

Noel Counihan

How Albert Tucker Misrepresents Marxism

1.
"The style is often what the French call bombastic. A pretentious and speculative piece of fustian . . . That which he trumpets in your ears, with the voice of a blustering buffoon, is his own glorification, wearisome nonsense and eternal rhodomontade about his pretended 'science' . . ."

"Add to this the awkward and disagreeable didactic pedantry, which serves for erudition, of the man who has lost his former pride in being an independent and original thinker, and who, now, as a parvenu of science, thinks he should swagger and boast of what he is not and of what he does not possess." (Karl Marx: Appendix to "Poverty of Philosophy.")

These comments describe Albert Tucker's "Art, Myth and Society" with striking accuracy. Marx wrote them after reading the "Philosophy of Poverty" by Proudhon, a man of sublime intellect and ability compared with Mr. Tucker.

"The history of cultural development is a history of visionaries and innovators," says Mr. Tucker, thinking of himself. "There is no use for the progressive, revolutionary artist . . . (for) by virtue of his own progressiveness such an artist stands partly outside his own time . . ."

And so he sees himself rejected and persecuted by the Right, the Centre and the Left. Here it is appropriate, as he misuses Maxim Gorki later in his article, to draw the attention of this persecuted "visionary" to an interesting statement of Gorki's, in his article "The New Man." Gorki says, "If some 'I' recognises himself as a necessary bit of the world's equipment, he should recognise every other creative 'I' as equally essential. In this way he escapes the feeling that he is alone in the world—a feeling characteristic of the middle class. That feeling was a source of grievance against life and served the philistine as a 'trick mirror' in which he saw himself as a hero, genius and stranger in a world that did not understand him."

Many people in Melbourne, and possibly Sydney, have been misled by Mr. Tucker into believing him a Marxist. Some identify his views with Communism. This is a mistake. The facts are that although the words "Marxist" and "dialectical," etc., hop endlessly around on the end of his indefatigable tongue, they fail to disguise his anarchism (really only bourgeois individualism in fancy dress), his metaphysics and ill-digested idealism, all wrapped up together with trappings of vulgar materialism and the flimsiest scraps of Freudian psycho-analysis.

His first two pages are full of metaphysical claptrap designed purely to present himself as a visionary and innovator.

He divides cultural activity into two kinds—the "Conceptual" and the "Functional." The basic activity, the "Conceptual" is of the pure, unconditioned, vacuum variety, beloved of all middle-class intellectuals. . . . "It has outstripped the social power to absorb" and is "autonomous and independent of society."

It is interesting to compare Marx and Engels with Mr. Tucker: "Sancho (Stirner) imagines that Raphael created his paintings independently of the then existing division of labour in the Rome of the period. If he had compared Raphael with Leonardo da Vinci and Titian, he would have seen to what extent the artistic work of the first depended upon the flourishing of Rome at the time with its Florentine influence, the work of Leonardo upon the circumstances in Florence, and the work of Titian upon the totally different development of Venice. Raphael, like any other artist, depended on the technical achievements in art before

Noel Counihan, after characterising this publication as the product of a "middle class intellectualist clique," virtually demanded that his article be published in this issue. — So far as the Editors are concerned, if he wants a little more rope, very well, let him have it.

his time, the organisation of society and the division of labour in his locality, and, finally, on the division of labour in all those countries with which his country came in contact." (German Ideology.)

So much for the "autonomous" conceptual activity of the Renaissance, for example. The essence of Tucker's confusion lies in his search for the character and history of creative activity in *consciousness*, in ideal, perceptual activity. Later on, he defines Art as the plastic equivalent of a state of human consciousness. This is undiluted idealism. "Individuals working in a society—consequently, socially determined work of individuals—such is the natural starting point." (Marx Introd. to "Critique of Political Economy.") "Whatever is the being of a society, whatever are the conditions of the material life of a society, such are the ideas, theories . . . of that society." (Stalin: "History of the C.P.S.U.") This is Marxist materialism.

