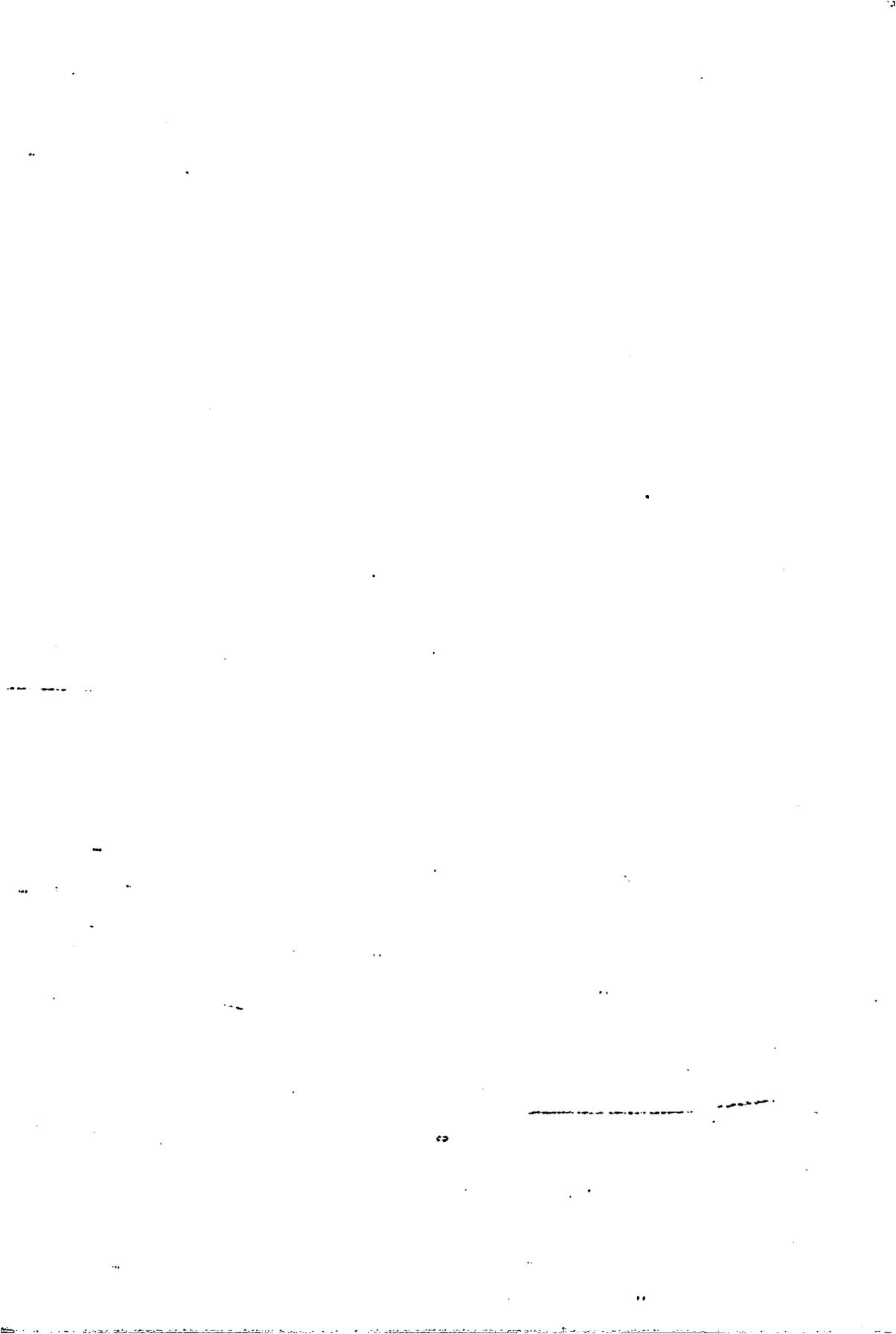


BOB AVAKIAN

Communism

and

**Jeffersonian
Democracy**



**COMMUNISM
AND
JEFFERSONIAN
DEMOCRACY**

Bob Avakian

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The first part of the report deals with the general situation of the country and the progress of the war. It is a very interesting and comprehensive survey of the state of affairs in the United States and its relations with the world.

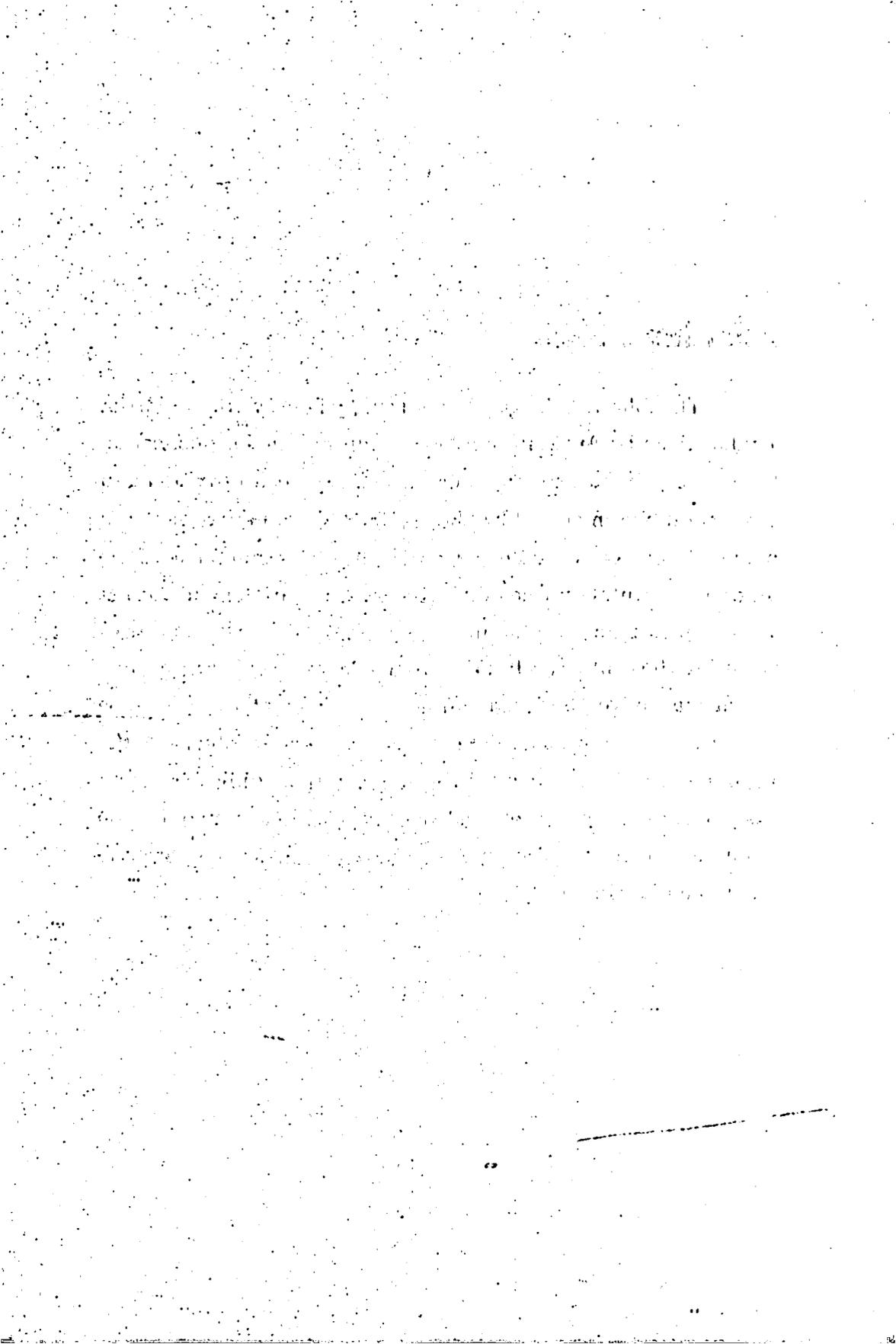
The second part of the report deals with the economic situation of the country. It discusses the various industries and the effect of the war on the economy. It is a very detailed and accurate account of the economic conditions of the country.

The third part of the report deals with the social situation of the country. It discusses the various social classes and the effect of the war on society. It is a very thorough and well-researched study of the social conditions of the country.

The fourth part of the report deals with the political situation of the country. It discusses the various political parties and the effect of the war on the government. It is a very clear and concise summary of the political conditions of the country.

Publisher's Note

The following is based on a talk by Bob Avakian—part of 7 talks given by Avakian in 2006. In editing this for publication here, as a printed text, some passages have been rewritten and some additional material has been added, but an effort has been made to preserve, as much as possible, the style and flavor of the original presentation (including the responses of the audience at various points), as well as its content and substance (and, with regard to the content, references to particular people and events, which may have been more directly relevant at the time this talk was given, have been retained where they are integral to the meaning and to the “flow” of the presentation, while in certain cases footnotes have been added by the author to amplify the point being made with the specific reference, and/or to relate it to what is happening now).



COMMUNISM AND JEFFERSONIAN DEMOCRACY

American Democracy: "They Kill People for Saying What You're Saying"

To begin—and to immediately touch on the basic reality of how this country is ruled and what its democracy actually amounts to—I want to recount a story I have told several times, because, in a simple and straightforward way, it concentrates so much of importance. Back in 1979, I went on a speaking tour in many of the major cities in the U.S., and in connection with that I made a number of media appearances. At one point I did a taped TV program, on which I was interviewed by several Black journalists in Cleveland. Right after the taping of this program, during which I had laid out clearly my revolutionary viewpoint, the woman who was moderating the program turned to me and said, very matter-of-factly: "My, you're awfully brave." Well, this sort of took me aback, so I asked her: "Why do you say that?" And she replied, in the same matter-of-fact tone: "You know, they kill people for saying what you're saying."

As I have pointed out a number of times in telling this story, what is very significant about this exchange, and her comments in particular, is that she didn't even say: "You know, they kill people for trying to *do* what you're talking about." She said simply: they kill

people *for saying what you're saying*. In this, she was cutting right to the quick, and in fact getting right to the essence of "American democracy."

And this was not just an odd comment from this particular Black journalist. It is not at all uncommon to hear comments of this kind from Black people and others who have had experience with the brutality and murder commonly carried out by the police, especially in the inner cities across America—or people who, in any case, have some sense of the actual history of this country and in particular the way it has dealt with those who are regarded, by the powers-that-be, as a significant threat, of one kind or another, to their rule. Among many such people there is, if not a profound scientific understanding, nevertheless a basic sense of the real nature of how things are run in this country—of the real relationship between the people who actually rule this society (however people think of that) and the people over whom they rule in running the society (however people understand that).

This is the reason I feel it is important to recount this story frequently—not only because that journalist's comment hit me very sharply at the time and struck me as very incisive, but because it does capture in a very concentrated way some essential things which far too many people, including many formally educated people, are actually ignorant of—or choose to ignore.

Another anecdote from "everyday life" also brings out this same basic point rather sharply, and unexpectedly. Recently, there was a story on *ESPN/The Magazine* online, by Scoop Jackson, a Black writer whose material has also appeared in publications such as *Slam* magazine. This article for *ESPN/The Magazine* was about Etan Thomas, a professional basketball player on the Washington Wizards (they can't be called the Washington *Bullets* anymore—can't have bullets in Washington other than those directed by the government). [Laughter] Etan Thomas is what they call a "role player" for the Wizards—he comes off the bench, scores a few points a game—he has talent but he's not a prominent player. And he is someone who, unfortunately, is kind of a rarity these days in professional sports in the U.S.: a progressive guy who is outspoken with his views. He has spoken at some of the anti-war rallies; he's written poetry condemning the Bush administration and politicians in general and speaking to the glaring contradiction between the way that they talk about

things in society and the way things actually are. He has spoken about wanting to drag these politicians down to the inner cities and force them to see what really goes on there, what people there are put through. So, this article by Scoop Jackson is mainly about Etan Thomas's politics, but in the middle of this article Jackson comments that if Thomas averaged 30 points a game, he might be dead.

Now, to be clear, Jackson doesn't mean that it's dangerous to score 30 points a game, in the sense that the effort, the exertion involved in this, might kill him. No, the clear implication is that if Etan Thomas were a prominent player on the level of a Michael Jordan, capturing that kind of media attention and the imagination of masses of people—and if, from that position, he were saying the things he's saying—he would probably be assassinated by the powers-that-be. Thomas is not calling for revolution, but he is indicting certain outrages of the system—and if he were doing that as a really prominent player, they might very well kill him, because it's too dangerous to have someone with that level of prominence saying even the kinds of things that Thomas is saying.

These "slices of life" do capture something very essential, and provide a kind of backdrop for a fuller discussion of the much-vaunted "American freedom and democracy," of the system that rules and shapes this society, and of the need for a radically different society and world.

"Jeffersonian Democracy": Ideals, Illusions, and Reality

As the title suggests, much of this discussion will unfold in relation to the ideas of Thomas Jefferson and the ideal of "Jeffersonian democracy," and the contrast between that and the viewpoint and program of communism—which represents, in reality, a far more liberating vision of human freedom.

Jefferson, and his political philosophy, stand in a real sense as an emblem of what is in fact *bourgeois* democracy—and in reality *bourgeois dictatorship*—in the history of the United States of America. And, as Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore point out, while

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“America’s historical memory” of Jefferson “has been rooted in distinct features of his protean career,” for many people Jefferson “remains the spokesman of a radical and popular democracy never achieved in America.”¹ In other words, many people—and many progressive people, in particular—who acknowledge that historically there have been, and today there still remain, what they regard as serious “flaws” in the way democracy is actually practiced in the U.S., nevertheless cling to the notion that somehow if this system could actually be made to live up to its ideals, then it would indeed be the best of all possible systems, not only in conception but in reality. And many of these people cling to Jefferson as the personification of, as Kramnick and Moore put it, “a radical and popular democracy” which has “never [been] achieved in America,” but which they long to see fulfilled.

To put this in other—more blunt, and scientific—terms, Jefferson stands as a personification and a concentration of many of the illusions of people in the middle strata in particular, and more specifically many in the intelligentsia, who have not ruptured with, and in fact stubbornly cleave to, a bourgeois-democratic view of the world. And not only is this the case broadly in society, but it has even been true, believe it or not, in the history of the communist movement in this country. We have the phenomenon—which is both astounding and disgraceful, if you’re coming at things from a genuinely communist perspective—of the old Communist Party, USA upholding Jefferson as a model. Even at the height of 1960s radicalism, if you went around the country looking for the CP, where could you find them? In their Jefferson Bookstores! This is a glaring example of how people who claim to be opposed to capitalism and the imperialism of the U.S.—and even some who claim to be communists—have wrapped themselves in the mantle of bourgeois democracy, particularly as that is personified by Thomas Jefferson. Back in the day, it used to be quite a lot of fun to get into a discussion with CP people about why they had Jefferson Bookstores. Besides the obvious fact that Jefferson was a slaveholder, there was the more general fact that Jefferson is a representative of the system that the CP claimed, at least, to be working to get rid of. And that’s just the point: You cannot get rid of this system if you proceed on the basis of upholding and extolling one of the main representatives of that very system, someone who is

1. Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, *The Godless Constitution: A Moral Defense of the Secular State*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York/London, 2005, pp. 106–07.

indeed emblematic of what that system is all about. And, in reality, you cannot get rid of the egregious outrages that many do recognize are committed by the government of the United States, unless you get rid of the whole system of which these egregious outrages are a concentrated expression and of which this government—and in particular its executive power and armed forces—are an instrument and enforcer. You cannot change all this while at the same time clinging to the ideas and ideals that characterize this system and dominate this society—ideas and ideals of which Thomas Jefferson is, in fact, a fitting representative.

Jefferson's ideal of a good and just society— and the reality of slavery

Let's get into this further by examining Jefferson's notion of an agrarian model as the concentration of the good, just and virtuous society.² This vision of Jefferson's involved a number of rather sharp ironies, which it is worth exploring.

The first irony: Jefferson extolled the yeoman, that is, the small independent landowning farmer, as the emblem—and the existence of many such farmers as the basis—for the best form of

2. In this connection, there are several works that are of particular relevance: Garry Wills, *Negro President: Jefferson and the Slave Power*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003; Roger G. Kennedy, *Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase*, Oxford University Press, 2003; and David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, Oxford University Press, 2006 (and especially chapter 14, "The Politics of Slavery in the United States"). Here, I have to say that Davis, like far too many others these days, repeats in the course of this book an all too familiar and seemingly *de rigueur* anti-communism—an anti-communism that is not factually grounded, but is frankly rather more fatuous, swallowing down and regurgitating much of the crude distortions and slanders of the whole communist project and the experience of socialist countries, even speaking of this as if it were even worse, in many ways, than classical slavery. Unfortunately, this comes in the midst of, and mars, what are otherwise very valuable insights and analysis in this book by Davis—insights and analysis which nevertheless remain important to learn from. Among other things, this illustrates the great importance of the Setting the Record Straight project (and its website thisiscommunism.org) and the need for struggle with people like Davis, as well as more generally, over what is the actual reality of the historical experience of the communist movement and socialist society—and, methodologically, the need to consistently apply an approach of thinking critically, including specifically when it comes to attacks and slanders against communism, rather than uncritically accepting all this.

government and of a virtuous society. To cite Kramnick and Moore once again: "For Jefferson the moral possibilities of democracy depended on keeping America an agricultural nation. That is, he did not think that democracy and the morality necessary to sustain democracy could flourish under social conditions that destroyed the economic independence of individuals." (*The Godless Constitution*, p. 152) Yet Jefferson consistently acted in the interests of the aristocratic large landowning and slaveholding class in the southern United States, in opposition to the interests of small farmers—and, of course, this was also in opposition to the interests of that group of individuals who most glaringly did not have independence economically, or in any other way: the slaves, who did not actually count as individuals in the eyes of the slaveholders.

In reality, Jefferson's agrarian society turned out to be a society based on slavery and ruled by slaveowners.

One striking example that a number of people have pointed to in this regard is the Louisiana Purchase (the purchase by the United States government of the Louisiana Territory from the French in 1803). Having suffered significant military setbacks—and dramatically so in the attempt to put down the armed rebellion of slaves in Haiti which had been initiated under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture—Napoleon Bonaparte, ruler of France, reckoned that he couldn't easily hold on to this territory in the Americas, and so Jefferson, then President of the United States, stepped in to quickly grab up this territory. In this he acted primarily in the interests of the slaveowners and in order to spread the slaveowning system into the new territories acquired through this act—not to develop an agrarian society based on a multitude of small farmers. This is just one example of many that could be cited which clearly illustrate that Jefferson consistently acted in the interests of the slaveowning class—in conflict with the interests not only of the slaves but also of the yeoman in the South, as well as the rising capitalist class centered in the North.

The whole southern way of life depended on slavery—that was its fundamental economic basis. Even small landowners who didn't own slaves strove to get into a position to own some. And, with regard to Jefferson himself, not only his economic status but also his political fortunes, including his election to the presidency, depended on slavery, and in particular the "three-fifths" provision in the Constitution of the United States—the so-called "three-fifths compromise," which

established that, for the purposes of taxation but also of voting and representation in the government, each slave would be counted as three-fifths of a human being. As many northerners pointed out at the time, coming from various positions and with various motives, this "compromise" essentially allowed the southern states, where slaves were counted as *property*, to accumulate greater representation in the national government, because of the multiplication of this "human property." In other words, northerners who owned property—for example, farms or factories—did not get to count each factory or farm as part of a formula for determining how much representation a northern state would have in the national government (in the House of Representatives, in particular), but the slave states got to count three-fifths of all the slaves, at any given time, in terms of this representation. This tilted things toward the southern states, in terms of the national political structure, from the beginning of the country. In fact, this was something that the southern states insisted upon as a condition of their joining with the northern states to form the United States of America, as a country with a single national government. Even those in the North who, on the basis of moral conviction and/or economic interest, were opposed to slavery, ended up capitulating to this demand, because forming this new country was more important to them—was understood by them to be more essential to their interests—than abolishing slavery. Thus, while this "three-fifths" provision in the Constitution was a compromise, this compromise gave a certain disproportionate power to the South, to the class of southern slaveowners; and this enabled them, up until the Civil War nearly 100 years later, to block and counter steps that would have gone in the direction of abolishing slavery.

It is sometimes claimed that Jefferson was actually opposed to slavery and wanted to see an end to it. And you can find statements by Jefferson where he says that slavery is in fact a blight and that it will have negative consequences for some time to come. There have also been misinterpretations of what Jefferson wrote about slavery. To take one important example, there are passages he wrote in drafts of the Declaration of Independence—some of which did not, but some of which did, make it into the final version of that Declaration—where the King of England and the British government were strongly condemned for supposedly imposing the slave trade on the United States. Now, there were, in fact, ways in which Jefferson and the slaveowning class in Virginia generally were opposed to *aspects* of the international slave trade, even while they themselves were involved in selling

slaves to other states and to slaveowners in other territories. In this, the essential motivation of these Virginia slaveowners was that *they didn't want the price of a slave being driven down*, since they themselves had become major sellers of slaves within America itself. This is, fundamentally, the reason that they were opposed to the continuation—once they did oppose it—of the *international* slave trade. They viewed this above all in terms of property, and supply and demand in relation to selling this particular kind of property—human beings. So, here again, Jefferson acted in the interests of the slaveowning class, and his “agrarian society” turned out to be a slaveowning plantation system—not a society of small independent yeomen.

This is of course related to, and in an overall sense part of, the larger contradiction between Jefferson's lofty sounding statements in the Declaration of Independence about the equality of all men (note: all *men*) and their “inalienable rights” and, on the other hand, the glaring fact that Jefferson not only owned slaves himself but consistently acted on behalf of the class of slaveowners and the institution of slavery, even while voicing certain moral qualms about slavery and musings about its long-term consequences for the new American republic.

