

MASS LINE IN CULTURE

no. 8

MASS LINE IN CULTURE will report on the progressive intellectuals' struggle against the bourgeois, obscurantist, anti-people and anti-scientific world outlook promoted in American universities.

MASS LINE IN CULTURE rejects as erroneous the viewpoint of putting politics in opposition to knowledge or substituting politics for knowledge. It also opposes the line of elevating knowledge above politics. These are the leftist and rightist lines on academic professions.

MASS LINE IN CULTURE holds that in every academic field there is bound to be a guiding ideology which plays the leading role and that there is no such thing as "pure" academic subjects divorced from politics. Imperialist scholar despots give prominence to idealist and reactionary theories in order to protect the interests of U. S. monopoly capital and to oppose movements for change.

MASS LINE IN CULTURE undertakes the struggle against this bourgeois ideology in the academic disciplines as an integral part of the American people's valiant struggle against U. S. imperialism and for socialism and urges intellectuals to build anti-imperialist positions in their place of work.

MASS LINE IN CULTURE encourages and reports on open discussions in the context of class struggle, struggle for production and scientific experiment. It is a publication of the Necessity for Change Institute of Ideological Studies, Dublin and Montreal, and is prepared by members of the Institute. Anyone wishing to receive additional copies should send a request to MASS LINE IN CULTURE, P. O. Box 6225, Providence, R. I. 02904.

MLA ANNUAL MEETING

The following article, from Mass Line in Culture #3, is being reprinted by members of the Literature & Ideology Study Group as one example of the type of activity which progressive intellectuals may undertake in the universities. Other issues of Mass Line in Culture have reported similar discussions on "Thought Control in American Universities," Anthropology, Modern Art, Student movement politics, Freudian psychology of the unconscious, Microbiology, Mathematics, and other topics. There are a great number of serious students of literature at the MLA Annual Meeting who are concerned with the consequences of ideas in culture and wish to actively study, discuss, and decide whose interests they serve. The interests of the American people are certainly best served when the thousands of intellectuals at this meeting match the seriousness of their concerns with active opposition to idealist and reactionary theories and bureaucratic practices. We will unite with all who support this analysis and who join us in insisting that all discussions must reflect the actual state of affairs among the intelligentsia today.

"The Fascist Outlook in T.S. Eliot's Wasteland"

(Report of the 4th weekly meeting of the Academic Activities Committee held in Wilson 302 at Brown University.)

"Fascist" is a taboo word in the literary establishment. According to academic despots and their apprentices, "we are all sensitive, pious, alert people; we could not be fascist. Eliot has the right to say whatever he wants; you have no right to characterize it politically." Itself fascist, this prattle goes on in spite of the fact that several of the major figures in 20th c. literature (including Yeats, Pound, and Eliot) were supporters of the political programs of European fascist parties.

As the fourth Academic Activities discussion developed, it turned out that Eliot's fascist political activities were not the point. Nor was the main point that parallels exist between Eliot's poem and Chapt. 10 of Mein

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Kampf ("The Crisis of German Culture"), the writings of the royalist reactionary Maurras, and the fascist meta-psychology of Jung.

The point was that this "most representative poem of the West," this "turning point of English literature in the 20th century," expresses a definite outlook which is itself fascist. In order to carry out political repression, a reactionary ruling class needs cultural propaganda which will justify it. In the perspective of history, The Wasteland is the ideological propaganda which Eliot contributes to reaction.

