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The reconstruction of culture: Peuple et Culture and the popular education movement

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Abstract

One of the most significant popular cultural movements of the Liberation was the organisation Peuple et Culture. Born in the Christian-Socialist ethos of the École des Cadres at Uriage under the Vichy regime, and inspired by the cultural policy of the Front Populaire, it developed as a Resistance organisation, bringing culture to the bands of *résistants* in the Vercors. At the Liberation and in the early years of the Fourth Republic, it played a key role in defining cultural reconstruction, emphasising the need for infrastructure and trained personnel, and working towards a holistic approach to workers' education and culture from school years into all stages of adulthood. As such, in spite of political and theoretical inconsistencies and contradictions, it laid the ground for future cultural planning policies under the Fifth Republic.

Keywords

cultural policy, Front Populaire, Liberation, Peuple et Culture, reconstruction, resistance, Uriage, workers' education

Peuple et Culture has recently been described as 'the major cultural organisation of the Liberation' (Ritaine, 1983: 58).[1] It called itself a 'national movement of popular culture' (Peuple et Culture, *Cahiers de la Culture Populaire*, 1945), and its central ambition was to 'give culture back to the people and give the people back to culture' (*Un peuple, une culture*, 1972). The movement was begun by a small group of people in Grenoble after the Liberation and emerged from the Education Commission of the Comité de Libération de l'Isère (Saez, 1986). The name Peuple et Culture is said to have been taken from a Collège du Travail formed in 1935 (*Grenoble,*

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ville d'expériences, n.d.: 4, *36 en Corrèze*, 1976: 1). The principal members of Peuple et Culture had played an important part in the École des Cadres at Uriage and then in the Maquis of the Vercors. Before that, the founding president of Peuple et Culture, Joffre Dumazedier,[2] had formed the Collège du Travail at Noisy-le-Sec in 1936 (Saez, 1986: 32), and had been deeply involved in the Auberges de la Jeunesse movement at the time of the Popular Front and afterwards (Saez, 1986: 28). It was during his activities in the Resistance that Dumazedier conceived the idea of Peuple et Culture as an organisation to be formed after the Liberation. Throughout this period Dumazedier was closely involved with Bénigo Cacérès, a master carpenter from Toulouse, who had shared the same experience at Uriage and in the Maquis, and who was to play a crucial role in the movement, both as 'animateur' and as chronicler of its history.[3] Others joined the group at Grenoble at the time of the Liberation, for example Paul Lengrand, who was principally responsible for drawing up the movement's 1945 manifesto *Un peuple, une culture* (Saez, 1986: 55). Peuple et Culture immediately began to play a key role in initiating several projects in Grenoble: the Centre d'Éducation Ouvrière de Grenoble, the Centre Interfacultés, the Centre Sanitaire and the Maison de la Culture (see Cacérès, 1967: 158–9). At the time he created Peuple et Culture Dumazedier had also been appointed Inspecteur Principal de la Jeunesse et de l'éducation populaire in the Grenoble académie (Saez, 1986: 37). Towards the end of 1946 the association moved to Paris (see *Peuple et Culture 1945–1965*, 1965: 29), where the headquarters are still to be found.[4] The movement is still very much alive and has many regional associations and many international connections.[5]

The movement has never ceased to retrace its own historical beginnings. Cacérès, in particular, has always been ready to wax lyrical at the memory of the Golden Age of 1942–6, when the seeds of the movement were planed at Uriage and in the 'équipes volantes' of the Maquis, and when the movement actually came into being in Grenoble after the Liberation. Cacérès had been a carpenter in Toulouse, keen for self-improvement, and had gone along to lectures by the left-wing Abbé de Naurois, with whom he became acquainted (Saez, 1986: 1–2). The Abbé de Naurois invited Cacérès to give a talk on 'la condition ouvrière'. Later, when the Abbé de Naurois was at Uriage, he invited Cacérès there to give another talk. After other occasional visits, Dunoyer de Segonzac asked Cacérès to stay on at Uriage, which he did. Cacérès continued his connections with Uriage when the group moved on to La Thébaïde, a large isolated manor-house near the Vercors, from which Resistance activities were organised. In La Thébaïde the working-class autodidact Cacérès found a highly cultured and highly intellectual setting, and one which for him was a kind of cultural paradise. From this base, as a member of one of the 'équipes volantes', Cacérès would go out into the countryside to visit the camps of Resistance fighters (Cacérès, 1967: 39–41). Here was a model of the links between political struggle, fraternity and culture which deeply marked Cacérès and others of his generation, and it was a model which they were determined to pursue after the Liberation. It was Cacérès's job to take culture to the *résistants*. First, they would pillage the library at La Thébaïde for relevant and morale-raising passages, and then they would transport the appropriate books in their rucksacks to the camps, to read them by the camp-fire:

> Reading took on then its full meaning. Here, passages from Michelet, Hugo, Saint-Just, Apollinaire, François la Colère,[6] assumed their true significance. The great poets came amongst men in order to help them to live, in order to teach them to hope. (Cacérès, 1967: 40–1)

It is not difficult to imagine how powerful such an experienced must have been, and Cacérès tells us that it determined the whole direction of his life:

> By communicating this portion of Man to other men, I came to believe for ever that in certain circumstances culture could really be shared … There, in that clearing of the Vercors, was revealed to me the incarnation of words, the power of language. Reading meant the preparation for the long road to change. We had to continue that enrichment. (Cacérès, 1967: 41)

This heroic spirit and cultural idealism were not surprisingly also to the fore in Grenoble at the time of the Liberation, when again cultural idealism was to thrive on scarce resources and difficult and physical and material conditions:

> You had to have lived through that genuine cultural epic in order to imagine the enthusiasm which at that time infused our country. During the hard winter of 1944, when the snow was blocking the roads, when food was never guaranteed, in buildings with improvised equipment, these 'animateurs' managed to create an extraordinary centre of cultural activity. They established institutions which the whole of France and, rapidly, foreign countries, came, not to admire, but to see in action, in order to attempt to reproduce them elsewhere. And yet everything was still disorganised. The simple fact of going for the continuation of this activity constituted an expedition. Means of transport, worn out by four years of Occupation, had given up the ghost. You had to fight for a place for long journeys in frozen coaches. You crossed the Loire on a wooden bridge, on foot, carrying your suitcase.
>
> Finding premises in Grenoble was a problem. There were still problems of food, of lodging and of money.
>
> The workers went back to the 'Bourse du Travail'. A 'Centre d'éducation ouvrière' was created. Fraternally untied, the members of the CGT and the CFTC attended evening courses and training sessions. The workers were so numerous that we had to repeat courses. A thirst for culture had taken hold of these men who wanted to actively participate in the future of their country in every sector. (Cacérès, 1964: 157–8)

In both the Resistance and the Liberation experiences Cacérès describes what he regarded as the perfect coming together ('la rencontre') of intellectuals and the people (Cacérès, 1967: 136–7). Cacérès himself had already achieved his own personal reconstruction during these years and he wanted his fellow French workers to share this experience. This notion of cultural sharing ('le partage culturel') was crucial for Cacérès and for the Peuple et Culture movement. It was assumed that the workers had a 'thirst for culture' (Peuple et Culture, 1, June 1946: 27–8), that they had cultural needs and aspirations which could be satisfied to a significant degree by being given 'access' to culture. The Resistance movement offered a privileged model of how intellectuals and workers could come together in a shared experience of culture, in a 'culture commune' (*Un peuple, une culture*, 1945: 10). This 'culture commune', or 'culture populaire' as it was also called, was what had to be fought for after the war and extended to the whole nation. This was the cultural struggle which now lay ahead and which was described in the heroic, virile vocabulary of the Resistance mixed with the traditional rhetoric of the working-class movement. It was a 'cultural struggle' (Peuple et Culture, October 1947: 3), but it was also a 'cultural conquest by the people' (1947: 3), and the 'cultural emancipation of the people' (Peuple et Culture, 1, June 1946: 9–10).