Slavery, White Supremacy, and Democracy in America

Historian Edmund S. Morgan in *American Slavery, American Freedom*, which is cited in David Brion Davis's book *Inhuman Bondage*, argues that for Jefferson and other Virginia slaveowners, such as George Washington (“father of our country”) and James Madison (who was the principal author of the U.S. Constitution and who himself became president of the United States), there was a certain kind of unity—a unity of opposites, as we communists would say—between how they viewed whites, and on the other hand, Black Africans, mulattoes, and Indians. Here I am going to quote from Morgan and provide some commentary on what he says, to highlight the essential points.

Morgan points out: “Racism thus absorbed in Virginia the fear and contempt that men in England, whether Whig or Tory, monarchist

or republican, felt for the inarticulate lower classes" of their own "race." What Morgan is getting at is that in Europe, on the part of the "liberals" as well as the "conservatives" (the Whigs and the Tories), there was an open contempt, especially among the upper, ruling classes and their political representatives, for the "ignorant rabble" of the lower classes, while in the United States this did not find exactly the same expression because a lot of this contempt was, to so speak, deflected and directed toward the masses of Black people—who were overwhelmingly enslaved, especially in the South—and toward mulattoes and Indians.

Morgan continues—and this is very significant in terms of the whole development of bourgeois democracy in the U.S.: "Racism made it possible for white Virginians to develop a devotion to equality"—equality for whites, we should underline—"that English republicans had declared to be the soul of liberty." And Morgan points out that one of the things that made this possible was the fact that, in Virginia, "There were too few free poor on hand to matter." In other words, because of racism and viewing Africans, mulattoes, and Indians as lesser beings not really deserving of freedom, white Virginians could, without feeling an acute contradiction, articulate, as Jefferson did in the Declaration of Independence, lofty principles about the equality and inalienable rights of all people. They were speaking about *white* people—and more specifically white *men*—while explicitly *excluding* these other groups of people—most especially the people of African origin whom they enslaved. The one went together with the other: the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others, the notion of equality among white people (though this too was not a reality) and the subjugation and enslavement of Black people, mulattoes, and Indians. Here is the paradox and the irony, here is a profound contradiction, built into the United States of America from its very beginning: These Virginians, whose ideas have exerted a very great influence on the conception of freedom in this country—and the embodiment of this in founding documents of this country—represented the interests of the slaveowning class among whites, yet they could declare that they were speaking in universal terms about freedom for all people. They could proclaim a republic, in opposition to a monarchy, they could extol the principles of a government consisting of representatives chosen by the people, and the freedoms associated with republicanism—and they could believe in this—even while practicing and defending slavery, as well as other forms of exploitation and oppression.

As Morgan puts it: "by lumping Indians, mulattoes and Negroes in a single pariah class"—that is, by putting them in a category of beings who are not really to be considered human and not to be afforded the rights and freedoms that human beings should have—"Virginians had paved the way for a similar lumping of small and large planters in a single master class." Here again we see the dialectical (contradictory) unity between the exclusion of one part of society, and the notion of the unity of the others—identified as white people—even with the class divisions among them.

Morgan points to a very profound conclusion: "Racism became an essential, if unacknowledged, ingredient of the republican ideology that enabled Virginians"—like Washington and Madison, as well as Jefferson—"to lead the nation."³

This speaks to a very significant particularity, or peculiarity, of bourgeois society and the principles of bourgeois democracy as they developed from the very beginning of, and have evolved historically in, the United States. As David Brion Davis points out, Morgan argues that racial slavery enabled Virginia's slaveowning planter class to coopt the poorer whites and thus perpetuate a highly exploitative and unequal society under the banner of republican liberty. As Davis puts it: "Virginia's slavery and racism became, paradoxically, the social and ideological basis for America's dedication to freedom and equality." (*Inhuman Bondage*, p. 135)

This is very important to understand, not only in terms of the founding of this country, but in terms of its implications and its consequences throughout the history of the country, down to today. The republican ideology and notions of freedom that have characterized the way in which the United States has been conceived and ruled have indeed included, as fundamental elements, racism and the oppression of Black people, and other "people of color": the exclusion of these groups—overtly and explicitly, or at least in reality and in practice—from the prevailing notion and application of freedom, and their subjugation from the very beginning and in the essential functioning of the country. And there has been a definite tendency for this to contribute in various ways to blunting the overall class

3. The above quotes are from Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, as cited in David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: the Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, p. 135.

conflicts in American society and the class consciousness of the proletarians—among the whites in particular, but also in a different way among Black people and other oppressed nationalities.

All this relates to the first irony I mentioned: Jefferson talked about a yeoman-based agrarian society as the model society, but actually, in opposition to that, he consistently upheld and fought for the interests of the slaveowning class; and the agrarian society that in reality he was an embodiment of, and a spokesman for, was a slave-owning plantation system.

Bourgeois Democracy, Bourgeois Elitism

The second irony is that, while Jefferson extolled the yeoman and the notion of a yeoman-based society, he firmly believed that such yeomen had to be led and headed by members of more elite strata, intellectually and economically—of which Jefferson himself was a representative. And here is an irony within this irony, so to speak: With regard to “Jeffersonian democrats”—this applies to bourgeois-democrats more generally, but in particular to those who uphold and extol Jefferson and his ideas and ideals as the model of a great society, even if it has yet to be fully achieved—many of them are among those who are very quick to attack communists, and in particular Lenin and his work *What Is To Be Done?*, for alleged elitism! How often have we heard them say things like: “Communists like Lenin think that the masses are too stupid to know what’s good for them! They think these masses have to have elite intellectuals ordering them about and telling them what’s good for them, since they’re too stupid to know what they really want and need—that’s what the communist view is, that’s what Lenin was arguing in *What Is To Be Done?*.”

Here, I don’t have time to go into all the ways in which that is a gross distortion of what Lenin was actually arguing in *What Is To Be Done?*. But the fact is that the essence of what he’s arguing there is the *opposite* of these accusations: He is insisting on both the ability and the necessity for the masses to understand the basic dynamics of objective reality, and of human society in particular, in order to consciously struggle to transform society, to make revolution with the final aim of bringing a communist world into being. He is emphasizing that this is the only way that such a radical transformation

of society can actually come about. And, yes, he is insisting that the masses need a vanguard to lead them in this struggle—a vanguard whose purpose is precisely to enable *the masses themselves* to make revolution, and not to substitute for them (or attempt to substitute for them) in doing that.

So here's "the irony within the irony": Many of these Jeffersonian (bourgeois) democrats never tire of hurling the charge of "elitism" against communism, and against Lenin in particular, and yet their hero and model Thomas Jefferson was himself a firm believer in the idea that the common people needed an economic and intellectual elite to guide them to the virtuous society. This is the logic Jefferson would have followed, if he had actually tried to bring such a society into being—which he did not.

Commodities, Polarization, Inequality, and Exploitation

And the third irony: If Jefferson's yeoman-based society had in fact been realized—and there are many reasons why it could not have been, but if it had been realized—before very long it would have given rise to and been supplanted by polarization and the emergence of elites ruling over the "common people." If you envision a society consisting of a large number of farmers, each holding a small amount of land and farming independently on that land, well first of all, there are many "natural conditions," if you will, that will differ among these landholdings—different conditions of the soil, the topography, and other environmental and geological factors—which will favor some over others.

Take Virginia itself, for example. I pointed to this in the "Revolution" talk:⁴ Why is there a West Virginia? The basic reason is that the territory of this state—which, before the Civil War, was the western part of Virginia—has a very different terrain than most of the rest of Virginia: this western area is very hilly and rocky, it has a lot of coal, but it is not so favorable for small farming or for

4. The full title of this talk is *Revolution: Why It's Necessary, Why It's Possible, What It's All About*; a DVD of this talk is available, in English and Spanish translation, from Three Q Productions, Chicago.

farming in general (there is some small farming, but it's not nearly as favorable for farming as some of the other parts of Virginia, and other parts of the South, which have a much richer soil). That is the underlying reason why, at the time of the Civil War, this western part of the state broke away from Virginia and the Confederacy: the economic conditions and interests of people there were, in significant ways, different.

There is also the very important question of how different parcels of land are situated in relation to water, and other factors which confer an advantage (or disadvantage) to those owning the land. These differences, and their effects and consequences in terms of farm output and related factors, would assert themselves, even if you started out with everybody having approximately the same size farm, with many small farmers independently carrying out family farming—with all the patriarchy and male supremacy that goes along with that, let us not forget. You would have had inequalities *within* these families and family farms, and there would have been the developing polarization and inequalities *between* the different farmers, even if you just took a region of the country like the South, to say nothing of the fact that you had farmlands opening further to the West, you had farms of a different kind in the northeast of the country at its beginning, plus you had agriculture in other countries and world trade, which would have penetrated into all this and would have reacted upon and influenced the polarization already developing within agrarian-based society in the U.S. And let's imagine that somehow the government said: "OK, we will implement the 'Jeffersonian model': everybody has to be a small farmer—or, if everybody doesn't have to be a small farmer, at least the base of the whole economy and the whole society has to be small farmers—and if anybody starts getting much bigger than anybody else, in terms of landholdings, we'll take part of their land away and give it to others, so there will once again be more equal distribution of small farmland throughout the country." Well, eventually you would have had wars, armed conflicts, over that, because those whom you were hindering in that way (those whose land you were taking away in order to "equalize" things) would have resisted, and if you kept doing this they would have rebelled and taken to arms.

And then, again, there is the whole world market and its influence on all this. At the time of the founding of the U.S., if you look at the sale of the southern cotton and tobacco and other products,

such as sugar, where were they going? To a large degree, it was to the world market, to Europe and other places. In order to maintain a situation of more or less equal landholdings, you would have had to stop everybody from producing for the world market, because if they produced for the world market, inequality would have been fostered and reinforced: Some farmers would have done better than others, would have found a more favorable market at any given time for whatever product these farmers were growing. And that would have reacted upon and intensified the polarization that was already developing. It would have been necessary to step in with the government and militarily shut off the country from the world market.

In short, this would have been totally impractical and unrealizable. Even if you started out on that basis—of many farmers with more or less equal size landholdings—you couldn't maintain it. This is fundamentally because all this would be—and in the actual history of the U.S. everything has been—within the overall context of commodity production and exchange. And there are two things to single out about that here: One, as what I have already sketched out illustrates, commodity production and exchange inevitably lead to inequalities, to polarization. The general operation of the commodity system means that there will be inequality; it means that some fare better in competition than others; it means that polarization develops. And what goes along with that—the second thing to emphasize here—is that labor power itself (the ability to work, in general) will become a commodity. You see this happening even today: Many farmers are no longer able to make it as farmers (or by farming alone); they are compelled to hire themselves out to others who are doing better (to other farmers, or to people running other businesses). In an agrarian society—and in particular one that is operating within an overall framework of capitalist commodity production and exchange—more and more people will be reduced to the position of being wage workers, having to sell their ability to work, their labor power, in order to live. You will also get *that* polarization—of capitalist and wage worker—along with the great unevenness that will continue to develop even among the class of landowners, broadly speaking. And when you add in the world market, once again, all this becomes much further accentuated.

So, along with the glaring contradiction between Jefferson's proclamations about how "all men are created equal" and endowed with certain "inalienable rights," on the one hand, and, on the other hand, not only the fact of his being a slaveowner but his repeated

actions, including as president, on behalf of the whole slaveowning class, these other ironies (or contradictions—ironies are contradictions) that I have pinpointed and spoken to here are in turn an expression of the fundamental nature of the society in which Jefferson lived and functioned and of which he does stand as a legitimate champion: a system rooted in relations of exploitation and oppression.⁵

In sum on this point: In looking at what Jefferson wrote (in his “Notes on Virginia” and elsewhere) about the model of a good and virtuous society being one based on a multitude of yeoman farmers,

5. In a larger, more sweeping sense, the specific character of U.S. society, and its historical development, is a particular expression of the contradictions that are fundamental in all human society: the contradictions between the forces of production and the relations of production and between the economic base at any given time and the superstructure of politics (including political institutions, structures and processes) and of ideology. *Forces of production* refers to the land, raw materials, machinery and other technology, along with people and their knowledge and skills, which can be utilized in production, while *relations of production* refers to the relations people enter into in carrying out production in a given society. In a fundamental sense, the character of the productive forces determines the character of the relations of production. As Karl Marx pointed out, in order to carry out production—in order to produce, and reproduce, the material requirements of life—people enter into very definite relations of production, and an economy cannot function (and cannot be understood) apart from these relations of people in production; but, in a basic sense, these production relations are independent of the wills of individuals—they are fundamentally determined, not by the ideas or plans of people, but by the character of the productive forces that are at hand. At the same time, it is a general phenomenon that the productive forces continue to be developed, and this tends to call forth changes in the production relations; for example, the creation and development of computers and other “information technology” have led to significant changes in the way production is carried out, even within the capitalist system. But when the productive forces have developed in such a way that the existing production relations as a whole have become, in a qualitative and profound sense, an obstacle to, a fetter on, the productive forces, then the objective necessity arises for a revolution in society, in order to be able to bring into being new production relations that can further unleash the productive forces in a qualitative way. The present era in history is one in which such a revolution is necessary and called for—to overthrow capitalism and replace its production relations with socialized relations of production, which correspond to the socialized character of the way production is carried out in today’s world (the fact that today’s large-scale production is, and can only be, carried out by large groups of people, organized into highly developed networks, working in common—and today this increasingly takes place on an international scale—as opposed to isolated individuals each working on their own products). Such a revolution—to transform the *economic base* of society (the production relations) must and can only take place in the *superstructure*, that is, through a political (and ideological)

and the conflict between this and the kind of society he actually upheld and fought for, we can extract from this some profound lessons about the nature of modern republican government as a *bourgeois* democracy—and about the nature of bourgeois democracy itself in general, as a form of *class rule* and domination, a *dictatorship* of the bourgeois class—as well as, more particularly, the specific expressions this has taken in the history of the United States, with the peculiar institution of slavery for more than a hundred years leading into the founding of this country, and for nearly a hundred more years after its founding.

The “Grand Narrative” About This Country— and the Brutal Reality Underneath This

There is a semi-official narrative about the history and the “greatness” of America, which says that this greatness of America lies in the freedom and ingenuity of its people, and above all in a system that gives encouragement and reward to these qualities. Now, in opposition to this semi-official narrative about the greatness of America, the reality is that—to return to one fundamental aspect of all this—slavery has been an indispensable part of the foundation for the “freedom and prosperity” of the USA. The combination of freedom and prosperity is, as we know, still today, and in some ways today more than ever, proclaimed as the unique quality and the special destiny and mission of the United States and its role in the world. And this stands in stark contradiction to the fact that without slavery, none of this—not even the bourgeois-democratic freedoms, let alone the prosperity—would have been possible, not only in the southern United States but in the North as well, in the country as

struggle which, so long as society is divided into exploiters and exploited, becomes concentrated in an all-out struggle for power over society, as embodied in the institutions of political power and expressed ultimately as the monopoly of armed force. What is radically new and unique about the communist revolution is that its objective is to overthrow the capitalist system of exploitation and to resolve the fundamental contradiction that characterizes capitalism—between the *socialized character of production* and the *appropriation as privately-owned capital* of what is produced through these socialized means—and this revolution will not only put an end to capitalist exploitation but to *all* exploitation, to the division of society into classes and to all oppressive social relations, and thereby will put an end to the need for, and the existence of, the *state*, a repressive apparatus wielded by the ruling class to enforce its rule over those it exploits and oppresses.

a whole and in its development and emergence as a world economic and military power.

Obviously, the way in which agriculture in the South developed was directly related to, indeed founded on, the system of slavery. But, beyond that, the way in which the U.S. related to the world market, and built up its prosperity and economic base in that way, was to a very large degree dependent on slave-based production. The interchange between the development of manufacture in the North and the development of agriculture in the South, for example—even when, before the Civil War, that interchange went to a large degree through the world market and through England in particular, where for example cotton would be sold to the textile mills in England and other products would be sold from England to the northern manufacturers in the U.S.—even that would not have happened in the way it did, on the kind of scale it did and with the prosperity that it led to, without slavery. Of course, this process—where, for example, cotton from the southern U.S. was to a large degree sold to England, rather than to New England—contributed over time to sharpening the contradiction between the slave system in the South and the developing capitalist system in the North of the U.S. But the point to emphasize here is that, in an overall and fundamental sense, the slave-grown products of the southern U.S. constituted a major factor in the development of the U.S. economy, in the North as well as the South. And the development of that economy, in turn, has been the essential underlying basis for the massive military machinery which is the ultimate enforcer of the role of the U.S. as a major world power.

In short: There would be no United States as we now know it today without slavery. That is a simple and basic truth.

Now, of course, slavery was not the only factor that played a significant part in the emergence of the-U.S. as a world power, whose economic strength underlies its massive military force. A major historical factor in all this was the theft of land, on a massive scale, from Mexico as well as from native peoples. But, in turn, much of that conquest of land was, for a long period of time up until the Civil War, largely to expand the slave system. "Remember the Alamo," we are always reminded. Well, many of the "heroes" of the Alamo were slave traders and slave chasers. Forget all that stuff about the Davy Crocketts as great heroes, which many of us were fed as kids—these were slave chasers and slave enforcers, and adventurers who, to a

large degree, were aiming to expand the slave system. More fundamentally, whatever the particular role of individuals, the war with Mexico over Texas was, on the part of the United States, most essentially motivated by the drive to spread the slave system. And expanding the slave system was a major aim of the overall war with Mexico, although that war also led to the westward expansion of the developing capitalist system centered in the northern United States (those two systems, those two modes of production, capitalism and slavery, were in competition with each other over which would dominate in the new territory conquered by the United States; this was part of the mounting conflict between them, which then erupted into the Civil War in the 1860s).

Now, if some things had turned out differently, a different United States, or something entirely different altogether, might have evolved in the same territory that now exists as the United States of America (or roughly the same territory), but the United States that did evolve could not have evolved, and would not have reached the position it has, if it were not for the existence and role of slavery in all this. So whenever you hear talk about "freedom" in this country, keep that in mind. Think back to the meaning of the statements by Edmund Morgan which were discussed earlier. Even when we're talking about actual bourgeois-democratic rights—and let us be clear that this is what we're talking about, rights within the overall framework of political domination, dictatorship, by the capitalist (bourgeois) class which in fact rules this country—you always have to understand this in dialectical relation with slavery, in the very foundation and in terms of the historical development of the country.

With regard to bourgeois-democratic rights, as well as in the overall development of this country, slavery is a decisive factor which continues to cast its long shadow.

This is a fundamental point that those who want to base themselves on idealist notions of Jeffersonian democracy need to be confronted with, and over which they need to be engaged and struggled with—in a very lofty way, but also a very sharp way. There are big things at stake in terms of how people understand this. This is not "abstract" history. Especially in this country, with its instant gratification ethos, people are conditioned and encouraged to think only in very limited and narrow terms—to only slightly vulgarize it:

anything that happened last week, let alone last year, to say nothing of a couple of centuries ago, is totally irrelevant to whatever I'm going to consume right now. In opposition to this conditioning that is carried out by the ruling class and its media and other means of molding public opinion, and is promoted by the very way this system functions, actually understanding history—and waging struggle about how to scientifically approach the understanding of history—is a crucial part of the struggle over the direction of society, and in a very real sense the direction of the world as a whole, especially given the role that the U.S., and its imperialist domination, now plays in the world. Really grasping what are the most fundamental things about the nature of this country and the way it has historically evolved: this has a crucial bearing on the struggle to radically transform this society, and ultimately the world as a whole. It has a crucial bearing on the struggle to win more and more people to understand the need to carry out such a radical transformation—and, as part of that, to grasp the impossibility of building a just and virtuous society (whatever that means) on the basis of Jeffersonian principles, even if such principles could be really and fully realized.

More on the actual foundation of U.S. wealth and power

Not only did slavery play a major role in the historical development of the U.S., but the wealth and power of the U.S. rests today on a worldwide system of imperialist exploitation that ensnares hundreds of millions, and ultimately billions, of people in conditions hardly better than those of slaves.⁶ Now, if this seems like an extreme or extravagant claim, think about the tens of millions of children throughout the Third World who, from a very, very early age, are working nearly every day of the year—as the slaves on the southern plantations in the United States used to say, “from can't see in the morning, till can't see at night”—until they've been physically used up, with their lives literally passing, bit by bit, day after day, from them into the machinery on which they're working (or which,

6. The overall, international network of imperialist domination and exploitation also involves, still today, a significant dimension of actual slavery. In addition to other forms of outright slavery, a major aspect of this is the “sex industry” and the international “sex trade,” in which huge numbers of women, especially young women and even many very young girls, are forcibly entrapped, while major crime syndicates and more “legitimate” capitalists derive huge profits from this.

in a real sense, is *working on them*, wearing their lives away) and into the products which they are producing through this labor. These are conditions very similar to outright slavery, and they often go along with superstructural expressions which are very close to slavery—ways in which, through customs and traditions, and sometimes even formal codes, the lives of these children, and others in these conditions, are controlled, confined and degraded. This includes overt sexual harassment of women, and many other degradations as well.

All this is the foundation on which the imperialist system rests, with U.S. imperialism now sitting atop it all.

Today, in the large parts of Africa which were raided for slaves who were traded on the international market for centuries, the continuing effects of this—and the overall plunder and depredations carried out by colonialism and imperialism up to the present time in Africa—continue to be felt in that continent. Throughout the Third World, huge numbers of people are maintained in conditions of horrible suffering as a result of the workings of this same imperialist system; even those who are not directly exploited by capital are—through the overall operation of the capitalist-imperialist system, not only economically but also politically and militarily as well as culturally and ideologically—regarded and treated as just so much human waste. Recently, I read an article about Angola (where there was an ultimately unsuccessful attempt at a revolution several decades ago now): Today the big oil companies, headquartered in the major imperialist countries, are plundering the oil of Angola, while even in the mainstream, bourgeois press there are articles describing, or attempting to describe, almost indescribable conditions of suffering endured by the masses of people who, out of desperation, have flooded into the cities—children playing by sliding down piles of garbage and human waste, surrounded by rivulets containing the same garbage and waste. Imagine the impact on the health of these children and on the people generally.

