

RAYMOND LOTTA

You Don't Know What You
Think You "Know" About...

**The Communist
Revolution and
the REAL Path
to Emancipation:
Its History and
Our Future**



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No Wonder They Slander Communism

Bob Avakian

Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA

If you step back and think about it, no wonder they slander communism so much. If you presided over a system that has such glaring, howling contradictions and disparities in terms of how people lived, a system which denied a decent life to the majority of humanity, and weighed them down with tremendous oppression and superstition and ignorance, while a relative handful in a few countries lived a life of unbelievable luxury—but, more than just luxury, they continued to accumulate capital while they fought with each other over who would beat out the other through this exploitation and accumulation of capital—if you stood back and looked at that... Imagine if you said to somebody: go to a drawing board and draw up the way you think the world should be. And imagine if somebody went to the drawing board and painted a picture of the way the world is now, and they said: this is the way the world should be. I mean, there would be tremendous howls coming from all quarters of humanity, saying: What the fuck—that's the way you think the world should be, with these tremendous disparities and people, little children, dying of cholera and malnutrition and other things that could be prevented easily, while a small number battle each other to accumulate more and more wealth from the suffering of this mass of humanity—that's what you think?!

Anybody who would actually draw that up on a board should actually be—and would probably be—rightly accused of criminal insanity. And yet, here's a class of people, the capitalist-imperialist class, that presides exactly over a world that way, and argues it's the best of all possible worlds. The only reason that people

don't—masses of people don't, right at this time—say, “this is criminal insanity” is because they've been propagandized and conditioned to believe that, in fact, this is the only possible way, and that the radical alternative to it that does exist, namely communism, has somehow been a horror and a disaster. And it's not hard to see why the ruling class of capitalist-imperialists would employ a lot of people to propagate that idea everywhere they could. If you presided over such a criminally insane system, you would undoubtedly do the same.

*From [What Humanity Needs: Revolution, and the New Synthesis of Communism](#),
[An Interview with Bob Avakian by A. Brooks](#).*

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Special Feature: Illustrated Timeline—The REAL History of Communist Revolution

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Interview with Raymond Lotta

Chapter 1: Introduction

People need the truth about the communist revolution. The REAL truth. At a time when people are rising up in many places all over the world and seeking out ways forward, THIS alternative is ruled out of order. At a time when even more people are agonizing over and raising big questions about the future, THIS alternative is constantly slandered and maligned and lied about, while those who defend it are given no space to reply. It is urgent that the questions be answered, and the TRUTH be told about the communist revolution—the real way out of the horrors that people endure today, and the even worse ones they face tomorrow. To do this, Revolution newspaper arranged for Raymond Lotta to be interviewed by different groups of people in different parts of the country, and other people sent in questions. What follows is a synthesized, edited version that draws on those interviews and adds new material since the interviews were first conducted.

Question: I've heard you talk about the "first stage" of communist revolution. What exactly are you referring to?

Raymond Lotta: We're talking about a sea change in human history, the first attempts in modern history to build societies free from exploitation and oppression. Specifically, we're talking about the short-lived Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian revolution of 1917–1956, and the Chinese revolution of 1949–1976. These were titanic risings of the modern-day "slaves" of society against their "masters." They aimed to bring about a community of humanity, a society based on the principle of "from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs," and one where there are no more divisions among people in

which some rule over and oppress others, robbing them not only of the means to a decent life but also of knowledge and a means for really understanding, and acting to change, the world.

Never have there been such radical and far-reaching transformations in how society is organized, in how economies are run, in culture and education, in how people relate to each other, and in how people think and feel as there were in these revolutions. Against incredible odds and obstacles, and in what amounts to a nanosecond of human history, these revolutions accomplished amazing things—and they changed the course of human history. Never before had the myth of an unchanging human nature—in which people are “naturally” self-seeking, and some people just “naturally” dominate others—been so decisively exploded.

For those few decades, a better world seemed on the verge of birth. As it is put in *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage, A Manifesto from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA*, for the first time, the “long night... the thousands of years of darkness for the great majority of humanity”—where society is divided into exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed—this was broken through, and a whole new form of society began to be forged.¹

The Lies of Conventional Wisdom

Question: But the conventional wisdom is that these revolutions were not liberating, but extremely autocratic, trampling on the rights of people... utopias turned into nightmares.