Peuple et Culture's aim was to develop certain specific pedagogical methods in the service of specific ideals, in order to bring about this cultural emancipation. It saw itself as a movement of 'popular education' or 'popular culture' which signified a vague mixture of adult education and working-class education. Peuple et Culture wanted not only to educate the working class which had lost out in the educational and cultural stakes, but also to modernise and perfect the educators, that is, it wanted to create a class of skilled, professional educators and 'animateurs', who in turn could carry on the work of 'permanent' education. Cacérès has, in fact, called Peuple et Culture 'the first French movement for the training of "animateurs"' (Cacérès, 1964: 157). The words

'populaire' and 'peuple' are notoriously ambiguous and one can already see how, like so many other organisations and individuals at the time of the Liberation, 'Peuple et Culture' was caught between at least two definitions of the 'people'. On the one hand, the 'peuple' was the exploited working class who lived in a state of cultural deprivation ('dénuement culturel') (Peuple et Culture, 1, June 1946: 16) and on whose behalf radical steps needed to be taken in order to change this. On the other hand, the 'peuple' was the whole nation, on whose behalf a unified and common culture needed to be forged at this great moment of national freedom and solidarity, in order to ensure the future health and efficiency of the nation. It is without doubt this latter definition – the 'peuple' as unified nation – which dominated Peuple et Culture discourse in the early postwar years. There was, of course, at this stage, an enormous desire on the part of all groups to achieve unity and consensus, and in this atmosphere Peuple et Culture, like others, was led to think not only that future unity and a common culture were the major priorities, but also that this unity actually already existed, that in fact the 'peuple' was already a unified nation. Thus we have Cacérès claiming: 'The Liberation was … the historical place and moment of the reintegration of the proletariat into the nation' (Cacérès, 1964: 147). But although Peuple et Culture largely adhered to this 'unanimist' line, a close reading of its literature shows that there were unresolved conflicts and ambiguities. This is hardly surprising when we know that the movement was made of men with significant differences in their political and philosophical views, which were likely to surface even in this period of willing compromise. In the early postwar period, for instance, both Dumazedier and Cacérès joined the Communist Party for a year, a move which deeply disturbed other members and put the movement under severe strain. This more radical commitment was intermittently apparent. For example, in the first issue of the movement's periodical in June 1946, we are told that the class struggle is still an incontrovertible reality (Peuple et Culture, 1, June 1946: 99), and in the second issue in May 1947 we find an attack on 'bourgeois culture' (Peuple et Culture, 2, May 1947: 11–12). In the 1945 Manifesto we are told that a 'fraternal and collective civilisation' is about to replace 'bourgeois individualism' (*Un peuple, une culture*, 1945: 14). And, despite the close links with Uriage, Personalism and progressive Christian groups, Dumazedier in 1948 criticises Christian youth organisations quite violently and makes a traditionally passionate and traditionally divisive plea in support of 'l'école laïque' (Peuple et Culture, October 1947: 3–4).

One of the most interesting and revealing sources for Peuple et Culture at this period is a dramatic spectacle entitled *La Vraie Libération*, produced in Annecy in the summer of 1945 by a Peuple et Culture theatre group, the text of which was published by Peuple et Culture in Grenoble in 1945. The spectacle was called a 'celebration' and is a most peculiar production, but no doubt is very characteristic of the period, from both an aesthetic and an ideological point of view. It is a kind of Greek dramatic piece, full of portentous rhetoric and clearly aspiring to the sublime and prophetic modes. It was performed by a team of youths and girls from the 'Jeunesses communistes de la CGT, des Auberges de la Jeunesse et de la JOC' (Bing, 1945: 37). It re-enacts, with the help of songs, dances and gestures, the process of defeat, occupation and resistance. The 'Voix des ondes' tempts the chorus ('men and women of France') into collaboration. The chorus, after internal dissension, refuses the call to collaboration and chooses to resist. The enemy is conquered and expelled, and an exultant cry goes up from the leader of the chorus: 'Without delay we must rebuild the house. To work, my children, for reconstruction' (Bing, 1945: 31). But then a note of warning is struck. The invader may have been expelled, but not the old enemy – the 'patron'. The men and women of France are ready to rebuild the house of France but not in the form of the 'old prison'. If the workers took to the Maquis, it was in order to liberate the country, in order to liberate work (1945: 32). What must now be created is 'la République du Travail'.[7] Such a consciousness of class antagonism and of the need for radical change continued to surface, as I have already indicated, in the next few years, but was by and large successfully repressed at this moment of 'rassemblement populaire'. There is

no doubt that what dominates the postwar discourse of Peuple et Culture is an overwhelming desire for cultural unity, either based on the fusion of classes, or the happy coexistence of classes.