This is the foundation on which rests the prosperity and “freedom” of the U.S. today—and it is the foundation of the “free world” about which the rulers of the U.S. and their media endlessly prate. At the same time, for tens of millions within the U.S. itself, conditions of brutal exploitation and oppression continue, including in a very acute way for immigrants—millions of them from Latin America and other parts of the Third World which are plundered by imperialism—along

with many others in what Lenin referred to as the lower and deeper sections of the proletariat. There are also millions in the inner cities (and others in rural areas across the country) who have been cast aside, denied the "right" to be exploited in a regular "legitimate" job. Inner city youth in particular are constantly subject to harassment, brutality and even murder at the hands of the police and are imprisoned in huge numbers (one in nine young Black men is currently in prison!).

All this takes us back again to Marx's comment on the "rosy dawn" of capitalist accumulation several centuries ago—an initial accumulation based on slavery and the hunting of slaves, on the burying alive of huge numbers of the native population in the mines of Bolivia, on the intensive exploitation of child labor. Today, this continues and exists in an international dimension, on an even bigger scale than it did at the time of that "rosy dawn" of capitalism. Now, in this era of capitalist imperialism, the world and the world's people are even more tightly bound together and enmeshed in the dynamics of capitalist accumulation, with all of its ruthlessness—which does not derive from the particular greediness of this or that individual capitalist or group of capitalists, but from the very process and "laws" of capitalist accumulation itself. This is something that is extremely important to grasp, and to struggle for people generally to understand: All this is poured into the very foundation and feeds the ongoing functioning of this whole system.

If you listen to the capitalists themselves, with their explanations and rationalizations for why they function as they do, you will hear them articulating some (though of course only some) of the truth about this. Even large aggregates of capital, controlling billions of dollars, are involved in intense rivalry with others doing the same. And the cheapening of the cost of production—especially through the more intensive and extensive exploitation of human labor—is absolutely necessary for that. Yes, capitalists would tend in any case to seek the most profitable conditions of production. But they are *driven* to do so by intense competition—which takes place on a gigantic scale in today's imperialist world—between very large aggregations of capital. Even some of these gigantic aggregations of capital lose out and go under if they do not more ruthlessly and relentlessly exploit people in the kinds of conditions that I've been speaking of. And—it cannot be said too many times, especially in the face of the systematic attempts to hide this and cover it up—*this* is the foundation and these are

the dynamics of the “prosperity and the freedom” that is so loudly proclaimed as the special nature of American society and of the “American character,” with its much advertised ingenuity and inventiveness and restless pursuit of something new—and, above all, more profit and money.

To return to Jefferson and his influence on “the American character”—or, more precisely, the particular bourgeois notions of freedom and rights that have prevailed in America—while Jefferson did speak at times of an agrarian-based society as the model of a good and virtuous society—and I have examined the essential content of this as well as some of the essential contradictions bound up with it—this does not mean that Jefferson believed that the good society should be based on or involve only agriculture. Jefferson’s view not only encompassed the need for other components, besides agriculture, of an overall economy but he also argued that private ownership in all these spheres was essential for the good society. Such private ownership was bound up with his notions of freedom. As Kramnick and Moore point out, Jefferson wrote that “agriculture, manufacture, commerce, and navigation, the four pillars of our prosperity, are the most thriving when left free to individual enterprise.” (*The Godless Constitution*, p. 107)

Freedom of Conscience as Private Property, “The Free Market Place of Ideas” — and a Radically Different and Far More Unfettered Search for the Truth

Furthermore, for Jefferson—and this was true as well for James Madison, the principal author of the U.S. Constitution—rights such as freedom of speech and the basic philosophical concept of freedom of conscience were bound up with the notion of the inviolability of private property. Kramnick and Moore point to something which I also noted in a short pamphlet, “U.S. Constitution: An Exploiters’ Vision of Freedom”: Madison regarded the protection of property as one of the most essential functions of the state—and it is important to underline here again that for Madison, and in the U.S. for nearly a hundred years, one of the most important forms of that property was

human beings, slaves. Madison, of course, was himself a slaveowner and a defender of the slave system; at the same time, he was also a more general, or “universal,” advocate of the rights of private property. Kramnick and Moore go on to make the point that, for Madison as well as Jefferson, “opinions and conscience were also sacred forms of individual property.” (*The Godless Constitution*, p. 103)

This is an extremely important point, and we should pause and examine this briefly. This of course is bound up with the whole idea that is encapsulated in the phrase we hear so often: “the free market place of ideas.” This has the virtue, if you will, of being rather explicit in its terms—it is a clear indication that this notion of individual conscience and of the expression of ideas is bound up with concepts of market principles, private ownership of commodities and ultimately capitalism and its particular categories of commodity exchange.⁷

We see this standing out very directly and starkly today in all the battles, not only in the U.S. (or other particular countries) but on an international scale, over “intellectual property.” And, of course, this is not merely a matter of legal abstraction but something which dramatically impacts the lives of great numbers of people. This happens, for example, when large agro-business firms based in the U.S. (or some other imperialist country) develop a genetically-engineered basis for producing a certain crop, and then they work to impose that means of agriculture on farmers not only in the U.S. itself but in other countries as well, disrupting and supplanting the more traditional ways of producing food, and in fact making it impossible for these farmers to continue agriculture in the traditional way, forcing them instead to pay the agro-business firm which owns these “intellectual property rights,” in order to again produce the genetically-engineered

7. As pointed to earlier, capitalist commodity production and exchange—and this is a defining feature of capitalism, which distinguishes it from other forms of commodity production and exchange—includes the exchange of labor power (the ability to work) for wages, a relation which involves the right of the capitalist to employ the labor power of the wage-workers in production, and to appropriate the products produced in this process. During this process of production, through the employment and use of labor power, more value is created by the workers than is paid to them in wages: it is a unique quality of the particular commodity, labor power, to be able to create additional value through its use, and this *surplus value* (what is produced by the workers in the course of working, beyond the value equal to their wages) is the source of capitalist profit and of the ability of the capitalists to invest on an expanded scale.

agricultural product—to, in effect, rent the ability to carry out such reproduction, as this has now become the “intellectual property” of a gigantic corporation based in a country like the U.S. Millions of people’s lives, and food production on a large scale, have been disrupted and even ruined through this process. From this and other examples we can see that it is not just a matter of an abstract theoretical concept of opinions and conscience being sacred forms of individual property. This has tremendous and devastating consequences for masses of people, millions and even hundreds of millions of people—and, at least indirectly, billions of people—throughout the world.

But let’s speak to the philosophical concept of “the free market place of ideas” and how that contrasts with the communist view of the pursuit of the truth and the contention of opposing ideas as an essential part of the pursuit of the truth. Here we come around to John Stuart Mill and his concept of liberty and in particular freedom of expression and the exchange of ideas.⁸ In a certain way we could say to this: Mill—yes, and no. From our point of view, the communist point of view, it is crucial to actually understand reality, in its motion and development, in order to be able to transform it increasingly in the interests of the broad masses of people and ultimately of humanity as a whole. Further, there is a need for the contestation of different ideas, and different approaches to understanding reality, in order to get most deeply to a correct understanding of that reality. And, yes, there is the very important principle that people should feel free and encouraged to express their ideas and not feel a heavy breath breathing down on them if their ideas are non-conformist or unconventional, or go up against the status quo, whatever that status quo might be. That is actually an important principle that we should understand deeply and uphold and fight for. At the same time, however, from the communist point of view, this is all part of a process of not just a few individuals but of masses of people getting to the truth of things, in many different particular spheres and in a larger sense, and being able to act in accordance with an actual, scientific understanding of reality—of reality as it really is, so to speak (and as it is moving and changing). But the notion of opinions and conscience as individual or private property ultimately—and

8. The reference here is to John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*. A discussion of Mill’s concept of liberty—and specifically his views on the contestation of ideas—is found in my book *Democracy: Can’t We Do Better Than That?* (Banner Press, New York, 1986); see in particular Chapter 7, “Democracy and the Communist Revolution.”

often not so ultimately—gets in the way of, and poses a significant obstacle to, that process of pursuing the truth.

Understanding the importance of the “battle of ideas,” of not suppressing unpopular or unconventional thinking, in order to have the richest process in seeking an understanding of reality, and in order for the people in society to feel that they have air to breathe and room to be “different” and to express different ideas: this is a crucial dimension of the kind of society that we want to live in and that masses of people would really thrive in; and it is also crucial in order to arrive at the truth in fundamental terms. But there is a vast difference, a crucial distinction, between that and the notion that any individual’s ideas are her/his private property and should in effect operate in competition with other people and their ideas—that all this should contest in a “market place of ideas” to see which one can, to put it rather baldly, command the highest exchange value. This is not the same as determining which one actually contributes the most to getting to the truth, and is not simply an appreciation of the way in which the contestation of ideas will help to create the right atmosphere for the kind of society we want, but it gives expression to the notion of ideas as commodities, competing to command a greater remuneration, in one way or another (even if this is not always directly monetary). So, too, the notions and the practice of “intellectual property rights” are an extension of, or are bound up with, the idea of “the free market place of ideas.”

All this flows from the philosophical concept of opinions and conscience as private property. And when you have individuals holding ideas as private property, the greater social good is going to be interfered with and hindered, just as it is generally in the production and exchange of commodities. People will hold back their ideas if they think it will benefit them to not bring them forward at a given time. Everybody who is familiar, for example, with copyrighting (and patents) knows the ways in which people who come forward with inventive ideas will jealously guard them, lest somebody else steal them—or, on the other hand, will rush to institutionalize them as protected private property, before someone else does the same. And there are many stories of how individuals have brought forward creative ideas, only to have them grabbed up by more powerful forces, such as corporations, which end up with the “rights” to them. All this is an expression of a situation where people are in competition with each other—and ultimately an expression of a society which

tends toward turning everything, including ideas, into commodities and into capital.

Even where this doesn't take a crude monetary expression, philosophically the concept of this being *my* idea—as opposed to *an idea* which is important in a larger context and ultimately for humanity—can cause real harm, and in this kind of atmosphere, in this overall framework of capitalist commodity relations, there can be, and often is, real conflict between the individual's profiting from his/her ideas and society and humanity as a whole benefitting from these ideas.

This outlook and approach of ideas as personal possessions, or private property—as commodities—has negative influences and consequences not only in terms of how people treat ideas that they come up with, but also how they view mixing it up with other people in the realm of working with, and wrangling over, ideas. Again, even leaving aside direct or more crude monetary considerations, to put it in somewhat psychological terms, your ego gets involved in it. Is what's important what is actually true and whether your ideas contribute to people understanding things, and being able to act on that basis in the fundamental interests of humanity—or is what's important the fact, or the notion, that something is *your* idea? There's hardly anyone, if there is anyone, who has not experienced these kinds of narrow and more self-centered sentiments or pulls—and, yes, sad to say, but not surprisingly, this is so even among the ranks of the communists. But, again, all this does a great deal of actual harm, and works against the larger interests of society and humanity.

So, returning to John Stuart Mill, there is a great difference between the positive side of John Stuart Mill, as represented in his arguments that ideas should not be suppressed because they are unpopular—that it is very important that people hear ideas articulated not merely by those who oppose them, however fairly they may strive to characterize them, but by those who are ardent advocates of those ideas—there is a profound difference between that principle, which has important application and is something that must be a part of the overall process of revolution, radically transforming society and advancing to a communist world, and on the other hand the notion of the “free market place of ideas.” The contention over ideas, and the overall development of ideas, should be unfettered by notions and by realities of markets, of competition and commodity

relations, of capital. As I have pointed out before,⁹ we do need to talk about the limitations, problems and errors in the cultural works that were produced during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China; but, besides the very high artistic quality and the revolutionary content of many of those works, one of the truly great things about the creation of these works was that it was explicitly—and very enthusiastically on the part at least many of the people involved—a process that consciously strove to overcome notions of individual ownership of ideas, including artistic creation. It is not that individuals and their creativity were unimportant and made no contribution in the creation of these works, but they were so and did so as part of a larger process, and not in accordance with—in fact in direct opposition to—the notion of ideas as private property.

Now, to be clear, there are a lot of ways in which, in order to have the best atmosphere and circumstances for creativity to flower and be expressed—and in order to have the kind of society in which people can increasingly thrive, individually as well as in their mutual interaction—you do have to not only recognize in a general sense but give the necessary scope to individual initiative and creativity. There does have to be a significant dimension in which people can go off and “do their own thing.” I asked a poet and spoken word artist, in the course of a conversation with him: “Could you write your poetry if you had a party cadre standing over your shoulder examining it at every point?” And he answered emphatically: “No fucking way!” Well, there is a definite reality to that, and the kind of society and world we want is not one in which there would be that kind of misplaced “political supervision” (“let’s check to make sure that everything is in accord with the ‘party line’ or what leadership thinks at every given point”... NO!). There should be room, there must be room, expansive space for a lot of creativity, and certainly for unconventional and non-conformist creativity, including that which goes up against whatever are the prevailing ideas and “norms” in a socialist society at any given time. But that can be developed on a much broader scale and in a much richer way the more it is increasingly unfettered from the “free market place of ideas,” the exchange of commodities in the realm of ideas, and the notion, ultimately, of opinions and conscience being sacred forms of individual private property.

9. See, for example, “Art and Artistic Creation—Solid Core with a Lot of Elasticity,” in Bob Avakian, *Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy*, Insight Press, Chicago, 2005, pp. 103–106.

Without lapsing into post-modernist theories of literature, and so on—in which basically the text has no intrinsic meaning and instead it means whatever anybody reads into it, and so there are multitudes of meaning, all equally legitimate—it is a fact that with regard to works of art, except for those that are literally created by the artist only for himself or herself (which are decidedly a small minority of such works), most of them are meant to go out to the world to make some kind of statement or other—however the artist understands that. In general, works of art are meant to interact with people and to affect people in various ways. And that can be done much more fully and richly while on the one hand, yes, giving a lot of scope to individual initiative and creativity, but at the same time breaking all this loose from notions and practices that embody the “free market place of ideas,” commodity production and exchange, and the competition that goes along with that—and the thinking that’s bound up with that.

So, yes, there must be in socialist society—and in communist society—a recognition of the importance of individual conscience, and of the right, and fundamentally of the need, for people to create various works of literature and art which embody and give life to different particular ways of “coming at” reality (or a part of reality), different modes of “individual expression.” There is an important role for that, and there must be a broad scope for that—both as something that’s important in itself and also, in a deeper sense, as part of the overall process of coming to understand the world in increasingly richer ways and continuing to transform it in accordance with the largest interests of humanity. All this is part of the objective of advancing to—and then continuing to advance in—the radically new era of communism. But this is very different from—and will be much more fully expressed the more that it moves beyond—notions of individual conscience and individual creativity as *private property*—which inevitably means in conflict and competition with other embodiments of private property.

Just as, in an overall and fundamental sense, the advance to communism means, and must mean, moving beyond the narrow horizon of bourgeois right—beyond the sphere of commodity production and exchange and everything bound up with that, including in the realm of ideas—it must mean moving beyond bourgeois right in relation to individuality, individual conscience, individual ideas, and individual creativity. This does not mean suffocating or arbitrarily

restricting this, but on the contrary giving much greater expression to it, while approaching all this on a radically new and qualitatively different basis, breaking free and far beyond the historically limited and, in comparison with what has now become possible, the paltry principles of "the free market place of ideas" and the notion—which Madison and Jefferson upheld—of opinions and conscience as sacred forms of individual property.

"Competing Elites"—and Moving Beyond "Elites"

The concept of "competing elites" is an important element of theories of bourgeois democracy and how it is the best system possible. The basic argument is that the existence of competing elites is crucial in order for people—and, in particular, those who are not part of the "elites"—to exercise initiative by being able to choose among, and thereby being able to influence, these competing elites. For example, Robert A. Dahl, in his book *Democracy and Its Critics*, speaks to what he calls an "MDP"—standing for Modern Dynamic Pluralist—society and how this best serves what he characterizes with the term "polyarchy"—which, according to Dahl, involves "a set of political institutions that, taken together, distinguish modern representative democracy from all other political systems, whether non-democratic regimes or earlier democratic systems." (Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, Yale University Press, 1989, p. 218.)

Dahl argues that:

polyarchy provides a broad array of human rights and liberties that no actually existing real world alternative to it can match. Integral to polyarchy itself is a generous zone of freedom and control that cannot be deeply or persistently invaded without destroying polyarchy itself....Although the institutions of polyarchy do not guarantee the ease and vigor of citizen participation that could exist, in principle, in a small city-state, nor ensure that governments are closely controlled by the citizens or that policies invariably correspond with the desires of a majority of citizens, they make it unlikely in the extreme that a government will

long pursue policies that deeply offend a majority of citizens. What is more, those institutions even make it rather uncommon for a government to enforce policies to which a substantial number of citizens object and try to overturn by vigorously using the rights and opportunities available to them. If citizen control over collective decisions is more anemic than the robust control they would exercise if the dream of participatory democracy were ever realized, the capacity of citizens to exercise a veto over the reelection and policies of elected officials is a powerful and frequently exercised means for preventing officials from imposing policies objectionable to many citizens. (*Democracy and Its Critics*, p. 223)

Well, let's look at things in the actually existing real world. [Laughter] Let's take what Dahl has said here, which expresses a fairly common affirmation of what is in reality bourgeois democracy, and see how this measures up to—and what it actually amounts to in—this real world. Let's begin with the assertion, which Dahl makes emphatically, that in such a society it is “unlikely in the extreme that a government will long pursue policies that deeply offend a majority of citizens” and that “What is more, those institutions even make it rather uncommon for a government to enforce policies to which a substantial number of citizens object and try to overturn by vigorously using the rights and opportunities available to them.”

In regard to this, I cannot help paraphrasing Lenin here, to say that Dahl might wish that there were a law against laughing in public (and for all we know, the Bush regime may yet oblige such a wish). Otherwise, to make reference to significant current events, and specifically to the millions and tens of millions who have tried by “vigorously using the rights and opportunities available to them” to prevent and then bring to an end the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, and numerous other policies of the Bush regime which are not only opposed but deeply detested by a very substantial segment of the population in the U.S.—probably a majority—if Dahl's statement were repeated among such people, it would very likely be drowned out under a tidal wave of bitter laughter.

**What does—and does not—happen through elections...
what is—and is not—meaningful political activity**

It is not just experience in this immediate period, but experience throughout the history of this country that has illustrated time and again the following essential truths:

1) There is, in the U.S., a ruling class that has interests which are very different from and fundamentally in opposition to those of the masses of citizens.

2) This ruling class in reality exercises a dictatorship—that is, a monopoly of political power backed up by and concentrated in a monopoly of armed power over the rest of society—and those who at any given time are administering that dictatorship will continue to pursue policies they are determined to carry out, even in the face of massive popular opposition, unless and until the larger interests of the ruling class dictate that it modify or even abandon a particular policy—or until that ruling class is overthrown.

3) Elections do not provide an avenue for the realization of the desire of masses of people to see these policies and actions of the government change—although *mass political resistance* can, under certain circumstances, make an important contribution to forcing changes in government policy, especially if this takes place in a larger context where these policies are running into real trouble and, among other things, are leading to heightened divisions within the ruling class itself.

If we step back a few decades from the present, we can see how the experience around Vietnam provided a concentrated example of all this. As I have pointed out before, there were two elections in relation to Vietnam which involved significant contention and “soul searching” particularly among people strongly opposed to the Vietnam war, and which illustrate the basic point I am making—and debunk the notions that Dahl is putting forward.

First, there was the election in 1964 when the U.S. began to significantly escalate its “involvement” in Vietnam. To inject a personal element into this—but something which touches on a more general phenomenon—this is one of the two elections for president of the United States in which I actually voted. It was the first election

in which I was eligible to vote, and after some agonizing I decided to vote for Lyndon Johnson in that 1964 election (I voted for Eldridge Cleaver in 1968, but that was a very different story). At the time of that 1964 election, there was a very intense debate in the “movement” about whether or not to vote—that is, whether or not to vote for Johnson. Johnson was coming out on behalf of civil rights, making concessions to the massive struggle around that, and at the same time, even while as president he was carrying out an escalation of the Vietnam war, he was not openly talking in the crazy and extreme terms that his rival, the Republican candidate Barry Goldwater, was. Goldwater was famous—or some would say infamous—for his statement, at the time of his nomination at the Republican Convention in 1964, that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice, and that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue. Of course, Goldwater conceived of liberty and justice in bourgeois and imperialist terms, and he saw the Vietnamese people’s resistance to U.S. domination as a vice—a violation of and interference with imperialist liberty and justice. So Goldwater was talking in extreme terms about Vietnam—bombing the Vietnamese back to the Stone Age, or language similar to that. Many people in the broad movement of that time were arguing that, with all this in mind, you had to vote for Johnson—that it was absolutely essential, in terms of Vietnam as well as other key issues, to vote for Johnson—and I, along with many others, was influenced and finally persuaded by this. So we went and held our noses, as people often do these days, and voted for the Democrat, Lyndon Johnson.

Well, after the election was over—during which Johnson had run campaign ads talking about the extreme danger of what Goldwater would do in Vietnam—Johnson himself proceeded to massively escalate the war in Vietnam, both in terms of bombing that country and in terms of beginning the process of sending wave after wave of U.S. troops to Vietnam (which, by the late 1960s, reached the level of 500,000). And, of course, those of us who had been persuaded and cajoled into voting for Johnson felt bitterly betrayed by this. This provided a very profound lesson.

By the time the 1972 elections came around (and I spoke to this somewhat in my memoir¹⁰), once again there was, even within

10. Bob Avakian, *From Ike To Mao and Beyond: My Journey from Mainstream America to Revolutionary Communist*, Insight Press, Chicago, 2005.

the Revolutionary Union (the forerunner of our Party) as well as more broadly among those opposed to the Vietnam war, a big debate and struggle about whether it was necessary to support the "anti-war candidate," George McGovern—or, to put it another way, to vote against Nixon. Within the RU itself, arguments were made that it was "our internationalist duty to the Vietnamese people" to vote for McGovern and get Nixon out, because otherwise Nixon would escalate the war in Vietnam again, but McGovern would bring an end to the war.

