

Major Essay on Negro Culture In Aug. Masses & Mainstream

By Harold Cruse

THE AUGUST ISSUE of *Masses & Mainstream* presents a major article by Doxey Wilkerson, **Negro Culture: Heritage and Weapon.**

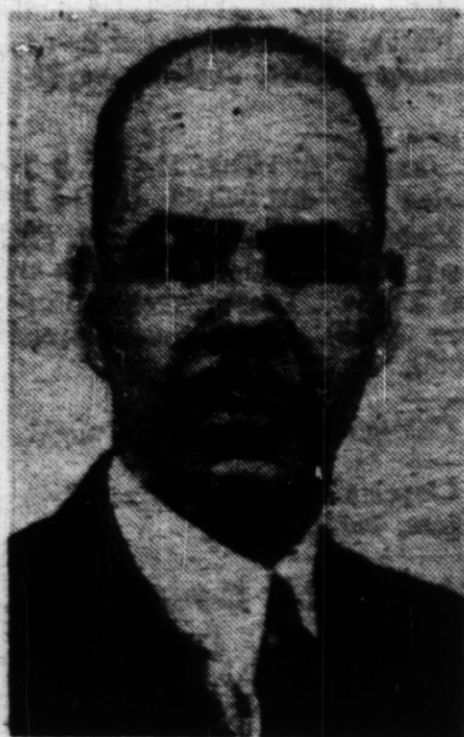
The content and scope of this article, while not intended to be definitive, nevertheless marks a new milestone toward fuller clarity on the Negro Question in its many aspects. It points the way to neglected area of struggle

MASSES & MAINSTREAM—Negro Culture: Heritage and Weapon, Doxey Wilkerson.

for the American Workingclass and its progressive leadership. For the Negro People, Negro artists and cultural workers, it will serve as a more clearly defined guide for action well rooted in Marxist orientation.

In this article Doxey Wilkerson makes it crystal clear that Negro Culture, like all peoples' cultures, bears no resemblance to the putrid attitudes, values and esthetic psychopathia inspired by the bourgeoisie and served to the human senses to conceal their reactionary philosophies of defeat, hate, war and oppression. Rather, Negro Culture is of a vintage born in the winepress of struggle against slavery and matured in the struggle for growth of a rising nation. Distinctly American, i.e. Negro American, in form and content, it is thus because, in spite of certain obscure African cultural survivals, Negro Culture could only be the outgrowth of material conditions obtaining in the development of America. "Thus it was inevitable that this people, with its special memories and sentiments and aspirations, should develop its own body of esthetic expression. This it has done in abundance — and the product is properly conceived as Negro culture," says the article. This body of expression is known to many Americans as the spirituals, work songs, the blues, and jazz. Of the wider scope of Negro Culture embracing painting, sculpture, poetry, fiction, drama, dance, less is known or recognized for what it actually is.

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DOXEY WILKERSON

view the total body of Negro cultural expression solely for esthetic contemplation, Doxey Wilkerson makes clear the living relationship of the Negro esthetic to the Negro Liberation Movement. The struggle for further development of Negro Culture must be part and parcel of the struggle for literacy for the Negro Artist and audience alike. The struggle for literacy is an overall part of the struggle for national liberation. Likewise is the struggle for social realism in content, the success of which rests on what is achieved in a higher level of literacy.

To an honest appraisal of the American cultural scene, it is evident that our cultural heritage is denied living development by the dead hand of bourgeois control and influence. It will be freed from this control only insofar as the strangulation and censorship of the cultural expression of the Negro People is fought against. Doxey Wilkerson's article will serve to arm Marxists and progressives with the understanding for this task. "Those white Americans," he writes, "who deny the concept of Negro Culture due to their ignorance or their failure to appreciate its rich abundance are but reflecting the characteristic

chauvinism which permeates our Jimcrow society."

From this it is clear that the struggle against white chauvinism on the economic and political level cannot gain lasting victories without an extension of that struggle into the realm of ideas—to the right of oppressed nations to self-determination through unfettered self-expression in art, music, literature, etc., etc. The lines dividing political, economic and cultural areas of struggle are, under imperialism, so fine that neglect of the cultural front is dangerous. It is a denial of the concept of a nation as "... a historically evolved, stable community of ... psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture."

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THE ARTICLE further states "Those Negroes who deny the existence of a Negro culture because they distort the struggle for equality into misguided struggle for 'identity' are but engaging in vacuous escapism." In recognition of the class aspects of the Negro Liberation Movement, Doxey Wilkerson's critical rejoinder is most necessary. The intellectual and middleclass strata of the Negro People where such escapist moods are prevalent cannot be overlooked. Rather, it is necessary to understand such tendencies as a reaction against national oppression.

There is, I believe, a debateable point in the article. It can be found in footnote 12 where Wilkerson raises the question as to whether certain works by white authors on Negro Liberation themes (e.g. Howard Fast's *Freedom Road*) might not properly be classed as Negro Culture. It is this reviewer's opinion that since white artists have a political responsibility to deal with Negro Liberation themes, such works cannot but add to the total body of Negro Cultural expression. The avoidance of such themes goes hand in hand with failure to struggle on the Negro Question on the cultural front. The validity of this criticism is open to discussion, and wide discussion depends on wide reading of this article which should be required reading for every Communist and progressive.