RL: Yes that is the conventional wisdom, and it is built on systematic distortion and misrepresentation... built on wholesale lies as to what these revolutions were about: what they actually set out to do, what they actually accomplished, and what real-world challenges and obstacles they faced.

Now people have a certain awareness of how they have been systematically lied to about things like “weapons of mass destruction” that were the pretext for the war in Iraq. And we’re not talking about incidental mis-admissions of fact here... the Iraq war resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, and the dislocation of millions.

But all too many people who consider themselves “critical minded” are all too willing to accept the “conventional wisdom” on communism. And let me be clear, the ruling class and intellectual guardians of the status quo have been engaged in a relentless ideological assault against communism... through popular journalism, so-called scholarly studies, memoirs that traffic in the “authenticity of personal experience,” films, and so on.

You know, for several years, I have been engaged in a project called “Set the Record Straight,” taking on these distortions and bringing to people the actual truth of these revolutions. For example, back in 2009–2010, I was on a campus speaking tour and one thing we did was to set up tables on campuses with a “pop quiz” on just basic facts about the communist revolutions.²

And the students scored terribly on the quiz. That is shameful, not just because it’s a statement on higher education... but more importantly because people are being robbed of vital understanding of how the world could be

radically different, could be a far better place, where human beings could really flourish.

There are real stakes here, real relevance and urgency to this *now*.

[We Need Revolution and a Whole New World](#)

Question: What do you mean by “stakes”?

RL: Look at the state of the world... the unjust wars, the poverty and savage inequality, the unspeakable oppression and degradation of women. The environmental crisis is accelerating and nothing is being done to stop it. The capitalist-imperialist class in power... that holds and violently enforces that power... that controls the world economy and the world's resources... this class and the system it presides over have put us on a trajectory that is threatening the very eco-balances and life-support systems of the planet.

People are responding, especially the new generation. We've seen major stirrings of protest and rebellion: the massive uprising in Egypt of 2011, the Occupy movements, the defiance of youth in Greece and Spain, the recent outbreaks in Brazil and Turkey. People are standing up. People are searching and seeking out solutions and philosophies. Various political programs and outlooks have gained influence and followings: “leaderless movements,” “real democracy,” “anti-hierarchy,” “anti-statism” and “horizontalism,” “economic democracy,” and so on.

But the one solution that is dismissed out of hand is communist revolution. Yet it is precisely and only communist revolution that can actually deal with the problems of society and the world that people are agonizing about... and that can realize the highest aspirations that have brought people into the streets.

And we are seeing the price of what it means where there is no communist leadership, vision, and program.

Take Egypt. People heroically toppled the Mubarak regime. On the surface there was dramatic change. But the military representing imperialism remains in power, and people are locked into the vise-grip of two unacceptable alternatives: Islamic fundamentalism, or some variant of Western democracy serving

imperialism. The notion of a “leaderless” movement that can somehow produce fundamental change has shown itself to be a dangerous and deadly liability and delusion.³

Question: But people say that Lenin and Mao just took power for a small group. How do you answer that charge?

RL: Lenin⁴ in 1917 in Russia, and then Mao⁵ in China led parties that in turn led millions and then tens of millions of people in revolutions that went after the deepest problems of society. They applied and developed the theory of scientific communism first brought forward by Karl Marx.⁶ This science lays bare the source of the exploitation and misery in society—the division of society into classes in which a small group monopolizes the wealth and controls society on that basis. And it shows how all that could be fundamentally overcome and uprooted, with a revolution corresponding to the interests of, and involving as its bedrock base, the exploited class of today: the proletariat.

The parties forged and led by Lenin and Mao did two things. First, they led the masses to make revolutions... to overthrow the old system. Second, they led people to establish new structures that empowered the masses to begin to take responsibility for ruling society and transforming it... beginning the process of abolishing all relations of exploitation and oppression and all the institutions and ideas that correspond to and reinforce those relations.

Marx had uncovered the possibility of a new emancipatory and liberating dawn for humanity. He insisted that this would ultimately have to be the work of the masses themselves. And these revolutions gave living expression to that.