Well, in the end, I (and the leadership of the RU overall) didn't go for this. We did examine the question seriously—we didn't just take a dogmatic approach. I remember being up many nights wrestling with the question: Is this a particular set of circumstances which requires an exception to the general approach of not supporting, not even holding your nose and voting for, bourgeois electoral candidates? But I came to the conclusion—on the basis of a lot of agonizing and of wrangling with others—that, no, it was *not* "our internationalist duty to the Vietnamese people" to support McGovern, that instead our internationalist duty was better served by continuing to build mass resistance against that war and the overall policies of the government—and, more fundamentally, opposition to the system as a whole—which is what we set out to do.

But there were many who did get drawn into the whole McGovern thing. It might be very interesting for those of you who weren't around at the time (or were not yet politically conscious and active) to go back and look at films, if they are available, of the 1972 Democratic Convention. There was Jerry Rubin, and many other "movement people," who were being welcomed into the killing embrace of "mainstream" bourgeois politics, and specifically the Democratic Party—back within those suffocating confines. And, in truth, some of them were feeling a certain sense of relief in believing that, after years of struggling to change things from outside those confines—with all the difficulties, sacrifices, and, yes, real dangers, bound up with that—maybe there could be an avenue for changing things "from within." But, of course, what happened in reality is that Nixon trounced McGovern in the elections. Through the machinery of bourgeois electoral politics, and the dynamics of bourgeois politics in a more general sense, things were more or less set up that way. Without going into too many particulars here, it is worth noting that McGovern was barely out of the gate campaigning, after the

Democratic Convention, when his running mate (vice presidential nominee) Thomas Eagleton was exposed as having been a “mental case,” as it was popularly conceived at the time. Eagleton, it turned out, had at one point sought psychiatric help, and this made him “unfit” to be vice president and next in line as head of state. So they had to replace him with Sargent Shriver (of the Kennedy clan). And more generally, the whole McGovern campaign was a debacle, right from the beginning. Nixon ended up winning almost every state in the presidential election that year.

Many people were demoralized by this—essentially because they had accepted, and confined themselves within, the terms of bourgeois electoral politics. Yet a few months after the 1972 election, Nixon was forced to sign a “peace agreement” on Vietnam. While this took place in the context of larger international factors—including the contention between the U.S. and the Soviet Union (which was then a social-imperialist country: socialist in name but imperialist in fact and in deed), as well as the international role at that time of China, which was then a socialist country but was adopting certain tactical measures, including an “opening to the west,” as part of dealing with the very real threat of attack by the Soviet Union on China—it was, to a significant degree, because of the continuing struggle of the Vietnamese people, and massive opposition within the U.S. itself to U.S. aggression in Vietnam, that Nixon was forced to sign this “peace agreement.”

This agreement led, first, to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam—and an attempt by Nixon to carry out “Vietnamization” (getting the army of the U.S.-dependent South Vietnamese government to more fully fight the war, backed up by U.S. air power)—and then led, only a couple of years later, to the ultimate and very welcomed defeat of U.S. imperialism and its puppet government in South Vietnam. You all have seen the scenes of people scrambling to get on the helicopters leaving the U.S. embassy in 1975, as the National Liberation Front troops (the so-called “Vietcong”) knock down the gate to that embassy.

Now, the important lesson for what we’re talking about here is that *in neither case*—neither in 1964 nor in 1972—*were the decisive changes that occurred brought about by the elections*. Quite the contrary. In 1964 people massively voted for someone who supposedly wouldn’t escalate the Vietnam war—and then he escalated that

war on a massive scale. In 1972 many people voted against Nixon because he was going to escalate the war further—but he was forced to pull out U.S. troops, and that led to the ultimate defeat of the U.S. and its puppet government in South Vietnam.

In both cases, the compelling pull and the seeming logic that it was crucial to vote for a Democrat—or at least to vote against the Republican—in order to avert real disasters, was not borne out at all in reality. And the reason for that is very basic: Elections are not the actual dynamics through which essential decisions about the policies of the government, and the direction of society, are made—the votes of the people in elections are not the actual forces compelling changes of one kind or another. This is what is dramatically illustrated if you examine—and in particular, if you examine scientifically—these two elections, which in effect bracketed the heavy involvement of the U.S. in Vietnam (the 1964 election toward the beginning, and the 1972 election toward the end, of that involvement).

So, let's issue a challenge: Let anyone explain how holding your nose and voting for the Democrat (or enthusiastically voting for the Democrat) in either or both of those elections led to, and was responsible for, changes of the one kind or the other—negative changes in 1964, with the escalation by the U.S. of the war in Vietnam, and 8 years later the positive change of U.S. imperialism heading for decisive defeat in its attempt to impose its domination on Vietnam through massive devastation of that country and the slaughter of several million of its people. No, none of this happened through elections, because elections are not the actual basis and the real vehicle through which truly significant changes in society (and the world), of one kind or another, are brought about.

This is obviously extremely relevant now, when there is a widespread hatred, in certain ways unprecedented in its scale and in some senses in its depth, for the whole regime associated with George W. Bush, and yet people have great difficulty rupturing with the notion that the only possible avenue for changing the course of things is to get sucked once again into the dynamics of bourgeois politics—which are set up to serve, and can only serve, the interests of the ruling class, and which have not and do not provide the means and channels through which changes in the interests of the people can be brought about.

In light of all this, we can see the fundamental error reflected in Dahl's assertion that "the capacity of citizens to exercise a veto over the reelection and policies of elected officials is a powerful and frequently exercised means for preventing officials from imposing policies objectionable to many citizens." In fact, the means through which that happens is massive upsurge and resistance, in combination with other factors—including resistance, struggle and revolution in other parts of the world, as well as other contradictions that the imperialists are running up against, even short of revolution to overthrow them. *That* is the basis on which, and the means through which, officials are prevented from continuing to impose policies objectionable to large numbers of people.

Can the people really be nothing more than pawns of elites?

And here we get to the fundamental point: What Dahl upholds as a "good society"—or, as people like him see it, the best possible society—is one in which the role of the masses of people, of the citizens, is *reduced to acting as a "check" on the elites who actually make political decisions*. This is another expression of the notion that the best possible political system is one in which there is not one supposedly uniform and monolithic elite, but *competing* elites, and the "freedom" of the masses of people—including the preservation of their human rights and liberties—resides ultimately in their ability to choose among, and perhaps maneuver between, competing elites. The presumption is that, particularly through the medium of elections, this will somehow cause the elites to compete for the people's support in such a way that somehow the will of the people will be exercised in setting the direction of society, to the degree that is really possible in a modern, complex society.

Well, to more thoroughly refute this, to demonstrate what it amounts to in reality—and to make clear that it is possible to have a radically different and much better kind of society, in which the role of the people is actually to be the decision-makers, through an overall process which takes place in a qualitatively different way and in a whole greater dimension than anything practiced, or even conceived, by the rulers and political theorists of capitalism (and previous forms of society in general)—let's begin with the following, speaking to the

essential nature and role of elections as the ultimate expression of democracy in bourgeois society:

To state it in a single sentence, elections: are controlled by the bourgeoisie; are not the means through which basic decisions are made in any case; and are really for the primary purpose of legitimizing the system and the policies and actions of the ruling class, giving them the mantle of a "popular mandate," and of channeling, confining, and controlling the political activity of the masses of people. (*Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?*, p. 68)

To illustrate this further—and to further highlight what is wrong with the notion of influencing competing elites in a way that will benefit the people—let's turn to a similar argument that was made by Malcolm X. Much as I love Malcolm, it is necessary to point to the limitations of his view of and approach to this—which ultimately flow from the fact that he had not taken up the scientific, materialist and dialectical, viewpoint of communism (although his development was in motion and was cut short by his assassination). In a speech which, back in the day, I listened to over and over again, and which I still enjoy in many ways, "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm goes into a whole argument about how Black people shouldn't be slavishly dependent upon and loyal to the Democrats. With his typical sharpness and biting wit, he speaks of how the Democrats and the Republicans are of the same type—they're both canines, both of the same family as the dog: one is a wolf and the other is a fox—and they are both against you. But, in the end, what Malcolm proposes is a familiar device: He argues that Black people in particular shouldn't just be a tail on the Democrats—who simply take Black people for granted and never do anything for them—but instead Black people should form a voting bloc and reward, or punish, those who do, or who don't, act in ways that benefit Black people.

Malcolm talks about how, at the time Lyndon Johnson became president, after Kennedy's assassination, Johnson flew back into Washington, D.C., and the first thing he did, when his plane landed, was to look around for his friend Richard Russell. As Malcolm tells it, Johnson "gets off the plane and what does he do? He says, 'Where's Dickie?' Now, who's Dickie? Why, he's that old racist, southern segregationist, white supremacist Richard Russell. No,

that man is just too tricky, 'cause his best friend is still old Dickie."
[Laughter]

We shouldn't trust those Democrats, Malcolm insists. And he goes on to talk about how some people argue that Johnson can handle the southern segregationists because he's from Texas and he knows them. Well, says Malcolm, if that's the argument, what about Eastland—a senator who was one of the most overt southern segregationists—he knows the southerners even better. Why don't we have Eastland for president!

Yes, Malcolm is very sharp in punching holes in this idea of relying on the Democrats—and it's great to listen to this, even now. But then, ultimately, what does he say? Well, he argues, if Black people form a bloc, then the Republicans will have to come to us, and the Democrats will have to come to us, and we'll go with whichever one will do more for us.

But what are the actual dynamics when this has been attempted? The Democrats come to you, and you put a bunch of demands on them and you insist: "Now, if you don't do this, and you don't do that, and you don't do the other thing in our interests, why we'll...we'll..." [Laughter] You'll *what*? You'll vote for the *Republicans*?! You see, it's very true, you've got the wolf and the fox, and one of them pretends to be for you and the other one doesn't even pretend to be for you, as Malcolm explained. But those are your choices, as long as you play by the rules of the game that they have set up. So, what leverage do you really have in this game? If the Democratic Party's role is to talk, at least sometimes, in terms that make you think that maybe with enough pressure applied to them you can make them adopt some of the things that you believe are really important—and if you try to put pressure on them to actually do that by threatening to vote for the Republicans—well, then, either openly or behind closed doors they will laugh uproariously, because they *know* you can't go and vote for the Republicans, who don't even *pretend* to be for those things that are important to you.

So, even on those terms and on that level, you have no leverage against them. They have you—you don't have them—as long as you are looking at things as being concentrated within and finding their only (or their best possible) expression within these, yes, very killing confines of bourgeois elections (and bourgeois politics overall). It is only by *breaking out* of those confines that you can actually begin

to influence things in a significant way—by going up against the whole operation of this machinery, breaking free of it and challenging it in a meaningful way.

The following from *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* helps to provide a concentrated summation of crucial points that are at issue here:

Many will say: how can the political system in a democratic country like the U.S. "serve to maintain the rule of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat" when everyone has the right to choose the political leaders by participating in elections? The answer to this is that elections in such a society, and the "democratic process" as a whole, are a sham—and more than a sham—a cover for and indeed a vehicle through which domination over the exploited and oppressed is carried out by the exploiting, oppressing, ruling class." (*Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?*, p. 68)

In order to have a deeper and more solid foundation for a correct understanding of this question, and to recognize more fully how apologies for bourgeois democracy, like that of Robert A. Dahl, represent fundamental distortions of reality, it is crucial to turn once again to the question of outlook and method—to the decisive importance of dialectical materialism, and, on the other hand, the striking lack of materialism (and lack of dialectics grounded in materialism) in bourgeois-democratic views and analyses.

One of the most basic truths that dialectical materialism brings to light is that the political and ideological/cultural superstructure in any society—and this definitely includes the U.S.—corresponds, and fundamentally can only correspond, to the character of the economic base of that society—in other words, to the underlying social and, above all, production relations and to the class relations and the forms of exploitation and domination that are rooted in those production relations. In a capitalist society, such as the U.S., the capitalist class predominates in the ownership of the crucial means of production; at the same time, there is a large group of people—the working class, or *proletariat*—numbering in the millions and millions in the U.S. today, who own no means of production and therefore can live only by working for, and being exploited by, the capitalist class which monopolizes

ownership of the means of production; while some others own a small amount of the means of production, and perhaps employ a few people, and so constitute a part of the middle class (or petite bourgeoisie).¹¹ If

11. Here it might be helpful to refer to the following, which speaks to the essential features of the economic base (the production relations), in general and specifically in capitalist society:

The production relations, in any economic system, consist, first of all, of the *system of ownership* of the means of production (land and raw materials, machinery and technology in general, and so on). Along with, and essentially corresponding to, this system of ownership, are the *relations among people in the process of production* (the “division of labor” in society overall) and the *system of distribution* of the wealth that is produced. To take the example of capitalist society: Ownership of the means of production is dominated by a small group, the capitalist class, while the majority of people own little or no means of production; the “division of labor” in society, the different roles that different groups of people play in the overall process of production, including the profound division between those who carry out intellectual work and those who carry out physical work (the mental/manual contradiction, for short), corresponds to these relations of ownership (and non-ownership) of the means of production; and the distribution of the wealth produced is also in correspondence with this, so that the wealth that is accumulated by capitalists is, in a basic sense, in accordance with the capital they have (the means of production they own or control) and their role as exploiters of the labor power (the ability to work) of others, who own no means of production; while those who are not big capitalists but may own a limited amount of means of production, and/or have accumulated more knowledge and skills, receive a share of the wealth in accordance with that; and those on the bottom of society find their small share in the distribution of social wealth to be determined by the fact that they own no means of production, and have not been able to acquire much beyond basic knowledge and skills. It should not be surprising that these—highly unequal—relations and divisions in society continue to be reproduced, and even tend to be accentuated, through the ongoing functioning of the capitalist system, the ongoing process of capitalist accumulation and the social relations, the politics, and the ideology and culture which are in essential correspondence with and which enforce, and reinforce, the basic nature and functioning of this system. And especially in today’s world, this functioning of the capitalist system takes place not only within particular capitalist countries but above all on a world scale. (Bob Avakian, *Away With All Gods! Unchaining the Mind and Radically Changing the World*, Insight Press, Chicago, 2008, footnote, p. 163.

the superstructure—and in particular the political processes, institutions, policies, and so on—come into any kind of serious conflict with the dynamics of the underlying capitalist economic base and its process of accumulation, then the whole functioning of society will be seriously disrupted and, unless you're prepared to follow that through to its full conclusion—in other words, to the overthrow of the system—you'll be forced to recoil from that and to adjust things (to adopt or accept policies) so that the superstructure is once again brought back into conformity with the fundamental nature and functioning of the underlying economic base and the whole process of capitalist accumulation (as it takes place and takes shape not only in the particular country, but today more than ever on an international scale).

Grasping this is crucial in order to understand how and why things happen in society (and the world) the way they do, including how and why politicians act the way they do.

Why, repeatedly, are even people who know better on some level seemingly unable to help themselves and, time after time, vote for politicians who promise one thing and do another, and never really act in the basic interests of the people? This calls to mind the "Charlie Brown with Lucy" experience in the "Peanuts" cartoon: the scene where Lucy is going to hold the football for Charlie Brown to kick it, and then at the last minute she pulls the ball away and he kicks wildly without making contact. He keeps falling for it—and she keeps doing it. Many, many people who have gotten involved in mainstream politics in one way or another have had this kind of experience—repeatedly. Remember, during the "traveling road show" of Democratic candidates before the last presidential election, in 2004, Dennis Kucinich and Al Sharpton articulated some of what people wanted to hear, but *Time* magazine declared early on in the process that, although Sharpton often got the best popular response, he was not a serious candidate. *Why* was he not a serious candidate, especially if he was getting the best popular response? Well, Sharpton's hardly a revolutionary, but even the things Sharpton said during that road show (however sincere he may or may not have been) were outside the pale of what the Democratic Party could actually seriously pursue, even in an election, let alone what it could actually do in running the government.

From the beginning, the conscious representatives of the ruling class were very well aware of all this. Sharpton, whatever his

individual intentions, performed a function, objectively, of drawing people yet again into the bourgeois electoral framework, in particular people with a lot of progressive inclinations who were (and today still are) very dissatisfied—or even deeply distressed—with the whole direction of things. And Sharpton actually articulated and advocated the “competing elites” orientation. For example, while being interviewed on one of the main news channels, Sharpton explicitly argued that the role of the masses is to influence what the elites do. Nonetheless, he was “not a serious candidate,” nor was Kucinich, because what they were putting forward, as limited as it was in terms of any real change, had nothing to do with what the actual dynamics of the system were bringing forth and required.

So then you ended up with Kerry as the Democratic candidate, and we all know what that was about. It’s the same “Lucy and Charlie Brown” routine, over and over again. Maybe this time they’ll actually hold the football...No, this time they will do what they always do, leaving you feeling the blues again when, yet another time, they do what they do—and not what you are encouraged to *imagine* they will do. That’s what their role is—that is, it is in line with the actual functioning of the economic base to which these politicians, in an overall and ultimate sense, have to conform and which they have to serve. Through a lot of complexity and struggle, the politics and policies of the campaigns, and of running the government, get worked out among those who represent the capitalist ruling class and the capitalist system, the fundamental dynamics of which shape all this and set its basic terms and limits.¹²

In relation to all this, it is crucial to grasp that what characterizes the political system in this country—and in bourgeois democracies in general—is a monopoly of political power not by elites detached in some way from the underlying economic base, but a monopoly of political power by a group of people who, yes, occupy an elite position, but most essentially are an expression of *definite relations of class domination* and, fundamentally, *definite exploitative production relations*. The political representatives of the mainstream

12. Although the talk from which this text is drawn, was given in 2006, and therefore it does not speak to the current (2008) presidential campaign/election, the basic principles and analyses discussed here apply to bourgeois elections and politics in general, and the “Obama phenomenon” in this (2008) election is a graphic, and highly concentrated, illustration and confirmation of these principles and analyses.

political parties (the Democratic and Republican parties in the U.S.) are in an ultimate and all-around sense the expression, in the political-ideological superstructure, of the underlying production relations of capitalism and the dynamics of capitalist accumulation, particularly as this takes shape and operates in this era of highly globalized capitalist imperialism. They are the expression, in the political sphere, of the monopoly of ownership of the means of production by the capitalist class—which, through that control over the economy, also exercises a monopoly of political power, expressed in an ultimate and concentrated way as the monopoly of “legitimate” armed force, the control of the established armed forces and police of the country, along with control of the courts, the bureaucracies and the institutions and processes of government as a whole.

This fundamental reality—that all this is rooted in the underlying production relations and the accumulation process of the capitalist-imperialist system—is the fundamental reason why the “political elites” are not free to act any way they will—any way they themselves might like to—and, in a basic and overall sense, cannot make decisions based on “mass pressure” that is exerted on them. While, in the face of massive political opposition and resistance—especially as this is manifested outside, and in opposition to, the established political framework and processes—they may be forced, in the short run, to make certain concessions, they will then work to reverse this, in the short run or over time, and in any case they are not free to act in a way that runs contrary to the fundamental class interests they represent, and to the production relations in which those class interests are grounded.

All this, again, is why, to put it simply, they act the way they do—repeatedly. This is why they say one thing and do another. This is why they get you to vote for them and then “sell you out” every time. This is why, for many years, the Democrats have had “no spine,” in opposing what the Bush regime has been insisting on doing. What exists, and is expressed, in the political system is, above all and in essence, a monopoly of political power, not for “un-rooted elites” floating free in the air, but for a *class*. And when, or to the degree that, the “political elites” actually do “compete,” they do so most fundamentally on the terms of that class and of the system in which that class dominates, and in an effort to win the approval and support of that ruling class (or particular sections of it). It is that ruling class which fundamentally and ultimately—including through

struggle within its own ranks—determines what the parameters and limits of “acceptable” politics will be, who the competing candidates will be and what policies they will actually carry out.

It is important to emphasize the aspect of struggle within the ranks of this ruling class because it is necessary to have a living, scientific—dialectical as well as materialist—and not a crude, dogmatic and mechanical understanding of this. As I pointed out in an article that appeared in the newspaper of our Party, *Revolution*, in 2005¹³ there is not a single “committee of the ruling class” sitting in permanent session and deciding all these things. Particularly in a large and complex imperialist country like the U.S., operating on the principles of bourgeois-democratic rule, things are much more complex than that, and decisions are arrived at through much more complex processes. But, in fundamental terms, it is the interests of the ruling capitalist-imperialist class that determine the character, and the confines, of political decision-making, including the electoral process and the actual functions this serves. Once again, deeply grasping this is crucial in understanding why politicians act the way they do and, in opposition to that, what are the actual means to effect social and political change, even short of revolution—and, ultimately, to make revolution in order to qualitatively and radically change the whole character of society and have that kind of qualitative and radical impact on the world as a whole.

Capitalist Society, Bourgeois Democracy and Dictatorship

All this points to the essential fact that what we’re dealing with here is a dictatorship. There is a lot of popular misconception—and a lot of deliberately-propagated misconception—of what dictatorship is, and what it is not. Commonly and popularly—and through the influence of bourgeois political representatives and theoreticians, media mouthpieces, commentators and “pundits,” and the

13. See “There is No ‘They’—But There is a Definite Direction to Things—The Dynamics Within the Ruling Class, and the Challenges for Revolutionaries,” in *Revolution*, #007, June 26, 2005; see also Bob Avakian, *The Coming Civil War and Repolarization for Revolution in the Present Era*, RCP Publications, Chicago, 2005, also available at revcom.us.

rest—dictatorship is understood to mean the rule of an all-powerful and essentially maniacal Leader (with a capital L), like a Hitler (or, as it's generally put out these days, a Stalin or a Mao); or it is presented that a dictatorship is where a small group of people exercise power without allowing any rights to the masses of people, any free expression of ideas, any right to political dissent, and so on. And, conversely, it is said that what a dictatorship is *not* is any society where you have elections with competing candidates and parties and where people are allowed certain civil liberties and human rights (recall the arguments of Robert A. Dahl cited earlier). But in reality, and as a matter of scientific analysis: *A dictatorship is a system of class rule, a monopoly of political power, expressed in a concentrated way through a monopoly of armed force to maintain and enforce that monopoly of political power—which is exercised to preserve and to serve the underlying economic system and its production relations, and the corresponding class and social relations.*

That is the essence of what a dictatorship is. A dictatorship may—in the case of bourgeois democracy, for example—allow people to vote on which group within the ruling class will exercise the functions of this dictatorship over them. What a brilliant scheme!—you not only exercise dictatorship, but you involve those being dictated over in fostering and reinforcing the illusion that they are *not* being dictated over.

