

# PEOPLE'S CULTURE

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## DOES THIS NEWSLETTER HAVE A FUTURE?

As this project approaches the completion of its 4th year of publication in the new series, it seems like a good time to visit with readers about its standing and prospects. Between 1978 and 1983, I published a literary magazine called *Quindaro*, which had in the neighborhood of 100-120 subscribers. I have to report that after 4 years, this newsletter has about 140 subscribers, with about 50 exchanges with other publications.

All of us daily receive appeals for money; this is not one of them. What I am appealing for is your insight, your perspective, your strategic thought. To carry out this project with the kind of care I have taken requires an incredible amount of time and energy. I have some advantage in historical perspective; for instance, when Thoreau was editing *The Dial*, it had a subscription list of only 100 names. Through heroic effort, Margaret Fuller was able to build it up to 200. Yet, *The Dial* helped create and sustain the great Transcendentalist movement in philosophy and culture.

What troubles me about *People's Culture* is simply that it has no connection with a cultural movement; I have the decidedly uneasy feeling that it goes Out Into The Void to an atomized aggregate of rugged individualists. I rarely receive any feedback from readers, even those whose books are reviewed. I realize that we are living through a period of collapse for the "Left"; that in a situation where almost all organizations we had are in disarray, it is difficult, and probably impossible to speak of doing anything more than starting over from scratch. It has been especially painful to experience the failure of almost all cultural publications in the socialist countries; few if any of these survive.

I was struck to read the comments of the noted German artist Jörg Immendorff, in an interview with *Le Monde* [reprinted in the box to the left here]. I don't agree with him that close contact with workers "is not the best method," but I do concur that we all badly need something like "a congress of druids," or means by which artists, writers and other people in culture can talk, argue, think, and create in a fertilizing exchange of ideas and concepts. Workers surely deserve to be a part of this process too. But the problem is, how can this happen? Fragmentation and alienation are so severe that people are almost unable to socialize.

This is a process that has affected entire societies. As C. Wright Mills noted almost 40 years ago, we have devolved from being citizens, to consumers; from participating in a living folk culture, we have been reduced to being passive television voyeurs, who haplessly "channel surf" trying to find something, anything stimulating. I have written in these pages about how empires move inexorably into phases of decadence. Can anyone deny that this is happening to us? It has been a strange experience to produce a newsletter issue

"It's a fact that for a long time I was a Maoist. It's not something I really want to go over again. But I did learn something from that episode in my life: that meeting the people the way Sartre did, in the streets, selling *La Cause du Peuple*, leaving his study in time to meet workers as they came out of factories, is not the best method.

"There's another line of action which entails reforging the union of writers, musicians and painters in such a way as to prevent standardisation and confusion. In Germany there are no ties between painters and writers. There are only specialists in one or other of the genres, without any connection between them, whereas the essential should be shared by everyone.

"In one of the *Astérix* albums—I can't remember which one—a congress of druids is organized. What we need is something like that, and I'm not joking; a meeting of artists so we can put back together what has been separated, so we can find a way forward, even if it means failing totally and not getting the slightest plaudit.

"If the view that art is a luxury, something like a superior form of design, prevails, it means it's something we can do without: all is lost. Art isn't the icing on the cake, and the cake is much too hard to be eaten."

—Jörg Immendorff, *Guardian Weekly*, August 14

with a large section on Labor Culture, then to send it out to contacts in the labor movement, and to receive no response. Similarly with issues on Race; no African-Americans would subscribe; on Women, no women would subscribe. I think it is a fact that we have many "interest groups" along gender and ethnic lines, but little interest in what anyone else is doing. That is, there are journals, newsletters, professional organizations in each of these fields, but no one wants to consider the Big Picture. We have no shared goals or strategies; it's every woman or man for themselves.

We have had phases like this in American history. When the Populist movement collapsed in the late 1890s, the Republicans appeared totally victorious; yet the Socialist movement soon developed. In the 1920s, the Socialists were imprisoned and exiled, yet the Thirties produced a tremendous surge of radicalism. However, what bothers me about our present situation is that we really haven't faced massive repressions now; the problem is systemic and much deeper: people are too bored to stir themselves. Too thoroughly pacified, too dependent and impaired. For all our knowledge of Hegemony, surely the world's greatest example is right before our eyes, and it ain't us.

All that said, let's go back and assess who we are. The typical reader/subscriber of this newsletter is a 40 to 50 year old teacher or other cultural professional. Most of you have