Mr. Tucker says: . . . "artistic form is derived from constant archetypal forms which are in themselves incapable of change as we understand it . . . They occur as the spontaneous visual symbols of the natural constants . . . which have existed since the world and life began. In this sense constants are not part of history, for history is the data of change." Yet Mr. Tucker always talks of dialectics, which according to F. Engels is the "science of the laws of motion in nature, society and human thought." For example: "All nature, from the smallest thing to the biggest, from a grain of sand to the sun, from the protista to man, is in a constant state of coming into being and going out of being, in a constant flux, in a ceaseless state of movement and change." Again, dialectics "takes things and their perceptual images essentially in their interconnection, in their concatenation, in their movement, in their rise and disappearance." (Engels: Dialectics of Nature.)

Suffice to point out that the obvious "constant" in Tucker's outlook is metaphysical idealism, and leads directly to theology. "Since the world and life began," says he. Yet it is obvious that once the fundamental materialist view of the infinity of matter is ignored and the idealist view of a "beginning" (in other words, a "creation") is accepted, then the questions must be put: "How, where, from what did matter come into being?" And how can the questions be answered without invoking a super-material primary "Idea," "Force," "Will," "Spirit," in other words, God?

So, it is not surprising that Mr. Tucker later accuses the Communists of an insufficient appreciation of the myth, psychology and religion. He wishes to lead us back into the arms of obscurantism. This is inevitable with every form of idealism, as Lenin insisted in "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," his polemic directed against Bogdanov and Co., who endeavoured to smuggle theology into Marxism through the philosophy of Mach.

Lenin concluded that professors of philosophy are nothing but the learned servants of the theologians. He also concluded that professors of economics are nothing but the learned servants of the capitalist class, and this description covers Mr. Bruce Williams, whose thesis in "Art in the Whole" is identical with Tucker's. Armed with sophomoric wit he, like Tucker, unscrupulously speaks of the Fascists and Communists as identical. Like the fascists and communists, Mr. Orwell wishes to dictate to the artists a principle of experiencing." The falsehood contained in cheap thinking of this nature runs dangerously parallel to the provocations of professional fascist fifth-columnists, and is of service to no one else.

Now Mr. Tucker, yielding to the temptation to demonstrate his scholarship, proves that he is devoid of all values by dragging into his article, as "witness," the late N. Bukharin.

It is fantastic to have to rely for a philosophic formula for "Truth," on one of the most hideous figures in the modern world, Bukharin, the "savant" of the fascist fifth column of poisoners, gunmen and scientific wreckers, who unsuccessfully betrayed their Socialist country to the Nazi plunderers. What was "Truth" to a Bukharin? But then, what are values to a Tucker? He quotes a murderer on one page, and his victim, Gorki, on the next.

Similarly, he drags in the name of A. A. Zhdanov, in order to support an accusation that in "the field of social-psychology . . . myth, religion, and art, the Communist Party betrays a serious weakness."

Who is Zhdanov? He is one of the most brilliant leaders of the Russian Communist Party. The eighteen months' epic defence of Leningrad, immortalised by Shostakovitch's "Leningrad Symphony," the heroic breaking of the Nazi encirclement, was carried out and still is being carried out under the leadership of Zhdanov. Tucker tears a statement clean out of the text and offers it as "people's consciousness lags behind economic life." "As a statement," says Mr. Tucker, "this is false." Now it is perfectly obvious to anyone who looks at history with the eyes of a Marxist, that, while at certain critical periods men react on their form of society and change it by an act of will, such a change "could only become possible, could only become a historical necessity, when all the material conditions for its realisation had come into existence." (Engels: "Anti-Dühring.")

Marx wrote in the famous preface to the "Critique of Political Economy": "No social order ever disappears, before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed: the new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore, mankind only sets itself such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more clearly, we will always find that the solutions already exist, or are at least in process of formation." Hence, the sense of Zhdanov's statement is quite clear and perfectly correct. Mr. Tucker is just indulging in misrepresentation, which becomes more obviously deliberate when he links Zhdanov and Trotsky together, with Trotsky appearing as spokesman for the Communist Party on Art.