At times you will hear some people, including some progressive people, say: "I refuse to acknowledge that I'm being ruled over." Well, refuse to acknowledge it or not, you are. And your refusing to acknowledge it is only doing harm to yourself and others in the same situation, because you can't change reality if you have refused to accept what that reality is. As much as Huey Newton, especially in his early years in leading the Black Panther Party, contributed to the development of a revolutionary movement in the U.S. (and helped inspire people who were building that kind of movement in other countries as well), he was fundamentally wrong—and he gave expression to a misconception that, in one form or another, has a great deal of currency these days—when he said: "Power resides in the ability to define phenomena and cause them to act in a desired manner." You don't exercise power by having some abstract ability to define phenomena any way you would like and thereby cause those phenomena to act in a desired manner. You exert political influence and ultimately exercise political power by recognizing the essential

reality that you are dealing with—what the existing political power is rooted in, reinforces and serves; what the contradictions are within that, and the possible pathways of transformation; and where your interests lie in relation to that—and by acting accordingly.

The fact is that, bourgeois democracy is a very effective form of dictatorship. You have to give the bourgeoisie credit: they've really hit upon and "perfected" something very clever in terms of perpetuating their rule and their interests. And it makes sense for the bourgeoisie to determinedly and stubbornly cling to this, as long as possible, because it involves exercising dictatorship while allowing, and encouraging, people to feel that *they* are exercising the power which in fact is being exercised *over* them.

But this is, nonetheless, a dictatorship, and whenever any group (or at times even an individual) acts in any significant way in opposition to the actual interests that are being dictated, then out comes the sharp edge of this dictatorship. The whole history of the U.S. is in reality a testament to this. In periods of acute social crisis and mass outpouring of opposition, this becomes more clear—it bursts through more of the outward appearance and camouflage. For example, in the great upsurges of the 1960s and into the early '70s in the U.S., many people came up against this dictatorship, and began to get at least a sense of it. I remember myself being in situations of virtual martial law, where you couldn't congregate in groups of more than a few—the police would forcibly break up any attempt to do so—particularly if it seemed to have any oppositional political purpose; and you couldn't do things like openly pass out oppositional political literature. Well, in those conditions it was much harder for people to argue that there is no dictatorship in this country.

And we saw what happened, for example, in the L.A. rebellion in 1992. When the masses of people rebelled, the government didn't say: "Let's have a vote to decide whether we think their rebellion is justified or not." They sent out the National Guard and then they sent out the Army. Why? "To restore order." From the standpoint of the functioning of this system, that was a logical thing to do—to mobilize brute military force, with the threat of massively using it, in order to suppress an uprising that threatened the interests of the ruling class and the "order" that this ruling class, and this system, requires. It did not matter to the ruling class—or it was not accepted by the ruling class—that this rebellion was

righteous, that it was an expression of completely justified mass outrage at years and years of brutal oppression. And even many people who might have identified with, or at least been sympathetic toward, the feeling of outrage that led to the rebellion—which was set off by the Rodney King beating and more specifically the acquittal of the cops who were caught on videotape beating him—were confused and conflicted by the rebellion, because the question was posing itself quite acutely: where is this rebellion going to go? Many people, particularly white middle class people, felt like this: “There is chaos in the streets...Are they going to come over to *my* house and burn my house down or take *my* things?” Even some people who think of themselves as progressive got caught up in that—but what they got caught up in, fundamentally, was a logic that corresponded to the needs of the system. The bourgeois system—whose oppressive functioning was the fundamental cause of the rebellion in the first place—required the reimposition, by open and brutal force, of order. In other words, it required the aggressive assertion of *dictatorship* acting on behalf of, and reinforcing the class interests of, the bourgeois (capitalist) ruling class and the production and social relations of which that bourgeoisie, in turn, is ultimately and fundamentally itself an expression.

If you didn't want to see order reimposed in that kind of way, then you would have to affirm that it is better to have chaos and disorder, at least for a time, than to have the forcible reimposition and reinforcement of injustice. It takes a radical standpoint, verging on a revolutionary one, to take that stand—and to take it thoroughly, and in a deep way. It takes a scientific understanding of the actual relations and dynamics that are involved, and how what exists, and what was then being aggressively asserted, is the actual exercise of dictatorship—even with certain democratic forms—in the interests of a definite class, which is itself the embodiment of definite social and, above all, production relations and the underlying dynamics of capitalist accumulation through those production relations.

At the same time as this dictatorship has a monopoly of political power—expressed in a concentrated way as a monopoly of armed power—it also has a monopoly in molding public opinion, so that the way people are inclined to act politically is in line with the interests of the class which exercises political power—dictatorship—over them.

Some of this came through in the movie “Bulworth.” In that movie the Warren Beatty character, Senator Bulworth, has kind of lost it, but in losing it he’s come closer to the truth—he’s lost his inhibitions. Well, he goes to a candidates’ debate, and you have the Jim Lehrer types there from the media who are going to ask the questions of the candidates. They start asking him questions, but Bulworth replies: Oh, man, this is really ridiculous—the same people who pay us are paying you to ask us the questions! [Laughter]

Well, this is, in somewhat populist terms, a basic reflection, if not a thoroughly scientific analysis, of what actually goes on. It is the “same people”—in the sense of the same *class* that’s exercising political power—who also monopolize and control the media and the means of molding public opinion in various ways—not just through the news media, but in an overall sense in the culture as well, including “popular entertainment” (although in the realm of culture some opposition does get expressed, this is hugely outweighed by the predominant “message” that comes through, in various forms, in the service of the ruling class).

In Morris Berman’s book *Dark Ages America*, there is an important section that speaks about the lies that were told by the Bush regime going into the Iraq war. In reading this, for my own reference I marked the word “lies” next to every place where Berman pinpoints these lies: it goes on for page after page. Berman also exposes the role of the mainstream media in propagating these lies and viciously attacking people who attempted to counter them. He asks, rhetorically:

What to think of NBC, which fired Phil Donahue (in addition to veteran war reporter Peter Arnett), the only TV network host opposed to the war? Or CNN, which attacked Scott Ritter, who had headed the U.N. weapons inspections from 1991 to 1998, as “an apologist for and defender of Saddam Hussein,” because he claimed that the case for Hussein being “a threat to the U.S. worthy of war” had yet to be made? (Kyra Phillips practically called him a traitor during their interview, and Paula Zahn told CNN viewers that he had “drunk Saddam Hussein’s Kool-Aid.”) (Morris Berman, *Dark Ages America: The Final Phase of Empire*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 221.)

Well, this is perfectly consistent with the essential role of these media. That role is to mold and shape public opinion in such a way that when people think and act politically, they are conditioned to think and act within the confines and in the interests of the capitalist-imperialist system.

To cite once again *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?*:

the much-vaunted freedom of expression in the "democratic countries" is not in opposition to but is encompassed by and confined within the actual exercise of dictatorship by the bourgeoisie. This is for two basic reasons—because the ruling class has a monopoly on the means of molding public opinion and because its monopoly of armed force puts it in a position to suppress, as violently as necessary, any expression of ideas, as well as any action, that poses a serious challenge to the established order. What Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* is more true than ever in today's conditions: "The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class." (*Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?*, p. 71)

Dictatorship Does Not Mean Unchallengeable Power

But all this does not mean that the ruling class of imperialists has everything all sewn up. There are profound contradictions in their system which, these days especially, are posing themselves in rather acute terms. And especially at those times when these contradictions become intensified and assume acute expression, this sharpens divisions within the ruling class itself and provides much greater openings for mass resistance to develop and to have effect. It also poses more sharply the need for revolution; and the further intensification of these contradictions may even lead to an opening for revolution.

Now, at the present time, this may not appear to be so true, because for reasons that I've analyzed before,¹⁴ one section of the ruling class (as represented generally by the Democratic Party) faces real difficulties in formulating and fighting in a consistent way for a systematic and coherent program that would really represent an alternative to the dominant program represented now in a concentrated way by the Bush regime.

Still, there are today significant conflicts within the ruling class. The fact that there are real difficulties for the ruling class—and, especially in the face of that, some real differences among them—is the reason that someone like Congressman Murtha, for example, could get a hearing in his criticism of the Iraq war. Of course, Murtha is in no way a representative of the people, and certainly he is not speaking on behalf of the oppressed people of the world, but he is speaking with great concern about serious problems that he sees arising already, and potentially much greater problems, for the U.S. ruling class. Murtha may get attacked, he may get shoved to the side, but he still has gotten a certain hearing, because there is enough conflict within the ruling class that arguments like his are treated as within the scope of “legitimate discourse,” on ruling class terms (and Murtha has certain particular credentials and connections—long-time association with the military, and so on—which make it more possible for him to say these things). I saw Murtha not long ago on Paula Zahn: he was talking about the murders of civilians carried out by U.S. soldiers in Haditha, Iraq, and Zahn went after him with her fangs bared. But what happened was interesting. He actually got angry and responded accordingly, rather than backing away from this—this turned into a rather sharp confrontation, which I don't think was mainly staged. But someone like Murtha's being able to express his views and to be taken seriously in a certain context, even while also being marginalized to some degree, is an expression of the fact that there are significant conflicts within the ruling class at this point; and the warnings being voiced by Murtha,

14. See, for example, “The Pyramid of Power And the Struggle to Turn This Whole Thing Upside Down,” in *Revolutionary Worker* #1231, March 7, 2004, & #1237, April 25, 2004, also available at revcom.us; see also *Revolution: Why It's Necessary, Why It's Possible, What It's All About*, DVD of a talk by Bob Avakian, Three Q Productions, Chicago, 2004.

along with some other ruling class figures, represent concern over much greater contradictions that could emerge and erupt.¹⁵

So, we shouldn't look simply at the way contradictions within the ruling class are posed at this point, and see only the significant aspect of paralysis on the part of one section of the ruling class (grouped around the Democrats). We should look further, at the deeper dynamics and at the potential for all this to assume much more acute expression. This, of course, will have very contradictory effects. On the one hand, this can (to echo Lenin's phrasing) provide further cracks, fissures and openings for mass outrage to erupt on a large scale. On the other hand, it will quite likely lead to even more vicious repression, including of any such mass eruptions and outbreaks of political resistance and concerted efforts to affect and change government policy.

15. At the time of this talk—prior to the Congressional elections in 2006—John Murtha, a veteran congressman from Pennsylvania, was one of a very few members of the Democratic Party who was then not only raising serious criticisms of the U.S. war in Iraq but was declaring that this war could not be won and that the U.S. needed to pull back (at least its main forces) from Iraq. Since that time, and in particular with the emerging candidacy of Barack Obama, leaders of the Democratic Party have been calling for a timetable for the withdrawal of at least most U.S. forces from Iraq—although this has been coupled, including on the part of Obama, with caveats about how it is important not to be precipitous, or careless, in pulling out U.S. forces from Iraq, and to listen to the concerns of the “generals on the ground” in Iraq about when U.S. troops could be withdrawn, and/or what kind of “residual force” should be left in Iraq, even after the withdrawal of (most) U.S. forces there. These Democratic Party leaders, and again Obama in particular, have also insisted that the war in Afghanistan must be more vigorously fought, including through the transfer of significant U.S. forces from Iraq to Afghanistan, while Obama has spoken of the possibility of launching direct attacks within Pakistan, in relation to (or as an extension of) the war in Afghanistan, and he—along with the Democratic Party leadership in general—has consistently insisted that it may be necessary to go to war with Iran, and possibly even to use *nuclear weapons* in attacking Iran (“all options must remain on the table”), if Iran does not bow to U.S. demands to stop its enrichment of uranium, even though, according to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran has a right to develop nuclear power for peaceful purposes, and there has been no conclusive evidence that Iran has been developing nuclear weapons.

The Obama candidacy, and the Democratic Party approach overall at this point (in 2008), embodies some notion of “course correction” in regard to the program that has been very aggressively pursued by the Bush regime, but it does not represent any kind of fundamental departure—it is not a “systematic and coherent program that would really represent an alternative to the dominant program represented now in a concentrated way by the Bush regime.” As mainstream,

But, just as we recognize, and emphasize, the profound point that (to paraphrase Marx) what is important is not what the masses of people are thinking and doing at any given time, but what they will be confronted with by the actual workings and dynamics of the system—and the ways this can impel them in the direction of thinking and acting differently—this also applies to the ruling class and to divisions and conflicts within the ruling class. What expression those divisions and conflicts take is not dependent primarily on what appears on the surface at any given time, or on the will of individual representatives of the ruling class, but on what are actually the underlying and driving dynamics. And if you go back to what is the larger grand strategy of the dominant force within the ruling class at this time (grouped now in and around the Bush regime) and look at what that is going to run up against as they pursue that and seek to go from one offensive to the next, you can see the potential for contradictions in the world and in U.S. society itself—including within the U.S. ruling class—to greatly sharpen and intensify, and you can, in turn, get a sense of the potential dialectic—the back and forth relation and mutual interaction—between that and what goes on among the masses of people.

This is a very important point: While the ruling class exercises dictatorship, it is not the case that it has absolute freedom and has no problems and no difficulties, is confronted with no necessity. In fact, at this time, the U.S. imperialist ruling class faces great necessity, and further necessity for it is being created by the way in which the core in power now (the Bush regime, for

bourgeois commentator Andrew Sullivan has pointed out, in arguing in favor of the Obama candidacy, it is “generally *minor* policy choices” that are “on the table” in the current (2008) presidential election. (See “Goodbye to All That: Why Obama Matters,” in the December, 2007 *Atlantic Monthly*, emphasis added.) Obama’s candidacy is not about changing American society, or its role in the world, in any essential way—which Obama could not do even if he wanted to, which he does not—but it is, secondarily, about making certain tactical adjustments in the course set by the Bush regime, and is principally about attempting to change the way in which people around the world, as well as in the U.S. itself, perceive this country and what it is doing in the world—to “put a better face on this,” and carry it out with a different style and tone, “rounding off some of the rough edges” of the way in which Bush and his regime have antagonized much of the rest of the world in pursuing a program which, to a very large extent, is shared by all sections of the ruling class and their representatives, even with certain secondary differences among them.

short) is aggressively pursuing its program (what we have referred to as its juggernaut of war and repression). We should keep in mind that those grouped around Cheney, and others aligned with them, first formulated a decade or so ago the grand strategy which has since become articulated as a national security strategy, after Bush took office. These forces have been arguing for this strategy since the early '90s—insisting, on the one hand, that there is an opening to make a leap in imposing American hegemony on the entire world in an unprecedented way, in a way that they believed would be unchallenged and even unchallengeable, but warning, on the other hand, that this opening will close after a certain period of time—other regional, and world, powers will emerge, and (they argue) if we don't seize the initiative now, we won't be able to continue the kind of momentum that will be necessary to do this. In formulating and advocating this strategy, they acknowledged that it would be hard to get the American people behind it—not that they let the people decide, but they do want to do this with the people deluded and following behind them to the greatest degree possible. This wouldn't be so easy to do, they recognized, absent something like a new Pearl Harbor—which then happened on September 11, 2001. This does emphasize that the question of whether these ruling class forces might have played some role in the 9/11 events is something which should not simply be dismissed, but does need to be looked into, in a serious and scientific way. Yet, whatever the story is with that, September 11 provided them with their “new Pearl Harbor.”

But even that has turned into its opposite in significant aspects. It is not now the same situation it was when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, shortly after September 11, 2001. The Bush regime ran into much more massive political opposition when it turned its focus from Afghanistan to Iraq. A lot of people were confused: What does that have to do with the “war on terror”? Well, if you think it's actually a war on terror, maybe it is confusing; but if you understand that, in fundamental and essential terms, this is a *war for empire*, then you can see that the war in Iraq has everything to do with it. But the Bush regime—as the driving force of the ruling class as a whole—ran into a very acute contradiction, because they were waging a war for empire *in the name of* a “war on terror.” That contradiction significantly rebounded in their face—it didn't stop them from aggressively pursuing the war in Iraq, and the “war on terror” overall, but it created all kinds of difficulties for them, even within the U.S.,

besides the difficulties they've had in actually imposing their will "on the ground" (and from the air) in Iraq. And along with this, there are the continuing, and mounting, difficulties they have had in "pacifying Afghanistan" after their initial success in toppling the Taliban: There is a growing resurgence of resistance in Afghanistan which, unfortunately, still consists largely of the Taliban and other reactionary forces allied with it. At the same time, there is the real possibility of a U.S. attack on Iran, which is fraught with great danger not only for the people of Iran, and that whole region, and indeed for the people of the whole world, but also for the U.S. imperialists themselves.

So they don't have everything all locked up. It is the nature of reality, and it is the nature of their system as a particular expression of reality, that it is full of and driven by contradiction; and even if certain contradictions are dealt with—either resolved or partially resolved or mitigated—this gives rise to new contradictions (or old contradictions in new forms). You go into Iraq, and then you've got the "cut-and-run" problem, the way things have turned out—the reality that, even if things are not going the way you planned, now that you have committed to this, and made it a major front of your so-called "war on terror," you can't simply pull out, without causing even greater problems for yourself. This is why there is a strong pull—and not just a pull on the Bush regime, but on the ruling class overall—to aggressively pursue that war, even with the difficulties they've encountered as a result of waging this war in the first place. So they had a certain necessity not to lose what they saw as a "window of opportunity"—particularly with the collapse of the Soviet Union and "the triumph of the U.S. in the Cold War"—and then they've created new necessity for themselves—not just for others, but for themselves as well—by going ahead and pursuing this course, including the war in Iraq.

It is very important to understand these dynamics in this way and not to simply see, as many people do spontaneously, how powerful these imperialists are. Otherwise, even a recognition of the way the ruling class dominates society can lead to defeatism: "OK, I agree with you, they run everything, they control everything, they dictate everything—there's not a fucking thing we can do." No. They do monopolize everything, dominate everything, dictate everything—but this is all riddled with contradiction which has the potential—and not just in some abstract historical sense—to become extremely acute.

Communism and Capitalism: Two Fundamentally Opposed Views of Freedom

To encapsulate a basic point that I have been coming at from a number of different angles: Political rule in American society, as in all capitalist societies, is democracy in its outward form, whose inner essence is dictatorship—dictatorship by the capitalist class (the bourgeoisie). And, in a country like the U.S., both “mainstream” political parties—the Democrats no less than the Republicans—are parties of the *ruling class*, serving the interests of that ruling class and the system in which that class dominates and of which that class is itself an expression. The essential role of *both* these parties is one of seeking to enforce the interests of the ruling class of capitalist-imperialists against the interests of the masses of people. Where and to the degree that these parties have differences, it is *in that context and for that purpose*.

But is there an alternative to this which could really embody a radically different kind of political power—and which, beyond that, could finally lead to the ending of the situation where one part of society exercises power, that is dictatorship, over others? The answer is yes—the road to such a society lies in the communist revolution.

Over 150 years ago, Karl Marx indicated, in very succinct terms, what the basic course and the basic aims of the communist revolution are. That revolution, he pointed out, must overthrow the rule of the capitalists—the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie—and establish the dictatorship of the formerly exploited class in capitalist society, the proletariat. But, Marx emphasized, this is not the end of the revolution; it is only the first step, or leap, toward a much greater goal and much more world-historic transformation in human society. The dictatorship of the proletariat, Marx made clear, must lead to—is the necessary transit to—the abolition of all class distinctions, of all the production relations on which those class distinctions rest, of all the social relations that correspond to those production relations, and the revolutionizing of all the ideas that correspond to those social relations (this is what we often refer to as the “4 Alls”). To put this another way (to refer to the language of the *Communist Manifesto*), the communist revolution involves two radical ruptures: the radical rupture with all traditional property relations—with exploitative economic-production relations, and with oppressive social relations,

such as the relations between men and women, which historically have been, and in a real sense remain, property relations that are bound up with antagonistic class divisions and which today find expression essentially as relations of commodity exchange—and, along with that, the radical rupture with all traditional ideas, with all the ideas that go along with and reinforce relations of exploitation and oppression. The communist revolution must involve the radical rupture with all that, in order to bring into being fundamentally different and liberating production, social and political relations, and the corresponding ideas.

In accordance with this, the democracy that takes form with the dictatorship of the proletariat, as a transition to communism, is radically different from that under the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Socialist democracy, with the dictatorship of the proletariat, not only actually enables political power to be exercised by the masses of people, increasingly involving the great majority of society in meaningful decision-making—which can never happen in a society ruled by an exploiting class, including the bourgeoisie—but also provides the basis for a flourishing of individuality and of individual rights, on an unprecedented scale and in a way that can also never happen under the rule of an exploiting class, where individuals find their position in society and their freedom defined and confined—shaped and circumscribed—by the prevailing, exploitative and oppressive, production and social relations.

At the same time, the role of the masses of people, with the dictatorship of the proletariat, is not limited to increasingly exercising political power, in some static sense, but more fundamentally lies in *continuing to transform society* toward the achievement of the “4 Alls” and the “Two Radical Ruptures” and, together with the revolutionary struggle throughout the world, advancing *beyond* the division of society into classes, beyond a situation where there are groups of people with antagonistically opposed interests and accordingly the existence of a state, a dictatorship, which imposes the interests of the ruling class over the rest of society. The continuation of the revolutionary transformation of society with the dictatorship of the proletariat is aimed at achieving the truly world-historic advance to where all those divisions and antagonisms, and the institutions and structures that correspond to that, as well as all the customs, traditions and ways of thinking that go along with that, can be overcome and moved beyond. The democracy that we

seek to effect, with the rule of the proletariat—which, in a concentrated way through its vanguard party, leads the broad masses of people of different strata in exercising political power in socialist society—is inspired by and aims for those world-historic transformations, and nothing less than that. Democracy in socialist society must, at every point and increasingly, be an expression of the advance toward those aims; and, in turn, a necessary part of this advance is finding the ways to give continually greater expression to democracy in that context, and in pursuit of those objectives.