What is it that Eliot contributes? In the discussion, four things were identified;

1. Fascist culture criticism. This is unlike the criticism of Dickens, for instance, who condemned "the ravages of industrialism" in order to reform the bourgeoisie. Eliot begins with the premise that spiritual dryness and sexual impotence (image of spiritual death) characterize Western culture and the implication that nothing within the power of man or nature can redeem the West. We must wait upon supernatural or superman. Eliot's distortion (that there is nothing, bones, cracked earth, endless plains, empty, unreal, fragments shored against our ruins) is then propped up with an elaborate artificial mystique about waste and dryness. The distortion hides behind various anthropological and archetypal paraphernalia from Jessie Weston and Frazer. Eliot makes this fascist culture criticism from the position of an aesthete, a superior entitled to constant anti-people characterizations of bored typist, ineffectual lover, wives and working men in inane conversation as "a walking dead." He encourages a league with the reader against people from this superior angle. Both poet and reader can regard themselves--in the light of their self-irony--as immune from the disease of the West. All this is to prepare opinion to support a call for "spiritual revival."

2. Insularity. Eliot draws upon various literary apparatus to support a posture of detachment and isolation: each individual lives in an opaque private prison of "self." In doing so he indulges in racial slander by calling up images from the feudal East and celebrates the lost, lively era of monarchy. Much like Hesse--now also promoted among advocates of fascist modernism--Eliot presents a ragbag of scholarship to give these cliches some specious authority (e.g., the notion of the "spiritual" Orient as if holy cows and dervishes were the principle aspect of the East). The scholarly crumbs are also intended to support his presentation of a ghostlike, innane non-life, "a heap of broken images."

3. Obscurantism. This means taking up a problem in order to obscure it; proposing an analysis and solution on the basis of mystifications. Ours is not a country of dead people, hollow men, or Eliot's Mrs Porters ("O the moon shone bright on Mrs Porter/And on her daughter/They wash their feet in soda water"). Obscurantist characterization has long been a form of fascist barbarism and it

is the practice of scholar despots to call this barbarism (such as Yeats' Vision) an "imaginative leap," "creative," and "humane," even though it denies all that man has learned in the past three or four hundred years of struggle to produce and reproduce his means of life and to overthrow his oppressors.

4. From obscurantism develop the two fascist practices of giving vague spiritual slogans and suppressing everything actually going on. The Wasteland is a compound of both these practices. One confirmation of this point from a participant was the observation that "shantih, shantih, shantih" with which Eliot ends the poem (and translates as "Peace which passeth understanding") is the expression used by pickpockets in India when caught in the act. Others pointed out that Hitler and Billy Graham both called for "spiritual revival" and say that it is not to come from political struggle but from "race consciousness," "Aryan mythos," "inner ascent," "transcendence," and--most recently--from "Consciousness III" or from "Peace" as a holy crusade. Recently, someone pointed out, Dr. Spock has echoed the notorious reactionary Bruno Bettelheim in arguing that we should all avoid giving Agnew a chance to criticize us by exercising "self-control" and quiescence. It is this which Eliot is proposing. Other examples of this sort of suppression by self-injected reactionary culture were also given.

Someone raised the question whether Eliot's obscurantism was "conscious and intentional." Several students pointed out that Eliot undoubtedly developed his culture criticism and his obscurantism voluntarily and did it in public. Also, they said, his intentions are not the point; intentions are the subjective business of any Tom, Dick, or Harry; what we are concerned with is the objective social consequences.

Another participant raised the notion that the analysis of Eliot "assumed an objective morality" and was "sort of spiritual" itself because it strongly opposed oppression, obscurantism and mysticism. But others pointed out that to ask "How do you know you are oppressed?"--as if it depended on some spiritual attitude--was very silly.

The entire discussion was very encouraging because it neither substituted knowledge of Eliot's poem for politics nor substituted politics for knowledge of the poem and its context. The role of reactionary culture in supporting and doing propaganda for reactionary politics in the interest of monopoly capital was clearly shown. And, too, for most of the audience, the nonsense of "shantih, shantih, shantih," was irretrievably exposed.

(Those interested are invited to attend a one-day conference on "Ideology in Literature" to be held in Providence, R.I. in February. The subjects of talks and discussion will be Spenser, Milton, and Yeats. Details will appear in subsequent issues of Mass Line in Culture.)