environmental devastation, colonialism, and imperialism. New social movement theories have emphasized mobilizations of grassroots, often-cooperative behavior. Indeed, the twenty-first century has witnessed the rise of new social movements across the globe.

Political Culture

In the 1960s political scientists introduced two concepts to help explain how and why members of a polity develop their world views and how these views become an operant personal philosophy of political life. The first concept was “political socialization,” addressing the processes by which we learn about our immediate community and the culture at large. Research showed that people learned, for the most part, to respect their political institutions, political figures, and the processes of governance that dominate their lives. People learn about all this in the home, at school, in the media, and among reference groups. The research tended to show that people “learn their politics” at an early age, and not much changes. (Much of the research was based on data before the upheavals of the 1960s.)

The second concept was largely content based: the idea of “political culture.” Political culture referred to the pattern of beliefs, symbols, and myths that dominate whole societies. Therefore, from the vantage point of stability, the task of societies and political systems was to “teach” the dominant political culture to the citizenry.

These two influential concepts in the literature of political science emphasized implicitly, if not explicitly, the maintenance of the status quo. And paralleling the dominant historical narratives discussed above, stability was the motif of academic theorizing. As the theories of social movements suggest, people sometimes come together to demand change, and, as Zinn has told us, that history is really the struggle between those who want to maintain systems as they are and those who seek change.

Enter the Arts

While social movement theorists—historians, sociologists, political scientists—have a lot to contribute both to the understandings of and participation in social movements, the role of the arts and culture are unexamined as educators, entertainers, advocates, and inspirations for social/political mobilization. We can extrapolate from the survey above a number of critical variables about social and political movements: a recognition of inequality, a sense of the possibilities of social organization, knowledge of political institutions and their utility, and the need and propensity to come together as communities. In short, critical elements of social/political movements are education, participants building common organizations, inspiring solidarity, and constructing alternative political cultures that justify organizing.

If we carefully deconstruct moments of social movement history, in the United States progressive populist movements, the Industrial Workers of the World, the women's suffrage movement, and in the organization of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s and the Civil Rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, *the arts have served as educational, motivational, inspirational, and organizing tools*. In short, the arts and culture are critical tools of political socialization and the development of alternative or resistance political cultures. And some activists who have self-defined as cultural performers saw their contribution to political activity as the production of their arts. This volume assumes that *there is an inextricable connection between social/political movements and the arts and culture*.

This Volume

The materials below discuss this fundamental proposition. The article by Susan Curtis reflects on and modifies the groundbreaking work of Michael Denning, who connected economics, politics, and culture in the 1930s. The next two essays, by Doug Morris and Julia Schmidt-Pirro, build on

the ideas of a “cultural front” to describe connections between folk, classical, and popular musics and the radical movements for change in the 1930s. All three authors speculate on how the progressive political culture of the 1930s lived on and influenced politics and the arts in subsequent decades. While the emphasis in these articles is on music, parallel developments in progressive political culture can be found in drama, such as the theater productions of the Federal Theatre Project; the novels of John Steinbeck, Michael Gold, and Richard Wright; the photography of the Works Project Administration; and the great social-realist paintings by such artists as Thomas Hart Benton, Jacob Lawrence, and Diego Rivera. Similar constellations could be identified in later periods such as the 1960s and the current period, in which socialist politics have seen a renaissance.

While the essays in the first section highlight music, in the second section the experiences of book publishing and distribution are reflected in the descriptions by Tim Sheard about his working-class press. And section three analyzes filmmaking, as commentators assess the impacts and value of recent movies addressing racism and anti-war activities. Finally, the volume “lets the poets speak,” with examples of poems that address class, race, and gender issues.

As the inspirational political activist and singer Pete Seeger quoted from his singing partner, Lee Hays, about the connection between political movements and culture:

*Good singing won't do;
Good praying won't do;
Good preaching won't do;
But if you get them all together
With a little organizing behind it,
You get a way of life
And a way to do it.”¹*

¹ Peter Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Carry it On! A History in Song and Picture of the Working Men and Women of America*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), pg. 10.