Communism: a *positive*—and not just a *negative*—vision of freedom

In the concluding section of the book *Phony Communism Is Dead...Long Live Real Communism!*, I spoke to the fundamentally opposed visions of freedom embodied in the bourgeois and the communist viewpoints, and I returned to this more deeply in a recent talk, excerpts of which have been published recently under the title, “Views on Socialism and Communism: A Radically New Kind of State, a Radically Different and Far Greater Vision of Freedom.” Here I want to focus on certain particular aspects of this: the concepts of *negative*, and on the other hand *positive*, freedom, and related notions and distortions concerning “utopian-totalitarian horrors.”¹⁶

In *Dark Ages America*, Morris Berman refers to the discussion of these different concepts of freedom by the historian Isaiah Berlin. In basic terms, *positive* freedom is a concept that associates freedom with the attempt to achieve an objective—to bring about change—with regard to society and the people in society. On the other hand, as Berman writes:

Negative freedom means I can do whatever I want so long as it doesn't interfere with the rights of others. This concept lies at the heart of liberal democratic politics; it deals with people at the level of what they say they want. (*Dark Ages America*, p. 71)

16. *Phony Communism Is Dead...Long Live Real Communism!* was originally published in 1992; a second edition was published in 2004, by RCP Publications, with the addition of an appendix “*Democracy: More Than Ever, We Can and Must Do Better Than That*,” which itself was originally published in 1992 in *A World To Win* magazine. “Views on Socialism and Communism: A Radically New Kind of State, a Radically Different and Far Greater Vision of Freedom” is available at revcom.us.

Berman continues:

So far, so good....The problem is that Berlin neglected to examine the downside of *negative* freedom, which renders his analysis lopsided....Negative freedom is essentially a position of absence; it corresponds perfectly to the laissez-faire economy. (*Dark Ages America*, p. 72, emphasis in original)

And Berman has significant criticisms of the laissez-faire economy and a society based on it. But, at the same time, he essentially accepts completely distorted notions about totalitarianism— notions which, as we know, are especially applied to communism. Referring to, and agreeing to a large extent with, Isaiah Berlin's 1958 lecture at Oxford University in England, entitled "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berman writes:

Using communism as the worst-case scenario, Berlin spent most of the lecture (and in fact, most of his life) focusing on the downside of positive freedom, which is certainly real. All utopian political schemes shade into their totalitarian opposite, he said, because of the arrogance inherent in the position that I know better than someone else what his "true" desires are, his hidden potential is, and am willing to coerce him into living the way he "ought" to live. (*Dark Ages America*, pp. 71–72)

In this characterization of what constitutes positive freedom—and this is a fairly widely-held view—it is not freedom that simply leaves you alone to do what you want, it is a freedom that tells you what you're supposed to want, and to do—a "freedom" that will be imposed on you by those who arrogantly believe that they know better than you what it is you actually should want and should therefore do.

There are so many things wrong with this, particularly as a characterization of communism, that it is hard to know where to start in refuting it. But to begin with something very basic: As anyone who has engaged it in any significant way should know, communism is not a "utopian" system, neither in conception nor in the way communist objectives have found expression in socialist society up to this point (in the Soviet Union from the time of the October, 1917 Revolution until the mid-1950s, and in China from 1949 to 1976). As a matter

of fact, a little reading of Marx and Engels would bring this rather quickly and sharply to light. Marx and Engels expended quite a lot of effort explicitly differentiating their theories and political positions from those of utopians. For example, in the *Communist Manifesto* there is a whole section criticizing utopian socialist ideas and programs, counterposing them to the scientific approach that Marx and Engels were bringing forward. Engels wrote a book whose title explicitly points to this profound difference—actually this was part of a larger work, *Anti-Duhring*, but it was published separately, under the title *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Now, by this Engels didn't mean that the socialism he was advocating was *both* utopian *and* scientific! His whole point was to put forward *scientific* socialism (which has been associated with its main founder, Marx, and has come to be called communism) and to *distinguish* that from various forms of philosophically idealist, utopian socialism.

The concept of communism as the “worst-case scenario of totalitarianism”—a concept based on the notion that the leaders of such a society think they “know” better than the people themselves what is good for them and what they want and need, or *should* want and need—this has nothing to do with what communism is actually all about. That is not to say that people calling themselves communists have never acted in this way. But the point is that this has nothing to do with the *principles* of communism *or* with a revolutionary struggle based on those principles and aiming to bring a communist world into being.

Necessity and freedom

Fundamental to a correct appreciation of this is the understanding that there never has been, and never could be, a society or a world—there never could be human existence—without necessity and, for that matter, without coercion in one form or another. The question is: What is the relation between necessity and coercion on the one hand and freedom on the other hand, and between self-conscious emancipation on the one hand and the underlying material conditions on the other hand?

In a number of other talks and writings (including “Views on Socialism and Communism”) I have emphasized the scientific, dialectical materialist understanding that freedom actually resides not in the exercise of some “free will” independent of all underlying

conditions or social constraints, but resides rather in the recognition, and more than that the *transformation*, of necessity—both necessity imposed by nature and necessity imposed by social relations at any given time, including international relations.

Now there is, in the communist revolution—in the struggle toward the final goal of a communist world—the need for leadership. In fact, this is not unique to communism, it is true in all societies, and in all struggles to change society; but in the communist revolution the need for and the role of leadership is not disguised but is openly expressed and advocated. This is for all the reasons that Lenin analyzed extensively and compellingly, especially in works like *What Is To Be Done?* This has to do with the fundamental, antagonistic divisions in capitalist society, which make communist revolution necessary, and possible—and more particularly it has to do with the ways in which these very same exploitative and oppressive relations serve to deny the masses of people significant access to and training in the realm of theory and working with ideas.

Along with this, there is the reality that, at any given time and in one way or another, “terms are going to be set.” This is another way of speaking to the existence and role of necessity. “Terms will be set” by objective reality in the larger sense, and they will also be set, yes, through the conscious actions of human beings—as individuals, but more essentially, and with greater impact, as social forces. This is expressed in many ways in capitalist society. There is the necessity, on a basic level, for people to find work, in order to be able to live. Some people, especially in the more privileged middle strata, have all kinds of illusions about the freedom they have, but at times they, too, are brought back to reality—for example, in situations where, all of a sudden, the job they have held for many years is eliminated and they are laid off. In such circumstances, they may have to pick up and move from one city to another—not because they always had a dream, ever since they were a three-year-old, to live in that new city, but because this is the only way they can make a livelihood, at least one commensurate with the kind of life they’ve become accustomed to and believe they have a need for. And, whether they want to acknowledge it or not, they are always being confronted with necessity (“terms”) that are imposed on them socially and politically.

To illustrate this further, let’s take some of the better aspirations of some of the more progressive people. They don’t like—in

fact, they are disturbed, perhaps deeply disturbed, by—many social inequalities that exist: between men and women, in the oppression of minority nationalities, and in other ways. But these terms have been set, these relations are established and enforced, as a result of the very nature and through the dynamics of this system, and people don't get to just "choose" to abolish them because they hate them, even if they do. People are forced to respond to conditions and terms that are set and imposed on them by forces above and beyond them as individuals. In fact, this will always be true for human beings in any society. The difference is that, in communist society, class divisions and other oppressive social relations will have been eliminated; these relations, and the outlook that goes along with this, will not stand as an obstacle to and interfere with the efforts of human beings—individually and, above all, cooperatively and collectively—to respond to the necessity they face at any given time. But at present we are still in the era of human history where any individual's or any group's attempts to respond to necessity not only have to confront that necessity in a general sense, but in attempting to do so face obstacles imposed by *social and class divisions and the corresponding ideas and outlooks*.

The essential difference with regard to communist society is not that we would no longer face necessity, or that no terms would be set—not only by nature but also socially—but that human beings, individually and above all collectively, would be able to confront and approach the transformation of this necessity *without the hindrance of class divisions and other oppressive social relations and the corresponding ideas, including the ways in which an understanding of reality is distorted through the prism of these antagonistic social and class relations, and the ideas and outlooks that correspond to them.*

In conclusion on this point, communism does not simply, or most essentially, envision and encompass "negative freedom"—that is, ways in which people, in socialist society as well as in communist society, will be able to pursue particular individual inclinations without interference from the institutions of society, so long as this does not do harm to others, or to society overall, in a way that has been socially-determined to be unacceptable—but, beyond that, communism envisions and will embody a whole new dimension of *positive* freedom: people pursuing, and effecting, individually but above all in common

and through their mutual interaction—including through non-antagonistic struggle—the ongoing transformation of society and of nature (and the relation between the two) to continually enhance the material and the intellectual and cultural life of society as a whole as well as of the individuals who comprise society.

The role of leadership in moving beyond social divisions that make institutionalized leadership necessary

Between here and communist society is where the real difficulty resides, at least in the perspective from which we see things now. Perhaps people in communist society would see this whole thing differently, and our difficulties today would appear quite differently to them than they do to us now. But from our perspective at this point, between here and the achievement of communism is where the acute contradictions get posed and where the difficulties come in. One of the main aspects of this is that it requires leadership to “work through”—to struggle through—these contradictions. And, yes, leadership does involve setting some terms.

Let’s take a sharp example of how terms need to be set: the question of evolution. I have to say, I am sick and tired of listening to these ridiculous creationist arguments attacking evolution. **SHUT THE FUCK UP!** [Laughter] As pointed out in the book *The Science of Evolution and the Myth of Creationism—Knowing What’s Real and Why It Matters*,¹⁷ every time science makes a new discovery that further confirms the already well-established fact of evolution, the creationists attempt to turn that into another attack on evolution. One of the main dimensions of this is the creationists’ “god of the gaps” device: a new fossil is found and now, they insist, you’ve got *two new gaps*, one on either side of the new fossil! [Laughter] These creationists seek to—or in any case often do in fact—wear down scientists and others who would argue, scientifically and honestly, the case for evolution and why it is important for people to know about evolution and to understand that this is one of the most well-established facts in all of science. The creationists are simply not interested in that. They have an agenda and they’re driven by that agenda, so they’re not going to take up, or be moved

17. Ardea Skybreak, *The Science of Evolution and the Myth of Creationism—Knowing What’s Real and Why It Matters*, Insight Press, Chicago, 2006.

by, a scientific approach to this—they *reject* the scientific method. They claim to have a “higher truth” which is greater than anything science can discover.

What is the relevance of this to the contradictions I am focusing on here, which are bound up with the socialist transition from the present to the future, from capitalist to communist society? Well, when we get to socialist society, the question of evolution will be treated as a definitively settled matter. If, especially in the early stages of socialism, there are some people who disagree with this—who will not accept the well-established scientific fact of evolution—then they can have their view, as thoroughly wrong as it is, but there is going to be a definite “verdict” about this question in society, and this will be reflected in things like policy about the curriculum in the schools. By the way, there is government policy about curriculum in the schools now, in case anybody hadn’t noticed. [Laughter] And there are today very real battles over what that basic curriculum should be. This will be true in socialist society as well, but it will be on an entirely different foundation and on radically different terms. Scientists in socialist society won’t be consumed with things like having to battle creationists over scientific theories, such as evolution, which have long been very firmly established as true and valid. After exhausting experience attempting to have honest debates with creationists, Stephen J. Gould finally concluded that it was not worth it to debate them anymore, because you cannot have an honest debate with them—and it just serves their purposes, making their ideas seem like something legitimate to debate, while wearing out the scientists who are attempting to engage this on an honest and rational basis. Well, in socialist society, there will be plenty of space and scope for vigorous debate about all kinds of questions, including in the realm of the sciences—and, as I have emphasized, this will be all the richer the more it is increasingly unfettered from commodity relations and their reflections in people’s thinking—but people, and in particular public institutions, will not be occupied, and vitiated, by endless debate with people who simply cannot accept well-established facts and theories, even long after they have been repeatedly verified by scientific methods.

This is a point in opposition to John Stuart Mill, and in particular to the bias and limitations of Mill. There does come a time when you have to close the debate and say: That’s enough about this, because the truth of this can be known, it has been established through many broad avenues and interwoven and mutually-reinforcing ways;

it's time to settle the verdict on this and turn our attention to other questions. That happens in any field in any society, but it will happen in a radically different way through radically different means and on a radically different foundation in socialist society, and still more in communist society.

Once again, the notion of communism as "utopianism turned totalitarian horror," where some people act on the assumption that they know better than others and seek to impose their ideas on others, is really very much in opposition to the essence of what communism is about—and, not only that, it's very much in opposition to reality. Yes, in socialist society it will still be the case—and this will find institutionalized expression—that some individuals, and more essentially some groups of people, will exercise a disproportionate influence over society. This will be so *not* because communists invented and imposed this, and institutionalized it with the advent of the socialist revolution, but because this will be inherited from thousands of years of class-divided society, where such divisions exist in profound ways and embody, and serve to reinforce, fundamental relations of oppression and exploitation. Moving to overcome all this will require a whole historical period. And although, throughout that whole transition, there will be a situation in which certain individuals and groups will exert a disproportionate influence over the direction of society, this will be less and less the case as this transition is carried forward. Overcoming and getting beyond that is in a real sense essential to, and a concentrated expression of, the aims of the communist revolution.

But we don't get to abolish this through the mere exercise of will or desire to do so. All this is rooted in underlying material reality, in profound material contradictions—in other words, necessity—that we have to transform through a whole historical era of struggle. And while there is that disproportionate influence of individuals and groups, there is always the potential for that disproportionate influence to be exercised in ways that run against the interests of the masses of people and against the very objectives in whose name that influence is being exerted. More specifically, there is a potential for communists to turn into revisionists—into people who, rather than upholding and fighting for the aims and objectives of, and the advance toward, communism, come instead to represent and fight for policies which, whatever their intentions, objectively lead back in the direction of capitalism. This can happen, and we have bitterly experienced that it has happened, first in the Soviet Union and then later in China.

But it is important to stress that, while these contradictions have a particular expression in socialist society, they are, in a broader and more overall sense, expressive of more fundamental contradictions characterizing class-divided society. This is not something that socialism brought into being through a “utopianism” that becomes transformed into totalitarian horrors. This is something that will be inherited—and that it is not possible to avoid inheriting—from thousands of years of society’s being divided into classes, thousands of years in which the two radical ruptures spoken of in the *Communist Manifesto* have not yet been made, a whole era in human history in which traditional property relations, and the traditional ideas corresponding to them, have been in effect and have been enforced, in accordance with the underlying material conditions and contradictions.

Let’s look at an important example from the experience of socialist society which stands as a sharp refutation of the notion that communism consists of “utopianism turned totalitarian horror”—where those who hold power seek to determine for the rest of the people what it is they should want, and force them to act accordingly. Raymond Lotta has pointed out that in socialist China (during the time of Mao), in the realm of consumer products there was a policy of having repeated surveys taken by the people working in the consumer sector, going out to the potential consumers, the masses of people, to conduct investigation among them to find out what kind of consumer items, with what quality and what quantity, etc., they would like to see, and to work out, together with these potential consumers—as well as with the sectors of the economy that produced these consumer items—better ways of producing things, which drew from these investigations.¹⁸ Now, this doesn’t mean that they simply took a “poll” or did a survey and then acted in direct and complete accordance with that, while ignoring the larger necessities and capabilities of the economy; what it means is that they repeatedly drew on the opinions of the masses, in this case their opinions about consumer items, and integrated that into an overall and synthesized plan that took into account all the various dimensions of the economy, and all the contradictions that are involved in developing the economy along socialist lines, increasingly in the interests of the masses of people—and not

18. See, for example, Raymond Lotta, “Introduction” and “Afterword” to *Maoist Economics And The Revolutionary Road To Communism, The Shanghai Textbook*, Banner Press, New York, 1994; see also thisiscommunism.org, the website of the Set the Record Straight project.

with regard merely to their more immediate and short-term needs but also their larger needs and interests in continuing the transformation of society, and the world, toward the goal of achieving communism, with the abolition of class divisions and all relations of exploitation and oppression, and the achievement of a common abundance for humanity and the flowering of human beings in that overall context.

Now, another commonly propagated notion is that in socialist China all the masses wore blue and gray uniforms—they all were a bunch of blue and gray ants—because Mao and other communist bosses believed that if everybody all wore simple uniforms and looked alike, it would be easier to control them and treat them like one indistinguishable mass without individuality, each interchangeable with the other. Well, along with the way this is a gross distortion in a general sense, this ignores—or reveals gross ignorance of—what the reality, the necessity, was that had to be confronted, and transformed, as the Chinese revolution triumphed and moved forward into socialism. When I visited China in the early 1970s, one of the things I noticed was that many children had these remarkably beautiful and variegated, many-colored clothes, while many of the adults still wore much simpler clothes. This was a matter of conscious orientation and policy, and part of a transition. But, in these distortions and slanders against Mao and socialist China, we see the utter idealism involved in these attacks, totally ignoring what the conditions were like for the masses of people before the revolution, and why this revolution was necessary and took place to begin with.

The masses of peasants in pre-revolutionary China, who made up the great bulk of the population, suffered under terrible oppression and were extremely poor. One manifestation of this was that they had very few items of clothing, usually made of cotton; this was all they had to wear, even in the winter, which is very harsh and severe in many parts of China. Since they could rarely afford new clothes, they had to rely on putting padding on the old clothes, as they became worn and torn—and after a while there were more holes than clothes in what many peasants were wearing. People were starving in large numbers, many were forced to sell their own children, often selling their daughters into prostitution, or even suffocating daughters at birth because things were desperate overall and girls were considered less valuable than boys—this was part of the overall relations in society which subjected females to degradation and abuse at every turn. These are the kinds of conditions that gave rise to the

revolution in the first place, and these are conditions that, once the new, revolutionary state was established, it set out to overcome.

And when, after the victory of the revolution, in the new socialist society they began to mass-produce clothes for the people, the first thing they concerned themselves with was not producing dyes and putting clothes through another production run to dye the clothes in many different colors; the first thing they were concerned about was that everybody would have clothes to protect them from the winter, and other necessities, to enable them to live a life worthy of a human being. At that time, beginning in late 1949, there were about five hundred million people in China, and this expanded to about eight hundred million people, as the population grew during the course of several decades of socialism in China. That's a lot of people to provide clothes for. That had never been a concern of the imperialists, and the exploiting classes in China aligned with the imperialists, who ruled the country in the pre-revolutionary days. But, with the victory of the revolution, this was one of the primary concerns of the new socialist government. So, when they mass-produced clothes for the people, at first they did so in a few simple colors, with the aim of providing enough clothing for everybody. Then, once that basic need had been fulfilled, they began to undertake and develop the processes of dyeing the clothes and producing many different colors, and they did it first for the children, because the children are the future, because the children are the ones who ought to have the bright colors that correspond to the bright future they could look forward to, as long as socialism lasted. And then they began to expand it out from there.

This is the reality, and this reality embodies the exact opposite of what is contained in these unprincipled attacks on "Maoist China," and on the experience of socialist society and communism in general. To echo the brilliantly incisive phrasing of Mark Twain (who said that what you need to get along in America is the perfect combination of ignorance and arrogance) these attacks represent a perfect expression of ignoring—or arrogantly assuming that it is not necessary to be aware of and to take into account—the necessity that people faced, and how they were setting about transforming that necessity in a whole new and radically different way as a result of having risen up in a revolution led by a communist vanguard, seizing power and beginning to more and more consciously revolutionize society in accordance with their fundamental interests,

even with mistakes that were made and definite shortcomings and limitations that were involved—all of which we should, and must, learn from, in order to do even better in the next wave of socialist revolutions.

A scientific understanding of society, and revolutionary changes in society— a basic answer to the slanders against communism

The superficiality of these kinds of attacks and slanders against communism and socialist society stands out very sharply, once one has even a basic understanding of what is involved in carrying out a revolution and then the socialist transition toward the ultimate aim of communism throughout the world. But precisely from a scientific, materialist standpoint, we can understand that until the advance to communism is actually achieved, in all situations in which society is divided into classes and there are the corresponding social inequalities, someone—or, better said, some group of people—is going to have a greater influence than others over affairs of state and the direction of society and that society's interconnection and interaction with the rest of the world; and in various ways that greater influence and role will be institutionalized, as indeed it is in every other form of society, although in fundamentally different ways and to fundamentally different effects. All this is, once again, a reflection, and in certain ways a concentration, of the underlying social and, above all, production relations.

But here it is important to emphasize two basic points:

One, this inequality in influence and decision-making is *much less* in socialist society than it is under capitalism, or any other system ruled by exploiting classes—and, as experience has highlighted, particularly through the Cultural Revolution in China, one of the main tasks of the socialist revolution, and one of the sharpest arenas of class struggle in socialist society, takes shape precisely in terms of whether or not to continue to *narrow* this difference, along with other social inequalities.

And, two, with the achievement of communism—and *only* in communist society—will this discrepancy, this gap, be fully and finally overcome.

The superficiality of the analysis of communism as articulated by people like Isaiah Berlin—and the yawning chasm between this analysis and what communism actually is and aims for—is, to put it bluntly, stunning. And so is the total lack of materialism reflected in this whole line of thinking—a lack of understanding that, in any situation and any society, wants and needs are socially conditioned and determined, and are not some expression of individual will divorced from the prevailing social—and most fundamentally production—relations. In “Views On Socialism and Communism” I gave the example of youth in the inner cities of the U.S. who are determined to have, and are convinced that they need, very expensive rims for their cars. That is not an idea that is innate to them, not an idea they were born with, or some notion they developed in the absence of and divorced from the social conditions that surround them, and the ideas that go along with those social conditions. People living in the 18th century would not have had the idea of having rims for the wheels on their cars—and in the future communist society, which would move beyond this whole crazy car-based economy, that idea would not arise (or, in any case, would not represent any significant social phenomenon).

Wants and needs are fundamentally shaped by the prevailing production and social relations and by the superstructure that essentially corresponds to and serves those production and social relations. The mania for shopping in this society, among broad strata of people—and in particular women, who are particularly targeted and influenced in this way by advertising, and in a larger sense by the functioning of the society overall—is a socially conditioned and socially determined phenomenon. There is not a gene for shopping.