If the words 'peuple' and 'populaire' are slippery notions, then the word 'culture' is no less so. In much French usage at this time, and certainly in the specific context with which I am dealing, the word 'culture' often means exactly the same as 'education'. But the term certainly can carry far wider implications, and it is by no means by chance that the movement chose to call itself 'Peuple et Culture' and not, for example, simply 'Peuple et Éducation'. It was typical of the period that the founders of Peuple et Culture had in mind not only a narrowly pedagogical revolution, but a whole moral, social and cultural one. When in the 1945 Manifesto the central question is asked: 'Can the spirit of the Resistance finally bring about a genuine popular culture?' (*Un peuple, une culture*, 1945: 9), 'culture populaire' does not only, nor even principally, mean education, but points to the ideal of a whole shared life of a nation. Like their fellow idealists at Uriage, the founders of Peuple et Culture were aiming at the creation of a new 'style of life', a 'new man', a new 'revolutionary Humanism' – in other words, they were aiming at nothing less than a reconstruction of culture.

Cacérès has said that the major work at La Thébaïde, apart from finding texts to read in the Maquis, was the preparation of the 'summa' *Vers le style du XXe siècle*, a work directed by Gilbert Gadoffre and published in 1945 (Gadoffre, 1945). The connections between this text and the documents of the Peuple et Culture movement are too extensive to be investigated and set out here. It is enough, in the present context, to say that Dumazedier, Cacérès and others applied to the specific field of 'culture populaire' more or less all of the major elements of the ideology of Uriage. Peuple et Culture also set out to put into practice specific cultural and educational projects that had been sketched out in *Vers le style du XXe* siècle ('Projet de Centre d'Éducation ouvrière', Projet de Maison de la Culture') (Gadoffre, 1945: 135ff, 194ff). Not least, of course, Uriage stressed the need to create a professional elite of educators and cultural 'animateurs', a militant avant-garde, with a profound sense of mission to undertake the cultural reconstruction of postwar France (Gadoffre, 1945: 203), based on the new civic faith of 'revolutionary humanism' (1945: 156–7). The founders and cultural militants of Peuple et Culture certainly saw themselves as this committed avant-garde, and set out consciously to put into practice the teachings of *Vers le style du XXe siècle*.

Together with the high moral intentions there was a very practical and concrete dimension to Peuple et Culture's desire for cultural reconstruction, and, if anything, this dimension came to outweigh other considerations. Following on from the Popular Front's notions of cultural and leisure needs, Peuple et Culture worked for the improvement of the cultural infrastructure of the country – that is to say, it believed in the prime need to provide equipment, installations and institutions, for in this it saw the surest way to put into practice a genuinely democratic cultural policy, one which would permit all people to have *access* to culture. So we read in the Manifesto: 'We shall fight unceasingly for the general institution in our own country of organisations such as the Russian "Palais des Pionniers", the American "Clubs de Jeunesse" and the Swedish "Maisons du Peuple"' (*Un peuple, une culture*, 1945: 25). The notion of achieving cultural democracy by improving the cultural infrastructure of the country was in many people's minds at the end of the war, and in the specific context of France it can be seen, as already mentioned, as an extension of the work of the Popular Front in this field.[8] This direct link with the period of the Popular Front is evident in the fact that it was Jean Guéhenno who, in 1945, was put in charge of the section of the Ministry of Education devoted to youth movements, popular education and sport. Guéhenno's vision of postwar cultural reconstruction was made clear in a speech he gave at the Palais de Chaillot in March 1945:

> I can see in each village a schoolhouse which has been transformed and expanded, where there would be several large rooms, for games, for work and for reading as well. You can call it what you like: a village club, a 'maison de culture', a 'foyer de la nation'. It will be a 'foyer', the 'foyer' of the modern spirit, I mean a beacon, where people will go until they are sixteen in order to begin to learn to think, certainly, but where people will continue to go afterwards, for their whole lives, because they will be sure of finding there joy and knowledge, every means to think even better and live better. The establishment will be run by a specially trained teacher, specifically appointed to that post, the post of teacher of men, of teacher of adults, equally capable of helping them and informing them in their professional life as in changing the quality of their leisure activities … And this country will begin to sing again, as it used to sing, as gaily, as solemnly, according to its rhythm, according to its style, according to its faith. And culture and the people will finally be reconciled. (Crubellier, 1974: 325–6)

In Guéhenno's speech there is a marked similarity with the ideas of Peuple et Culture. Guéhenno stressed the need to provide culture and leisure institutions for the community, where above all the young, but people of all ages, could be educated to attain a higher quality of life (Guéhenno talks of changing 'the quality of people's pleasures'), and where there could occur a genuine coming together, a 'reconciliation' of 'peuple' and 'culture'. As was the case at the time of the Front Populaire, Peuple et Culture tended to lump together culture, education and leisure, and much of the time these terms are interchangeable. Peuple et Culture certainly held very firmly to the prewar and Vichy belief in sport as a privileged means of attaining the civic ideal, and was highly suspicious of sport being commercialised or being regarded as an 'escapist' activity, as part of a 'culture d'évasion' (Peuple et Culture, October 1947: 4). A key element of Peuple et Culture's policy was its ambition to set up 'healthy' leisure and cultural clubs, to combat the pernicious effects of city life and especially of café life:

> Popular leisure clubs in order to attract into a healthy and educative environment the great number of people for whom the main 'foyer' is the café: factory clubs, district clubs, new army clubs, film clubs, youth clubs or 'maisons du peuple'. It doesn't matter what they are called: that varies with the age, the milieu and the technical particularity which defines them. Here, education takes place especially in a healthy environment, in collective celebrations (civic or artistic), film shows, exhibitions of posters, exhibitions in general, etc. … For the mass of young people we must cover the entire country with a dense network of youth-hostels and organise popular tourism on a grand scale. (*Un peuple, une culture*, 1945: 24)

Above all, Peuple et Culture seems to have wanted to find ways of protecting the nation against what it considered to be the evils of mass culture. At one point mass culture is even called the new 'occupying force', in the face of which the militants of popular education must organise a stubborn resistance (Peuple et Culture, October 1947: 3). Against what it saw as the commercialised anarchy of mass culture, Peuple et Culture offered the alternative of 'popular culture' which would be guided and controlled by high-minded civic educators and 'animateurs'. What is, however, also evident is that Peuple et Culture wanted the state to be eventually responsible for this 'popular culture', as one can see from this statement made in 1945: 'Militants, do not let us forget that the final goal of our activity remains the creation of a public service in charge of workers' leisure and culture' (Peuple et Culture, 1, June 1946: 25). At this early postwar stage, the state did not in fact include 'cultural development' in its planning process, something that was only to happen in years to come. But it seems clear that Peuple et Culture at the time of the Liberation laid much of the groundwork for later debates on cultural development, and it continued to make significant contributions throughout the 1950s and 1960s to the increasingly important area of 'cultural planning'.[9] It also provided many of the key figures who became the professional 'animateurs' and managers of cultural institutions. Gabriel Monnet, who ended up by being in charge of the Maison de la

Culture at Bourges, is perhaps one of the most famous examples (see Cacérès, 1967: 74). Peuple et Culture also went on to contribute significantly to the work of international cultural organisations, most noticeably UNESCO (see Saez, 1986).

From the very beginning Peuple et Culture's high-minded moral and cultural aims went together with a desire for 'la culture populaire' to play its role in the postwar economic effort and in the modernisation of France in all its sectors. Peuple et Culture believed it could contribute to the process of training and transforming individuals and of 'adapting' them to the modern society which lay ahead. It believed its contribution was perfectly geared to the new scientific and industrial society of the future. This explains its absolute obsession with, and faith in, such notions and practices as 'functional pedagogy' and 'mental training' (see *Un peuple, une culture*, 1945: 20–1; Peuple et Culture, 1, June 1946: 55ff). It prided itself on its scientific 'technique' and insisted that its educators and 'animateurs' were 'technicians'.

