

WSWS arts editor David Walsh speaks at San Diego State University on art and identity politics

By our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site Arts Editor David Walsh spoke at San Diego State University on April 18, giving a meeting entitled, “Should art be judged on the basis of race and gender?” Walsh spoke to an audience of some 70 students and workers and presented a Marxist analysis of recent controversies in arts and culture. The lecture was followed by a lively question-and-answer period.

The WSWS will post a version of the talk in the next few days.

The presentation centered on the role of identity politics and the social layers obsessed with race and gender in contemporary American life, and the cultural implications of those issues. The speaker referred to the new constituency for imperialist war, often in the name of “human rights” or “women’s rights.” He discussed several recent episodes—the attack on *Free State of Jones* and the protests against Dana Schutz’ painting of Emmett Till, *Open Casket*—that indicated the degree to which certain upper middle class layers are saturated with a pernicious racist outlook. The opponents of Schutz’s work demanded that it be removed from the Whitney Museum in New York and destroyed.

Walsh argued that there was a material basis for the pursuit of racial and gender politics. He took note of various statistics revealing the sharp polarization within the African American population, and among women. “These newly affluent elements want more,” he said.

The WSWS arts editor then posed several questions, “Is it possible ... for one gender or ethnicity or nationality to successfully create artistic works about another? Is such a thing even permissible? ... And what are the implications if these efforts are not possible or permissible?”

After rejecting the notion that there were entirely distinct black and white cultures in America, Walsh proceeded to discuss “the history of ethnic or racial particularism, the notion that there are absolute differences between peoples, and that they are incomprehensible to one another.” He briefly noted the positions of various figures of the Enlightenment on the equality of peoples and the “unity of human nature.” By contrast, he pointed to counter-Enlightenment thinkers who emphasized irrationalism, ethnicity, national prejudice and tradition. In this context, he concluded this portion of the talk with a reference to the “micro-politics” and “difference” advanced by postmodernism.

Walsh then connected the influence of identity politics and postmodernism to the relative barrenness of artistic production over the past 40 years. It is not accidental, he noted, there has not been a single artwork one can point to that sums up in images the period in which we live.

During the question-and-answer segment of the meeting, one faculty member argued that Walsh’s reference to the Nazi-like character of the protests against Dana Schutz’s painting of Emmett Till was illegitimate.

Walsh replied that from an ideological point of view, racialism or ethnic chauvinism in any form was reactionary and had a deadly logic, and the socialist movement had always opposed it. He also raised the question of Zionism and how the Israeli ruling elite leveraged itself on past crimes to justify its oppression of the Palestinians.

One student asked Walsh if it were possible to understand “black antagonism” within capitalism and

implied that the unique character of the black experience had to be recognized as the basis of any present-day discussion. The speaker replied that slavery arose out of economic processes, not the racist pathology of white people. Racism did not arise from psychology or culture, but from the need to justify and defend certain economic relations. For American capitalism, he explained, racism became a key element in dividing the working class.

He asked the student, “How can you confront racism, how do you confront these issues? In our view, you cannot confront them on a single-issue basis, but by getting to the root of the problem, capitalism, by unifying the working class against the system that is the source of all these poisons.”

Another audience member asked Walsh to elaborate on the anti-war movement of the last decade and how it had become “pro-war” and also the relationship between this phenomenon and the WSWWS analysis of the pseudo-left. Walsh said there had been a big class shift in layers of the erstwhile protest movement. “The generation of 1968, what happened to that generation? Much of it has become wealthy, it turned to the right, becoming obsessed with itself.” Walsh noted that the leadership of the mass protests in 2003 began to fold up the anti-war movement when the Democrats were elected in the 2006 mid-term elections and refused to act against George W. Bush and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The process completed itself under Barack Obama.

One audience member asked how the media kept people divided. Walsh began by saying the media uses identity politics, individualism and a thousand different means to distract and divert the population. “They encourage selfishness and backwardness,” he said, “along with the worship of Wall Street, the worship of the military and religious backwardness.” The population of the US has been bombarded in recent decades with every variety of ideological filthiness, Walsh suggested.

He asserted, “People are not at each other’s throats, Americans are more tolerant than ever and there is a deeply democratic sense among young people. This is not the central issue for most young people, but the media and the *New York Times* would have us believe that everyone is obsessed with race and gender.”

Another questioner asked about the Obama

administration, and his differences with Trump. Walsh responded, “Obama was always a fraud, he is a representative of the ruling class. Obama and Trump speak for different sections, or wings, of the ruling class, they have different lifestyles, different approaches, but the basic policies are the same. In any case, the Democrats and Republicans have a division of labor.” He observed that the disappointment and disillusionment of the Obama years had led to Trump.

Echoing the question about the uniqueness of the black experience, one young audience member suggested that there was also a “single female experience” as well. Walsh suggested that while women had, of course, common characteristics, as did men, in any discussion of politics and society, the social factors were decisive. The questioner, he argued, might have physiological characteristics in common with a Margaret Thatcher or a Condoleezza Rice, but if one of the latter were ordering police to beat her up at the barricades, the social differences would predominate.

Several audience members asked if Walsh had hope for the future and what the way forward was. He mentioned that he had great confidence in the future and in the younger generation in particular, saying, “Masses of people are in debt, working bad jobs, over-educated and under-unemployed people, this is a recipe for revolution.”

He concluded by saying, “Now our argument is that they need to have a much clearer sense of how society has reached this point and a far greater understanding of history and culture. We put ourselves forward, we are building an international socialist party, but you have to decide if we are right or wrong.”

Many stayed after the lecture to thank Walsh for his comments and several bought copies of his book *The Sky between the Leaves*, as well as other literature. There was much discussion after the formal end of the meeting.

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