Communism is not about telling people what they “really” want, in opposition to what they “think” they want. It is fundamentally about transforming the production and social relations, and along with that the superstructure of politics and ideology. It is about achieving the “4 Alls,” to which I’ve made reference. The struggle to reach communism does involve and require a conscious and organized leading group, a vanguard, which, if it is going to lead the advance to communism, must base itself not on a utopian ideal but on a scientific understanding of human society and its historical development, and the fact that this historical development,

while not following any predetermined plan nor any transcendental will, has nevertheless led humanity to a situation where there is the possibility—not the inevitability but the possibility—of making the leap to communism; a vanguard which, on that basis, and through applying the scientific outlook and methodology of communism, brings this understanding to the masses of people, enables them to take this up and mobilizes them to wage an increasingly conscious struggle on this basis: to first overthrow the capitalist system and establish the socialist system, with the dictatorship of the proletariat; and then, while defending the socialist state against threats and attacks by remaining reactionary states and reactionary forces, within the country and internationally, to advance through a whole period of socialist transition to communism as part of, and together with, this same struggle throughout the world.

Now that, of course, is a very boiled-down statement of the fundamental character and aims of the communist revolution, and as such it cannot help but include a certain amount of oversimplification. But it presents the essence of the matter, and it is a million times closer to the actuality of what communism and communists are all about than the rather silly—and at the same time pernicious—notions, glibly tossed around, about utopian totalitarians thinking they know what is good for people and then setting out to force people to act in accordance with this utopian notion, whether they like it or not. Such superficiality and distortion, grounded in a lack of materialist dialectics, leads far too many people, even otherwise critically thinking people, to suspend critical thinking and uncritically accept the most grotesque distortions of and attacks on communism and the experience of revolutions and socialist societies led by communists—the lurid tales of “senseless and bloodthirsty tyranny and mass murder by totalitarian communist regimes” in the Soviet Union and in China. And thereby, ironically, it causes people who take up this viewpoint, but who are deeply dissatisfied with the current state of the world, to end up in a cul-de-sac, a deadening dead end, with what often seems to be genuinely angst-filled agonizing about the possibility (or, as they see it, the impossibility) of a better future for humanity. —

Near the end of *Dark Ages America*, for example, Morris Berman voices frustration with the limitations of bourgeois democracy as a model within the U.S. and internationally. He writes:

If you really are a radical, on the other hand, you are aiming for something else—but what? Time, perhaps, to find out. My own belief is that there is no warding off the Dark Age; all the evidence points in that direction. But you can certainly do your best to keep it out of your head, which is a contribution of a sort. What is thus called for is long-term study and thought, in an effort to come up with a serious alternative to global bourgeois democracy. (*Dark Ages America*, p. 329)

Berman then expresses agreement with the idea that what is needed now, specifically for radicals, is not action but theory.

Now, part of this is very wrong. There is, in fact, a great need now for action—for mass mobilization of resistance, and for very active and bold political work aimed at repolarizing things, not only to build resistance but more fundamentally to build a revolutionary movement—in order to actually bring about a truly radical alternative to bourgeois democracy and to all the horrors of the capitalist-imperialist system of which bourgeois democracy is an outward expression. Yet, at the same time, it is very true and very important that, in dialectical relation with this kind of political action, there is very definitely and very profoundly a need for theory and for wrangling in the realm of theory and strategic thinking in the broadest and deepest sense.

But, once again, a great irony here is that, so long as Berman and others like him buy into the slanders and distortions of the truly radical and truly emancipating theory and strategic orientation of communism and the communist revolution, they will consign their search for a radical alternative to ultimate and fundamental failure and the further frustration and aimless alienation and cynicism that will inevitably accompany this. Among other things, this illustrates once again and adds further emphasis to the great importance of the whole project to “Set the Record Straight” with regard to the historical experience of revolutions and countries led by communists, of socialist society and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The Transition to the Future—The Reality, The Shadow, and the Exhilaration

In envisioning the future of communism, and then confronting the contradictions and challenges that lie in the path of, and in a real sense define, the epochal revolution that must be carried out in order to get to communism, a phrase from the poet T.S. Eliot may come to mind: “between the idea and the reality falls the shadow.” When applied to the questions being grappled with here, this is a way to express the profound and often acute contradictions between where we’re aiming to go and what we have to do to get there.

Now, as a brief aside here—but something that does relate to the question of social transformation—the sense of alienation that was a striking feature of T.S. Eliot’s work, as expressed in poems with titles like “The Wasteland,” was ultimately a reactionary alienation. Eliot’s alienation was not only prompted, to a significant degree, by World War 1 in a general sense and all of the horrors—the destruction and slaughter—that occurred as a result of and in the course of that war, particularly in Europe (T.S. Eliot was born in the U.S. but moved to England and became in effect an English poet); his alienation was also occasioned, in a real sense, by the weakening of Britain and the British empire through the course of that war. It used to be [singing, with a British accent]: “Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves—Britons never, never, never, shall be slaves.” [Laughter] But, then, Britannia didn’t rule as much of the waves (or what could be conquered by dominating “the waves”) after World War 1; it still had a large colonial empire, but it had suffered real losses and the prospects for remaining the world’s leading power seemed dimmed, while the very real price for all this was personified very starkly in the presence of wounded veterans throughout London and other parts of Britain. All this combined in people like T.S. Eliot to give expression to a very pessimistic feeling—a certain sense of loss of purpose, of a purpose which had been associated with the fortunes of the British Empire, and not just English culture in some general sense. Eliot’s was an orientation of looking to the past. He described himself after a certain point as a royalist, politically—in other words a supporter of the monarchy—and a religious traditionalist.

But the fact is that, in the U.S. at least, in the early 1960s in particular—but as part of the whole phenomenon of the “60s

generation,” and for the intellectuals of that generation in particular—T.S. Eliot was often quite popular, because the alienation that came through in his poetry resonated with what was objectively a *very different* kind of alienation that many of the youth of that time—particularly, but not only, youth of the middle class—were feeling in the context of a very repressive and suffocating culture in American society and in a situation where, for many of these youth, the veil began to be pulled back to reveal some of the truly vile nature of America, its history and its role in the world.

With all that, there is still some value to posing things in the terms of that line from T.S. Eliot: “between the idea and the reality falls the shadow.” Here—between the idea and the reality—is where many see the problem with communism, even many seeking a radical alternative. And here, in fact, is a real, profound and at times very acute contradiction: between the vision of communism and the actual governing principles of communist society on the one hand, and on the other hand what is required in order to reach that society.

If we could somehow just leap in a single bound straight to communism, I have no doubt that many people would readily make that leap. Many people are attracted to the idea—or the “ideal,” as they envision it—of communism, in a general and somewhat abstract sense. The idea that there would be an abundance for all, that the communist principle **from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs** could be applied, that no one would be in need, and people would not be scrambling and scuffling in competition with each other to meet either basic needs or broader wants; that the political system would be serving these kinds of principles; and that ideologically people would be motivated by this kind of orientation: all that is very attractive—especially if you separate it from the real and acute contradictions that are involved in getting there.

But, of course, we can't do that. Once again, it is *scientific* communism, not utopianism, that is involved and required.

A scientific approach leads to the understanding that, to actually make the first great leap on the road to communism—that is, to overthrow the existing system and the existing state power, which enforces the basic relations of that system—requires a monumental struggle and, let us be honest, monumental sacrifice, amidst chaos and upheaval on a mass scale. And, yes, it will involve very

real destruction—not mainly initiated or brought about by the forces of revolution, but by the forces of the old order.

In order to have a revolution, there has to be a large and significant group in society for whom life is already a living hell while, with the approach of a revolutionary situation, increasing numbers of people gravitate toward not only the idea but the concrete reality of the struggle to bring into being a radically different society. At the same time, there are objectively significant contradictions bound up with the fact that, in accordance with its basic principles and methods, and in order to succeed, the communist revolution cannot write off, or treat as if they're in the camp of the enemy—and thereby propel into the camp of the enemy—all those whose situation, "in ordinary times," does not drive them toward a desperate search for a radical alternative, including those who may be deeply disaffected and even outraged about the direction of things, but whose daily life is generally such that they tend to recoil from the idea of upheaval and turmoil, and from the prospect of the destruction that the forces of reaction will bring down against a revolutionary uprising. Particularly in the U.S. today, there is a very broad array of people who fall into that category. But there is also, at the base of this society—among the proletariat, and in particular its lower and deeper sections, and others who are daily discriminated against, brutalized and degraded by the workings of this system and the machinery of organized "legitimate" violence which maintains this system in force—tens of millions who are not only impoverished but who more readily gravitate toward, and can more readily be won to, an orientation of not just fighting back against the injustice and oppression they suffer in a more direct sense, but bringing into being a world in which all oppressive and exploitative relations would be abolished and superseded by something far better.

Of course, this doesn't mean that these tens of millions spontaneously understand the need for a revolution guided by that orientation and aiming for those objectives, or that they are moving in that way already, without communist leadership; the basic point is that their position in society, and the ways they are affected by the dynamics of this system, make them more readily inclined to gravitate toward that outlook and to take up that position.

The truth is that those working for such a revolution in a country like the U.S. are confronted with very real difficulties and

formidable challenges, because of the concentrated power of the reactionary ruling class—but also, in a qualitatively different sense, because of the existence of a large middle class in this country and the relative privilege of significant parts of that middle class (the “big soft middle,” as I have referred to it¹⁹). But, viewed strategically, there is a means and a basis to win over broad sections of that middle.

Going further into a strategic discussion of how this can be done—and, still more, digging into particular dimensions of this—is beyond the scope of this presentation.²⁰ What is important to stress here is this: Only if you step back from the immediate and surface appearance of things—only if you “go up to the mountaintop” and get a sweeping view of social phenomena and their underlying contradictions and driving dynamics—can you actually see the possibility of this, and have a solid basis to work to bring this into reality. Viewing this narrowly, from within any particular aspect of things—even approaching this from within the immediate reality of the exploited and impoverished masses at the base of society, viewing the world simply through that prism—you will not be able to see the possibility of revolution, or recognize the kind of revolution that is necessary and possible. Spontaneously, the masses who are in that position don’t see this themselves, partly because of the workings of the system, including the molding of public opinion by the powers-that-be, but also because without a scientific approach, and without a strategic viewpoint grounded in that approach, they can’t see the possibility of a real way out. Viewed simply from within the immediate situation of any section of society, even the lowest and deepest sections of the exploited and impoverished proletariat, the perspective is too narrow. This is another expression of the essential point Lenin makes in *What Is To Be Done?*: This understanding, this scientific method and approach, has to be brought “from without”—from outside the realm of the immediate situation and experiences of even the most exploited

19. This is a reference to “Why We’re in the Situation We’re in Today...And What to Do About It: A Thoroughly Rotten System and the Need for Revolution,” also part of the 7 talks I gave in 2006. Audio files of these talks are available online at bobavakian.net and revcom.us.

20. The strategic approach to revolution in a country like the U.S., and the basic aims of that revolution, have been spoken to in a number of works of mine. And this is presented in a concentrated way in *Revolution And Communism: A Foundation And Strategic Orientation*, a *Revolution* pamphlet, May 1, 2008, and in the *Constitution of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA*, August, 2008, which is available at revcom.us.

sections of people. It has to be systematized into a conscious, scientific approach to understanding and transforming reality, and *that* has to be brought to the masses, taken up by them and transformed in this way into a powerful political-revolutionary force (and continually developed further, through the ongoing back and forth between theory and practice).

There are all kinds of profound and acute contradictions involved in the process of communist revolution, including what many people grab hold of to attack the whole project: In the very fact that this understanding has to be brought "from without" there is the contradiction that those who first take up this scientific outlook and methodology generally represent a very small percentage of the population, and come predominantly from among the intelligentsia to begin with. And the question does sharply pose itself: Can a leap be made to where this is actually taken up by increasing numbers of the masses? If this does not happen at some point, then of course it is impossible for there to be a revolution, particularly a communist revolution.

That is one contradiction—and points to one profound leap and transformation that has to be brought about, as a crucial part of getting to where a revolution is actually possible. Of course, this leap, too, is not a mere matter of will, or desire, but depends to a significant degree on the development of the objective situation, and the effects of major changes in society and the world on masses of people, at the same time as it depends on the conscious work of those who, at any given time, have taken up this scientific, revolutionary outlook and method, and are determined to persevere in taking this to broader masses of people and waging the struggle to win growing numbers of them to take this up and wield it as well.

But then another leap is still required, one which is much more profound: Even if a section of the masses comes forward to form the backbone of the revolutionary movement, you have still not eliminated the contradiction between those who do intellectual work and those who do physical work—between mental and manual labor—between those who are accustomed to working in the realm of ideas and, on the other hand, the broad masses of people who, in capitalist society (and all societies ruled by exploiting class), are largely and essentially "locked out of" this realm. You cannot overcome that until you make revolution and advance into the socialist stage, until

you overthrow the capitalist system and begin moving through the socialist transition toward communism, as part of a whole, world-wide and truly world-historic revolution.

All this is an expression of the fact that, while you're making a revolution, this revolution itself is full of profound and often acute contradictions, involving not only all the struggle, sacrifice, upheaval, violence, chaos, and destruction that is bound to be involved in such a revolution—all of which is largely brought about by the forces of the old order, but which you have to meet and defeat—but also the contradiction that's carried like a germ within what you're doing: that those who will be leading this process, in the necessary first great leap of seizing power, and for some time afterward, objectively and of necessity play a different role than the masses of people broadly who are, and who must be, actively involved in this revolution; but, on the other hand, unless much broader and continually growing ranks of the masses themselves take up the tasks and challenges of this revolution in an increasingly conscious way, the revolution will not continue to advance toward the final goal of communism, but will instead be set back and reversed. Unless you handle correctly this and other deep-seated contradictions involved in carrying forward the process of uprooting exploitation and eliminating all oppressive divisions in society (and the world), while not suffocating but instead actually further invigorating intellectual and cultural life, and fostering vibrancy and vitality in society—unless you handle all this correctly, your revolution will get turned around at one point or another. This is a crucial lesson that must be drawn from the experience of socialist society so far—including the bitter experience of the reversal of socialism, and the restoration of capitalism, first in the Soviet Union and then in China.

There is no easy solution to this. There is not going to be any revolution unless the basic masses, in the inner cities, in the sweatshops, in the farm fields, and so on, take up this revolutionary outlook, and struggle—not in a blind way but consciously and with a deepening grasp of the necessary scientific outlook and method—to understand reality and transform it in accordance with their most fundamental interests and ultimately the interests of humanity as a whole. Yet there will, for a long time, remain real distinctions between the masses, in the broadest dimension, and on the other hand those who, because of their life experiences—and, generally, their more privileged position in society—have been able to acquire

more facility in grappling with theory and working with ideas: that contradiction cannot simply be wished away, or moved beyond in a short period of time. And it is going to reproduce itself, even after the overthrow of the old order and the establishment of the new, socialist society. In that new, socialist society, the doors will be opened to growing numbers of the masses becoming involved in, and developing their facility with, the realm of working with ideas. Whole sections of people who, in the past, have been effectively denied any access to this sphere of working with ideas will find the obstacles to this progressively overcome. And from an early age, new generations of the masses will be encouraged and given the necessary foundation, training and "tools" to do this. But it won't be possible to make this happen with everybody all at once and without distinction—because of the necessities of life and of transforming society. People have to eat. You have to have the ability to defend the revolution and the new state power that this revolution has brought into being. You have the responsibility to support and assist the revolutionary struggle throughout the world. At the same time, you have to effect certain relationships with other countries, including a dimension of trade even with some countries which are still dominated by imperialism and ruled by exploiting classes that are the bitter enemies of the revolution you embody. All these factors will assert themselves and prevent you from overcoming, in any short-term time frame, the deep-seated contradictions that, in effect, you are carrying forward within your own revolutionary process.

In the history of our movement, and in the socialist societies that have existed, mistakes have been made—now in one direction, and now in the other (and sometimes bouncing, or "flipping," from one to the other): mistakes in the direction of treating the people who have had more privileged positions as virtually, if not literally, the enemy; or mistakes, on the other hand, of giving too free a rein to those who continue to objectively occupy a more privileged position within socialist society. In the Soviet Union a lot of the engineers and technicians and many of the people who had positions of leadership in industry, and so on, came out of the working class. They were educated and trained to fulfill these roles. But, once they got into those positions, they objectively occupied a different place in society than the broad masses of people, out of whose ranks they had emerged. Again, you cannot get rid of those contradictions right away, or through any "short-cuts," in one direction or another.

Even with the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a new socialist society, you can't just go like *that* [snapping fingers] and get to communism. You have to work your way through all these contradictions, and do it correctly—and, while we have a wealth of summed up experience, and of theory overall, to guide us in doing this, there will still be a significant aspect of confronting and learning to deal with experience that is genuinely new. You don't even have a chance of doing that if you don't continue to more and more deeply ground yourself in materialism and dialectics, and the whole method and approach that flows from that.

These are some of the key lessons that we've drawn from the first stage of proletarian revolution and socialist society—particularly with regard to the relation between democracy and dictatorship, and the radically different ways in which these find expression in socialist society, as opposed to capitalist society, but also in terms of the underlying contradictions which are involved in moving, ultimately, beyond the whole realm of bourgeois relations, and the corresponding ways of thinking—including the historically limited and constricted bourgeois notion of freedom.

Think about what will actually be involved in this. If you want a society in which people are debating affairs of state and world affairs—as we do—well then, you will have a situation where people are debating whether the foreign policy of the socialist government should be what it is. In so doing, however, they will be talking about all kinds of sensitive things. And let us not forget that even when you have state power, you are still dealing with powerful enemies that are looking to pounce on you and destroy what you have achieved. As much as the capitalists, through their representatives and apologists, *talk* about a “free market place of ideas,” and the notion of allowing everyone to pursue their dreams, they don't believe in this when it comes to anything touching on their fundamental interests. There has never been an instance where the masses of people have been led by communists and have risen up to make revolution and set out to build a radically different society, and the bourgeoisie has sat back and said: “Well let's see if it works. They claim they can make a better society—let's stand back, get out of their way, and see if they can actually do it. And then we'll compare it to our model of society and see which one people like.”

Now, apparently, at a speech by Raymond Lotta at UCLA the Young Republicans who attempted to be a disruptive force at the meeting were reduced to whining in these terms. When they made their arguments, and these arguments were countered and refuted powerfully, they fell back to: "Well, why can't we just go do our capitalist thing, and you can do your communist thing, and we'll see which one comes out better." But that was a momentary lapse on their part. [Laughter] And, in any case, that is not how the bourgeois ruling class relates to attempts by masses of people to move beyond capitalism and bring into being a new world without capitalist relations. They will pounce viciously on any such attempt—they will look for weaknesses and play on those weaknesses, they will try to heighten, in a negative way, the contradictions we are having to confront. Wherever a breakthrough is made and a socialist society is actually established, the remaining imperialists and reactionaries will seek, in whatever ways they can, to strangle this new society economically and isolate it diplomatically and politically, while threatening it—and, if they can, actually attacking it—militarily, all with the aim of moving to wipe out this new society.

Do we really want political dissent and intellectual ferment in socialist society? Yes, we do—and in a much greater way than has been the case in previous socialist societies. But this will be "messy," and full of risks. This is why I have several times spoken to how this will involve the phenomenon of repeatedly "going to the brink of being drawn and quartered." Having public discussion and debate over questions such as the socialist state's foreign policy will not only involve people who will express disagreements with that policy at a given point, but also some who are going to verge on, if not literally cross over into, revealing state secrets—which can do a lot of damage. How do you sort all that out? How do you correctly handle these, often intense, contradictions? How do you prevent strategic damage from being done without turning the lights out and creating an atmosphere that is suffocating, without causing everyone to feel intimidated and afraid to raise their heads, let alone to voice any disagreements and objections or bring forth political dissent and opposition? What we're talking about here with a New Synthesis, and "solid core with a lot of elasticity," is not a game. It will truly be exhilarating in a very fundamental sense. But this is not, and it will not be, a game. It will often be extremely intense, and it will require continually regrouping ourselves, more

and more deeply, in a scientific approach to reality, in order to be able to sort things out and handle them correctly.²¹

This is why some of people have said about the New Synthesis I'm putting forward: "I believe you *want* to do that, but you're not going to be able to do it." Well, we have to prove them wrong on that. Not because we want to be right and we want them to be wrong, but because we have to do this in order to get where we need to go. We have to do all this as part of achieving the fundamental goal of overcoming and surpassing these historically-based and deeply-rooted contradictions that have marked human society for thousands of years, including the contradictions between men and women, between intellectual and manual labor, as well as those between different nations and nationalities and between different regions—and different parts of the world—with all their economic and social and cultural differences. This is all a very complex process. To carry this forward, through all the obstacles and dangers, and all the twists and turns, you need a core of people who really do deeply grasp, and are continuing to grasp more deeply, the essential scientific method and approach to dealing with all these contradictions—and you need to continually expand this core.

Again, all this can be, and in many ways will be, extremely exhilarating; but it is also going to be extremely hair-raising. We should understand that unity of opposites and learn how to handle that well.

**Not just the ultimate goal, but the road to that goal,
must be truly and profoundly liberating**

Another way of getting at this is that while we can't just leap to communism in a single bound, on the other hand not only the final

21. Being "drawn and quartered" refers (metaphorically here) to a form of execution common in feudal society, in which a person's body was literally pulled apart in four directions. I have spoken to the concept of "going to the brink of being drawn and quartered," as well as the principle of "solid core with a lot of elasticity," in a number of talks and writings in recent years. See, for example, "Bob Avakian in a Discussion with Comrades on Epistemology—On Knowing and Changing the World," in *Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy*. The New Synthesis referred to here is spoken to in "Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity," available at revcom.us (see also the *Revolution* pamphlet *Revolution And Communism: A Foundation And Strategic Orientation*) and is discussed at length in "Reenvisioning Revolution and Communism: What Is Bob Avakian's New Synthesis?" also available at revcom.us.

goal of communism, but the road to that goal, all along the way—not just the idea, or the “ideal” of communism, but the revolutionary process and the overall transition to communism—must be, and definitely can be, far, far better than the world as it is under this system. I was recently talking with someone who brought out yet another powerful illustration of the truly horrific conditions of the masses of people in the world today, in this case child laborers. He referred to a graphic picture of young children in India, many as young as 5 years old, working in dirty and dangerous conditions making matches, with sulfur from the matches all over their bodies. Reproduce that a million times over: This is the reality of the masses of people throughout the world whose lives are taken, slowly or more quickly, creating the wealth on which this system thrives and of which its apologists boast. This is the world as it is dominated and shaped by capitalist imperialism—a world which in fact, and without any exaggeration or hyperbole, is a horror for the great majority of humanity.