Contrary to what one might at first think, given much of its high cultural and high moral stance, Peuple et Culture was also only too ready to apply economic models to the area of culture and education. This can be seen most strikingly in a rather startling assertion in the Manifesto: 'We want to be educators, to PRODUCE EDUCATION, as others produce bread, steel or electricity (*Un peuple, une culture*, 1945: 2). And a later passage in the Manifesto states that the educational project to produce a 'true common culture' (a necessity for a healthy economy) should be pursued with the same efficiency that one expects from the military and industrial sectors (1945: 27). Faced with such statements, it becomes difficult not to conclude that, in the end, Peuple et Culture's grand discourse on culture and education comes down to being an apology for economic modernisation and an exhortation to the state to deploy culture and education in this process of modernisation.

This seems a harsh conclusion to draw on the generous and idealistic project of 'éducation populaire', but it is a rather inescapable one. In fact, it has become rather difficult not to have a similarly disabused view of other major aspects of the popular education movement at this time. I am sure that Peuple et Culture did good work on the ground in its numerous clubs, but one has to say that its cultural, intellectual and political premises were always too naive and muddled. Culturally, it focussed too much on the figure of the working-class autodidact, eager for knowledge and culture; it was too respectful of high culture and too suspicious of mass culture. It was too willing to limit future thinking about culture to questions of material conditions and facilities, and no doubt more seriously, it was too ready to allow culture and education to serve economic ends. Intellectually, it was a victim of the hybrid ideology of Uriage, with its inextricable mix of Socialist and Christian rhetoric, which was in part responsible for the impossibly vague and ambiguous terminology with which Peuple et Culture dealt with cultural matters. Politically, it was caught between, on the one hand, attachment to archaic notions of class and work, and, on the other hand, enthusiasm for the classless, technological society of the future. But given all these criticisms, it still appears to me to be one of the most illuminating and characteristic projects to have come out of the period of postwar reconstruction. What is more, many of its illusions, naiveties and confusions were to persist long after this period, and one could even say that they still dominate the cultural field in education and in politics.

Notes

1. Another cultural organisation which deserves close study is Travail et Culture, which in the early postwar years was intimately linked with Peuple et Culture, and with which it shared the periodical *Doc*.
2. The well-known sociologist, whose most famous study remains, perhaps, *Vers une civilisation du loisir*? (Dumazedier, 1962).
3. See, for instance, Cacérès (1964 and 1982).
4. At 108–10, rue Saint-Maur, Paris 11ème.

5. See the bulletin *Peuple et Culture*, 1 (March 1983) 'Supplément à *Culture*, no. 4'. *Culture* is now the title of the movement's periodical. For an interesting view of the contemporary French adult education scene from an English point of view, see Toynbee (1985).
6. François la Colère was Aragon's name during the Resistance.
7. The call for 'la République du Travail' has itself a distinctly archaic feel, and this sense is confirmed by the fact that the call also goes up for 'la République Universelle', and that the piece ends with the singing of 'La Ronde des Saint-Simoniens'. This impression of archaism is also evident in Cacérès's *L'Espoir au cœur* (1967), in which he describes the Resistants singing the 'Chant des canuts' and Pierre Dupont's 'Chant des ouvriers' round the camp-fire. It is important to remember that Cacérès was a 'compagnon charpentier', an active member of a 'compagnonnage', and a writer of an historical novel on 'le compagnonnage'.
8. Peuple et Culture always saw itself as building upon the example of the cultural policy of the Popular Front (see Cacérès, 1981).
9. See, for example, the 1964 'Colloque de Bourges', organised by Peuple et Culture and the Association pour l'expansion de la recherché scientifique with the help of the Bureau d'études du Ministère des Affaires Culturelles. The proceedings were published in *L'Expansion de la recherche scientifique*, 22 (April–May 1965).

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