Trotsky, who degenerated into the lowest depths of gangsterism, the gangsterism of the Gestapo, with whom he collaborated, died a gangster's death at the hands of an accomplice. During his life in Russia, he disagreed fundamentally with Lenin and the Marxists at every turn in the struggle against Tsarist absolutism, and later in the struggle against the counter-revolutionary profiteers and interventionists. At no time did his views on cultural problems coincide with those of Lenin, Stalin and the Communist Party. It is well known that Trotsky completely opposed the whole Marxist conception of a proletarian art and culture. He absolutely denied that the working class was capable of creating its own culture—a culture rising both from a critical reevaluation of the culture of the past, (the cultural heritage of which Lenin and Stalin so often spoke), and the reflection, in new forms, of its own world, its own dynamic experiences and aspirations. Trotsky denied that the peasantry must play a vital role in the destruction of class society, as the allies of the decisive class, the proletariat. He possessed no faith at all in the creative powers of the proletariat itself. He hated and feared the new proletarian intellectuals, like Lenin and Stalin, and mistrusted the rank and file of proletarians, except as a disciplined mass to be led by a general staff of middle-class intellectuals like himself. This is precisely Mr. Tucker's view. So we see, firstly, that Mr. Tucker is bankrupt of values, secondly, that he substitutes misrepresentation for reason; and, thirdly, that his views are those of the Trotsky with whom he attacks the Communist Party.

Mr. Tucker says complacently: (a) "In one of his rare references to aesthetics, Marx confined himself to observing 'an unequal relationship between the development of material production and artistic production,' but hoped that the contradiction would be solved by the dialectical method." (!). (b) "Undeterred by Marx's cautious and non-committal attitude over this question, the political left . . . reconciled the contradiction without the dialectical method. The function of the artist is interpreted as that of a glorified cartoonist and banner-maker, etc. . . ."

Now this is really very amusing. The famous appendix to Marx's "Critique of Political Economy" contains a number of fragmentary notes dealing with the law of unequal development. As an illustration of this law, Marx notes: "the unequal relation between the development of material production and art, for instance." He quotes the apparent contradiction between the extremely high level of development of Greek art and the low level of development of the Greek productive forces, and then demonstrates that there is no contradiction at all. He points out that Greek mythology is the arsenal of Greek art and that Greek mythology could only exist as a result of the primitive character of Greek economy and the subsequent primitive social order. "All mythology masters and dominates the forces of nature in and through the imagination; hence, it disappears as soon as man gains mastery over the forces of nature. What becomes of the Goddess Fame side by side with Printing House Square (the site of the 'Times' building in London)?" Explaining why Greek art still constitutes with us a source of aesthetic enjoyment, he likens Greek society to the "social childhood" of man, and Greek art to the charming, artless ways of the normal child. He asks: "Why should the social childhood of man, where it had obtained its most beautiful development, not exert an eternal charm, as an age that will never return? . . . The charm their (Greek) art has for us does not conflict with the primitive character of the social order from which it has sprung. It is rather the product of the latter, and is rather due to the fact that the unripe social conditions under which the art arose and under which alone it could appear, can never return."

Now, where does Marx "hope that the contradiction would eventually be resolved by the dialectical method? Where on earth is Marx's "cautious and non-committal attitude," etc., etc., to be seen? It is clear that Mr. Tucker has completely failed to understand this profoundly suggestive Marxist observation.

Marx and Engels were vitally interested in aesthetic problems. Marx planned, as a young man, a special work on aesthetics. He worked on a "Treatise on Christian Art," whose publication was made impossible by the Saxon censorship. He contemplated works on Balzac and Heine, and was preparing an article on aesthetics for the "New American Encyclopedia." Throughout his works, historical and economic, as well as in his letters and articles, there are cases when in one or two phrases, or a remark not directly referring to art or literature, he gives us a key to the understanding of entire eras in the development of art, individual phenomena, the connection between art and the history of society, individual writers and art.