In opposition to this, the struggle for revolution, as well as the final goal of communism, is—and must be brought forward, in a living way, as—something far, far better, something truly emancipating. Even with all of its struggle and sacrifice; even with all the upheaval; even with all the violence and destruction, largely brought about by the forces of the old order to prevent this radical transformation of the world; not only will our revolution lead to a radically different and much better future for humanity, but the process of this revolution itself must, and can, embody increasing elements of that future and itself be profoundly uplifting for the growing numbers who, more and more consciously, take part in and drive forward this revolution, and for the great majority of the people.

In this light we can see the importance of the following:

In a country like the U.S., the revolutionary overthrow of this system can only be achieved once there is a major, qualitative change in the nature of the objective situation, such that society as a whole is in the grip of a profound crisis, owing fundamentally to the nature and workings of the system itself, and along with that there is the emergence of a revolutionary people, numbering in the millions and millions, conscious of the need for revolutionary change and determined to fight for it. In this struggle for revolutionary

change, the revolutionary people and those who lead them will be confronted by the violent repressive force of the machinery of the state which embodies and enforces the existing system of exploitation and oppression; and in order for the revolutionary struggle to succeed, it will need to meet and defeat that violent repressive force of the old, exploitative and oppressive order. (From "Some Crucial Points of Revolutionary Orientation—In Opposition to Infantile Posturing and Distortions of Revolution," which is included as an Appendix in *Revolution And Communism: A Foundation And Strategic Orientation*, a Revolution pamphlet, May 1, 2008.)

And:

In the final analysis, as Engels once expressed it, the proletariat must win its emancipation on the battlefield. But there is not only the question of winning in this sense but of how we win in the largest sense. One of the significant if perhaps subtle and often little-noticed ways in which the enemy, even in defeat, seeks to exact revenge on the revolution and sow the seed of its future undoing is in what he would force the revolutionaries to become in order to defeat him. It will come to this: we will have to face him in the trenches and defeat him amidst terrible destruction but we must not in the process annihilate the fundamental difference between the enemy and ourselves. Here the example of Marx is illuminating: he repeatedly fought at close quarters with the ideologists and apologists of the bourgeoisie but he never fought them on their terms or with their outlook; with Marx his method is as exhilarating as his goal is inspiring. We must be able to maintain our firmness of principles but at the same time our flexibility, our materialism and our dialectics, our realism and our romanticism, our solemn sense of purpose and our sense of humor. (Bob Avakian, *For A Harvest Of Dragons, On the "Crisis of Marxism" and the Power of Marxism Now More Than Ever*, RCP Publications, 1983, p. 152.)

Overcoming the lopsidedness in the world

In this truly world-historic revolution, we face the challenge of not just overcoming the deep-seated social inequalities and oppressive and exploitative relations in any particular country, but of overcoming the profound lopsidedness in the world. This is for two basic reasons. First, and most fundamentally, because this is what our whole struggle is, and must be, all about: bringing a whole new world into being, and not creating some kind of perverse "communist imperialism" which feasts on the rest of the world in perhaps a new form—which would not be communist at all but would, in fact, be imperialist. And second, because unless and until this lopsidedness is overcome and surpassed, it will not be possible to eliminate relations of exploitation and oppression, and the accompanying social inequalities, in any lasting way in any part of the world. The world is too interconnected and interknit to carve out, in any long-term sense, any part of the world that is somehow a zone free of all that. That is all the more true today than it has ever been before in history. And this underscores all the more powerfully the strategic importance and meaning of the fact that our orientation has to be one of proletarian internationalism, and not something less than that—not patriotism or nationalism in any form—as our guiding outlook. Even the nationalism of an oppressed people or oppressed nation—while it can and does propel struggles that must be united with—cannot take things where they need to go, cannot lead to uprooting the oppression of that people or nation, let alone all the oppressive relations and profound social inequalities that still mark and mar the world.

For these fundamental reasons, overcoming the lopsidedness in the world is an essential and integral part of the communist revolution. There will be no communism without that. There will be no radical and lasting rupture with traditional property relations and traditional ideas. There will be no achieving of the "4 Alls"—and then moving forward from there in a whole new era of human history—without doing this on a worldwide level and without overcoming the great and in many ways growing lopsidedness in the world. This is a point of basic orientation, and at the same time it is an expression of the complexity and, yes, of the difficulty, of what we are setting out to do. This is another key contradiction that, from the beginning—even before capitalism-imperialism is overthrown and a new, revolutionary state power is brought into being, and then on a whole other level once a socialist state is established, now

here and now there—must be addressed, consistently and systematically, and handled in correct relationship to all the other contradictions that have to be confronted, and transformed, in advancing to communism.

This adds a whole other dimension to the phenomenon of “going to the brink of being drawn and quartered,” in order to do what needs to be done. There will be a constant pull toward just addressing the problems that exist in any particular socialist society. This pull will be strengthened by the very real need to deal with often acute and pressing problems and necessities: feeding the people; providing decent health care and decent housing to the people, and an education that contributes to enabling people to more deeply know and transform the world. All this, and more, will have to be addressed while also defending the particular socialist state from the threats, and the attacks of various kinds, by powerful enemies. How to do all that without reinforcing—but instead working to overcome, to the greatest degree possible at every point—not only the remaining divisions and social inequalities within the particular socialist country itself, but also the gigantic lopsidedness in the world: This captures, in a concentrated way, the challenges that will be involved in achieving the transition to communism, including the challenge of handling the contradiction between repeatedly going, of necessity, “to the brink of being drawn and quartered” *without actually going over that brink*, without losing the revolution but instead carrying forward the revolutionary advance toward communism.

A scientifically-grounded conquering spirit

Now, I don't say all this from the point of view of, nor to foster and encourage, pessimism. I firmly believe that there is a material basis for the advance to communism. Along with that, I am convinced that the more deeply one is grounded in materialism and in dialectics—and the more therefore one actually understands the underlying and driving contradictions and dynamics and grasps the complexity of what must be confronted and overcome—the *more* possible it is to actually see the basis for, and to act consciously to bring into reality, the kind of profound revolutionary change that is represented by the communist revolution. And, in opposition to that, the more one proceeds on the basis of ignoring, or being ignorant of, these contradictions, the more one is set up to be demoralized.

It will not lead to anything good to go out into the world and attempt to evade these contradictions—putting them to the side while trying to forge ahead in a blithely and blindly optimistic way...until you run into the very real and profound obstacles that have to be overcome. The only road forward lies in more and more consciously confronting and “working through”—that is, struggling through—these contradictions. And if the conscious revolutionary forces forget about these contradictions, reality—and, in their own way, the masses of people—will *remind* you of them. People do this all the time, when the goal of revolution and communism is raised with them: “Yeah, but what about *this*?” And “What about *that*?” Or “The people we’re up against are just too powerful.” Or “These people around me are just caught up in all this other bullshit.”

Much of this is true—and it does tend to reinforce the idea that revolution is not possible, if you are just looking at the surface and what’s happening at any given time immediately around you. But what are the deeper contradictions and driving forces that are going to be shaping and influencing what people are confronting, beyond how they’re seeing the world at a given time? Without understanding that, how can you see the possibility of dealing with everything you have to come up against? How are you going to see beyond the surface, to the deeper mainsprings and driving forces, which are going to shape the reality with which people are confronted?

How many people in New Orleans a year, or even a few days, before Hurricane Katrina hit, and then the levees gave way, expected to be dealing with what they were suddenly confronted with? Well, the operation of the imperialist system itself, and its effects throughout the world, will continue to cause major disruptions and upheavals, often on an even bigger scale than what happened with Katrina. The way that masses of people are confronted by reality, and have to deal with reality, is going to keep changing, often in sudden and dramatic ways. Yet the imperialists don’t have all freedom, and those opposed to them don’t have all necessity either. There is, in each case—although this involves very different particularities—freedom and necessity. And once more it is very important to keep clearly in mind that freedom does not lie in ignoring or seeking to evade necessity but in the recognition and transformation of necessity, on the basis of the essential and fundamental contradictions involved and the possible pathways of change associated with all this. To transform necessity into freedom in a

way that is in accord with the most fundamental interests of the great majority of the people throughout the world, and ultimately humanity as a whole, requires grasping and applying the methodology and approach of communism, which makes it possible and provides the means to keep digging down to the underlying and driving forces; to determine what is a temporary and secondary phenomenon and what is a more significant and fundamental expression of the underlying reality; to be able to repeatedly sort all this out and handle correctly all the different aspects of this and their interrelations; to identify and seize on openings to make radical ruptures and revolutionary leaps in changing society and the world.

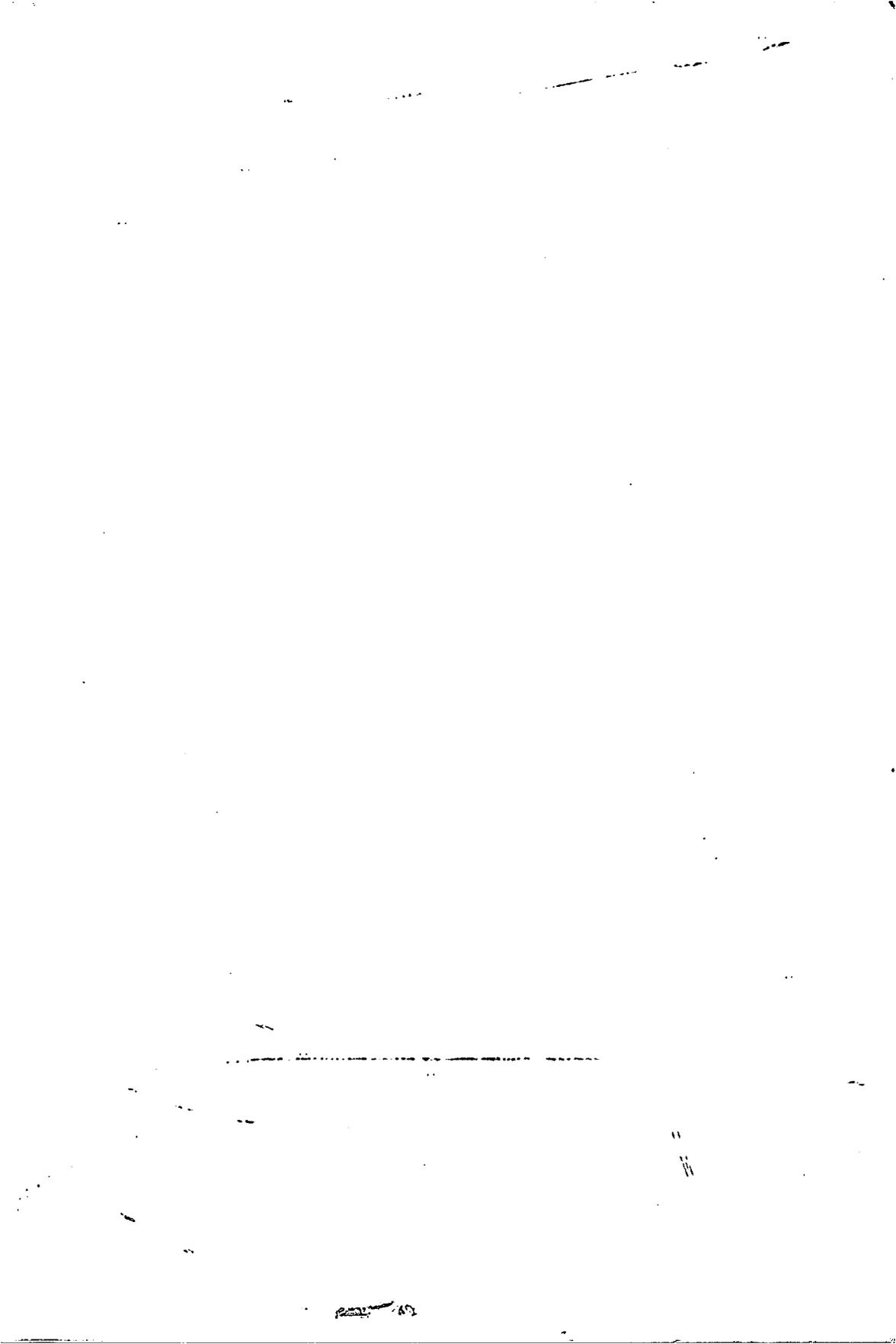
It is in this way, it is on this scientific foundation and through the application of this scientific method and approach, that we can, and should, have a conquering spirit—and an orientation of (to borrow a phrase from a poem by Yeats) passionate intensity—for revolution and communism.

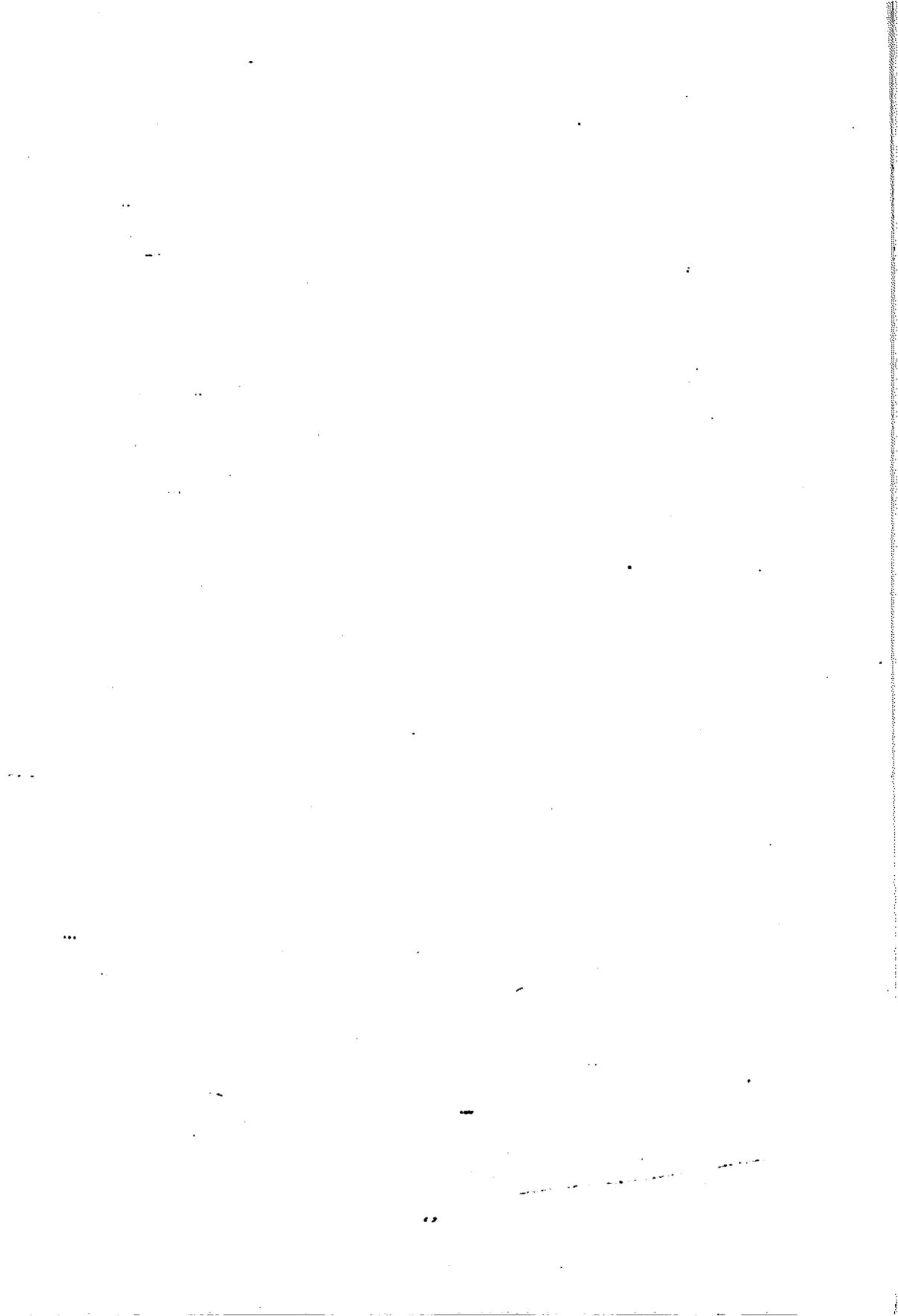
It is through taking up and applying this scientific outlook and method, and on that basis waging the struggle to confront, transform and eventually move beyond the contradictions that define this present era in which humanity is still entrapped: it is in this way that we can make it a reality that not only the final goal, but the road to that goal—not merely some abstract idea or some utopian ideal of communism, but the scientifically-established goal of communism, and the revolutionary process and the living transition to communism—is, in reality, radically different and far better than the world as it is under this system.

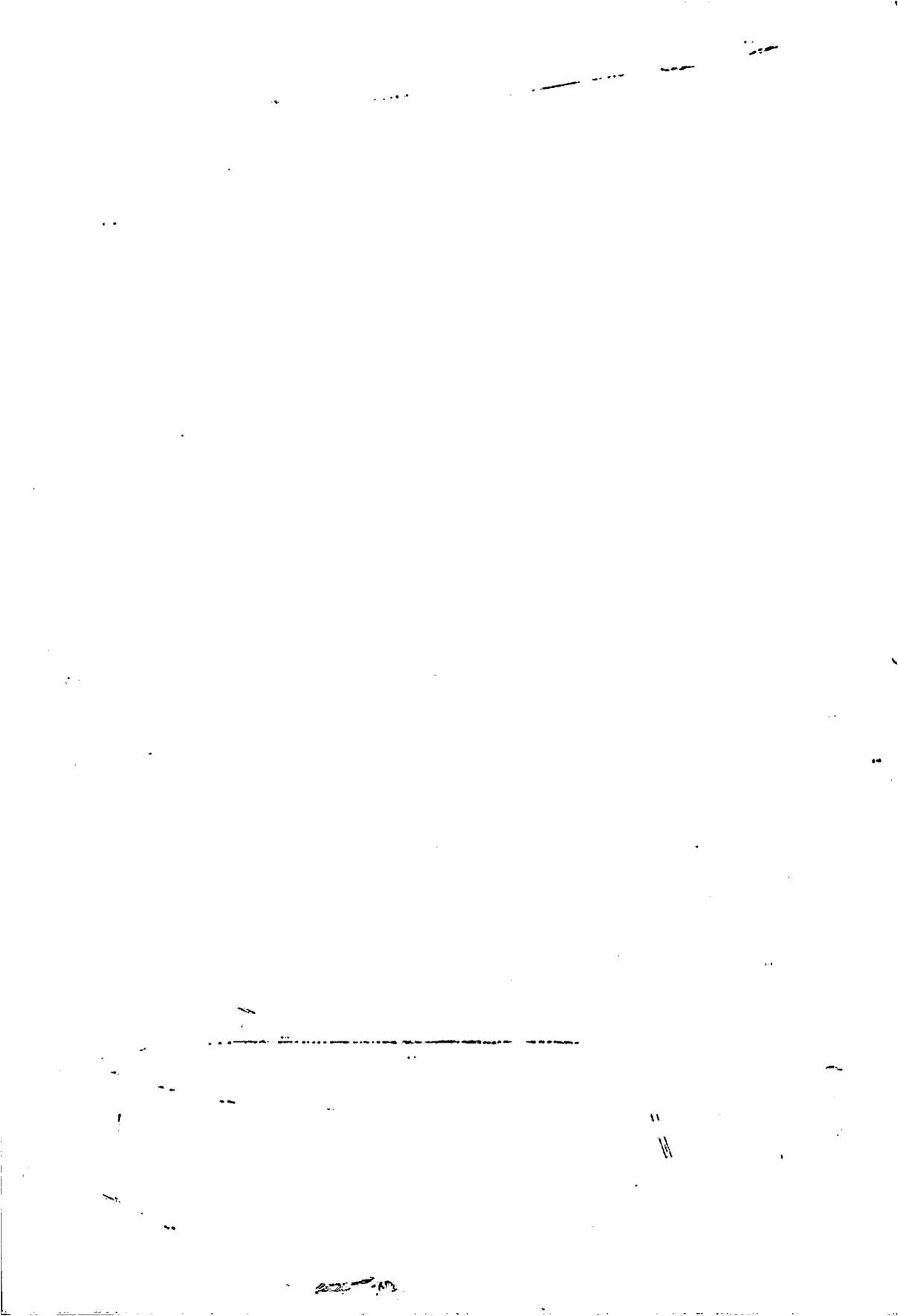
The Bankruptcy of Bourgeois-Democratic Ideals, and the Liberating Potential of Communist Revolution

When we weigh this against even the most ideal expressions of bourgeois democracy, whether represented by Jefferson or others, we can see the definite historical limitations—and today the complete poverty, the utter bankruptcy—of bourgeois democracy, and everything bound up with it, all the relations of oppression and exploitation that are integral to the capitalist system and

inseparable from the functioning of bourgeois democracy/bourgeois dictatorship. We can grasp the way in which not only the goal of communism, but also the struggle for communism, embodies something far beyond the narrow horizon of the bourgeois concept of rights, something which represents the struggle for a freedom, for an emancipation of humanity, that is in a whole other dimension beyond even the most ideal expression of bourgeois democracy, or anything else that has existed so far in human history. Grasping that underscores the necessity, and should heighten our determination, to struggle through all the contradictions that lie in the path of actually bringing this into being.







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