The works of Marx are studded with critical references to the literature and art of antiquity and the modern world. The vast sweep of his literary taste is revealed in the names of his favourite writers, Homer, Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Diderot, Fielding, Goethe, Balzac and Dickens. With Engels, he was above all interested in realism in art. He considered that art the greatest which most clearly reflected the nature of social relations. He was profoundly affected by those works which revealed deep understanding of the objective movement and processes of human society. Marx and Engels repeatedly pointed out how the great masters of realism revealed in their works an awareness of the most fundamental economic political and historical truths.

In one of his references to Balzac in "Capital," Marx says: "Balzac is remarkable in general for his deep understanding of real relations."

In the "New York Tribune" of August 1, 1854, Marx wrote of Dickens, Thackeray and other English writers: "The brilliant contemporary school of English realists has uncovered more political and social truths with their graphic and eloquent portrayals than all the politicians, publicists and moralists together, have depicted all the evils of the bourgeoisie, beginning with the respectable rentier . . . ending with the petty shopkeeper and lawyer's apprentice." Marx especially loved Shakespeare, and constantly urged Lassalle to substitute, in his dramatic works, the methods of Shakespeare for the romanticism of Schiller.

Listen to Engels in a letter to the writer, Margaret Harkness, in 1888: "If I have any criticism to make, it is only that your story is not realistic enough. Realism, to my mind, implies, besides truth and detail, the truthful reproduction of the principle that the emancipation of the working class ought to be the cause of the working class itself. The revolutionary reaction of the working class against the oppression that surrounds them, their convulsive attempts—half-conscious or conscious—to attain their rights as human beings, belongs to history, and may therefore lay claim to a place in the domain of realism."

Thus Engels in 1888 provides the theoretical key to the Socialist realism of to-day. The realism which reached its peaks in the art of Hogarth, of the Dutch school headed by Rembrandt, of Breughel and of Goya, was bourgeois realism, the art of enlightened humanism, bitterly opposed to tyranny and despotism. But its values reflected those of the bourgeoisie, unconscious of its historic role, its vision limited to capitalist democracy. Socialist realism is the realism of the working class, conscious of its historical role. It understands the contradictions of modern society, and is conscious of the future and of the decisive role of the working class. Does this mean that the artist must reduce himself to the level of "sloganeering and banner-making?" Engels wrote to Miss Harkness: "I am far from finding fault with your not having written a purely Socialist novel . . . to glorify the social and political views of its author." He quotes the example of Balzac, whose realism compelled him to depict the triumph of the French bourgeoisie over the decadent reactionary nobility with whom Balzac was in full political sympathy. ". . . that I consider one of the greatest triumphs of realism," says Engels.

So, it is clear that the copious references of Marx and Engels to aesthetic problems guide the Marxist directly to a new art, Socialist in content, Realist in form. Daumier was its prophet, and it flourishes to-day in Orozco, Gropper and the vast stream of Soviet painters, led by Deineka, Gerasimov and the Kukriniki.

Now Mr. Tucker objects to Socialist Realism, which he represents as an invention of modern Communists. But it is only twenty odd months since Mr. Tucker spoke to friends of mine, welcoming the development in Melbourne of a new group of Socialist-realist painters, which included, he said, W. Bergner, Noel Counihan and himself.

Mr. Tucker continues to misrepresent Communist policy towards artists, when he accuses the Marxists of "exhuming Trotsky" and attempting in their work and behaviour to establish an "Art-dictatorship."

In the Soviet Union, as is well known, Stalin and the Communist Party routed the Trotskyist intellectuals of Rapp, who were reducing art to vulgar "sloganeering," and who were suppressing the work of great Socialist realists like the late Mayakovsky and Sholokhov.

Mr. Tucker talks of "glorified" cartooning. I ask, were the great fresco painters of the Renaissance afraid of the cartoon? Hardly. Were Bosch, Rubens or Breughel? Were Rembrandt, Goya, Delacroix, Daumier or Van Gogh? Definitely not! And, may I ask what is Picasso's "Guernica" but a great cartoon of pain and anger at Fascist barbarism? Tucker talks of "banner-making." But, surely, the works of Tucker, Perceval and Nolan in the anti-Fascist show were strikingly reminiscent of the poster, with its superficial form and flat conventions?

Mr. Tucker cries loudly for freedom for the creative worker, freedom from violence, regulation, coercion, want and moral blinkers! What Marxist would disagree that freedom from these conditions is the fundamental right of the artists. The artist enjoys these conditions already in

the Soviet Union, as Mr. Tucker knows. But what are the conditions under which Mr. Tucker raises these demands? Axis Fascism has plunged the world into the most bloody warfare, seeking by weight of arms and unbridled bestiality to reduce the peoples of the world to serfdom or worse, and to destroy all national cultures. The Australian people is shedding its blood on its own soil and in New Guinea, fighting with bitter heroic determination to defend its national independence from destruction by a Fascist despotism. This war is the most decisive in history. Defeat for the United Nations means the end of our cultural values and cultural freedom. "When I hear the word 'culture,' I reach for my revolver," said the Nazi, Jost. Fascism has proved that it does not even stop at absolute racial annihilation. But victory, possible only by the military defeat of the Fascists and the uprooting of the Fascist regime, means to free the world from the worst scourge it has ever known. Talk of freedom in any sense can be sincere only insofar as it is related to this titanic people's struggle. Mr. Tucker's talk of freedom from violence, coercion, etc., reflects the anarchy of those people who seek only their own comfort and freedom from responsibility in the collective struggle for existence.

Mr. Tucker takes refuge in his newly discovered "myth" and attempts to pass it off as Marxism by quoting Maxim Gorki. In Gorki's hands, the myth is creative, inventive imagination, a conscious weapon with which to change reality in a practical way. In Tucker's hands, it is steeped in the unconscious, in psychological mysticism and Freudism (in itself, essentially a creed of escape into an inner world of complexes and repressions and away from social and economic realities). It is the fashionable viewpoint of that section of middle-class intellectuals who have their backs firmly turned on history's most significant war, and their minds concentrated on little worlds of their own terrors, fantasies and irresponsibilities. Mr. Tucker is merely one of their spokesmen.

John Reed reviews a unique Exhibition of Anti-Fascist Art without once referring to its purpose or its relation to the Anti-Fascist war. Joy Hester paints a Leonski-like killer and dreams of the severed "umbilical cords of dead women" (Comment, March, 1943). Sidney Nolan gives birth to "The Dream of a Lorraine-sitter." Max Harris hails the reactionary dictum ("no sermons but the subjective truth") of the adventurer, Orwell, a member of the P.O.U.M., the Fascist fifth-column in Barcelona; and, in the March "Comment," repeats the racial rubbish that the Jews are "impelled towards the esoteric, the transcendental, the permanent faith of the cabbala." What else do Tucker's paintings like "The Possessed," "The Puppet-master," and "Death of an Aviator" express but the outlook of minds dominated by fear of pain, of psychological collapse and death? They reflect the panic of those elements in the middle and upper classes who are terrified at the enormity of the war and the necessity of sacrifice. Tucker's paintings lead directly to demoralisation, pacifism, defeatism.

The narrow class arrogance and intellectual narcissism of the fashion-chasing "modernists," grouped around "Angry Penguins" and "Comment" is expressed sharply in Mr. Tucker's attitude to the common people: "The communists say, Take Art to the people. I say, Take the People to Art, by creating for them the conditions necessary for their cultural growth. That is a job for the politicians."

Socialist-realists support wholeheartedly the attitude expressed by Mr. J. D. Blake in his address to the Anti-Fascist Exhibition and published in "Angry Penguins."

... AND SOME GREAT BURKES OF ART.

"It was Burke who said: 'The laws of commerce are the laws of nature and therefore the laws of God.' No wonder, then, that true to the laws of nature and God, he always sold himself in the best market."—Karl Marx in "Das Kapital."