At the same time, you couldn't do this without leadership—scientific and far-seeing leadership. And this lesson was paid for in blood in the first great attempt at revolution—the Paris Commune.

Chapter 2: The First Dawn—The Paris Commune

Question: Could you say more about the Paris Commune?

Raymond Lotta: The Paris Commune happened in 1871, during the last days of a war between France and Germany. The people of Paris had been suffering terribly... massive unemployment, food shortages, and the destruction of war. On March 18, they rose up against their “own” government. The Paris National Guard, which had radical influences within it, revolted... and sections of the city joined in an insurrection. The Guard took over the town halls of most of the districts of Paris, and executed two generals of the French wartime government.

A week later, the National Guard organized new municipal elections. A new government was created. This was the Commune. It was made up of socialists, anarchists, Marxists, feminists, radical democrats, and other trends.

Right away, the Commune abolished the old police force. It introduced radical social reforms: separation of church from state; it made professional education available to women and gave pensions to unmarried women; and it canceled many debts. The Commune established centers where the unemployed could find work. And the Commune allowed trade unions and workers’ cooperatives to take over and run the factories that the capitalists had abandoned during the war. Immigrants were allowed to become full citizens.

But it wasn’t just that a new government was taking progressive measures. There was an attempt to create a new *mode of rule*, a different kind of governing system.

Question: What do you mean by that?

RL: The Communards, as they were called, tried to create a political system representing the interests and needs of the workers, urban poor, and lower classes in society... those who had been long oppressed and denied political power. And they also set out to create a form of rule that operated differently from the bourgeois system. They tried to make administrators more accountable to the people who elected them; they tried to simplify government and link it more directly to the rough and tumble of the masses' lives.

Question: I've met anarchists who say they base themselves on the Paris Commune—that this is their model. What would be wrong with that?

RL: Well, there were a few problems, but one big one. The Communards had gotten this going in Paris—and it was really remarkable what they were doing—but they had not decisively overthrown the old exploiting order and thoroughly destroyed the old state power. In fact, the top political leaders and the military forces of the old French government had fled to the outskirts of Paris, to an area called Versailles.

You see, the central committee of the Commune conceived of what they were doing as a municipal revolt and that they could hold out in Paris. The Communards had this idea that by creating the Commune... that this model, with its creativity in the now liberated space of Paris, would be the example for the rest of the country to follow. But this was not a correct understanding.

The French ruling class was not reconciled to its initial defeat, and it still had the power to enforce its will... notably regular armed forces.

By May, this reactionary Versailles government had amassed an army of 300,000 soldiers. On May 21, the army reentered Paris to crush the Commune. The Communards fought back heroically. But the military forces plowed through

their street barricades and went on to massacre between 20,000 and 30,000 Parisians... just over the course of one week. There was a famous last stand, in a cemetery, with people literally backed to the wall. A wave of executions followed.⁷

Marx Draws the Essential Lesson from the Commune: We Need a New State Power

Karl Marx enthusiastically supported the Commune. After its defeat, he scientifically assessed its significance and lessons. He pointed out that the Commune was positively prefiguring a new kind of state, the dictatorship of the proletariat—that the Communards were not simply laying hold of the old state machinery and trying to put it to progressive use. But he also pointed out that one of the Paris Commune's fatal weaknesses was that it did not march on Versailles and thoroughly shatter and dismantle the old state machinery, as concentrated in the permanent army of the old order. He also pointed out that the Commune failed to dismantle and seize the assets of the Bank of France, which was financing the regroupment of the old regime and its military in Versailles.

Marx showed that every state was, in its essence, a *dictatorship of the dominant class* in society. That is, there may be some forms of democracy, but so long as society is divided into classes, the army, police, courts and executive power will enforce the interests of the dominant class—which today means the capitalist-imperialist class. Again, a key lesson of the Commune was that the capitalist state power *has to be thoroughly smashed and dismantled...* it has to be replaced with a new system of state power, the dictatorship of the proletariat. In other words, you have to dismantle the armed forces of the old system—and to establish a whole new economic and social system, you have to create a new state power that can enforce the will of the oppressed and exploited.⁸

And the Commune had another weakness: it did not have the necessary leadership to analyze, confront, and act on the real challenges it faced. It did not have a leadership basing itself on a scientific understanding of what it would take to defeat counter-revolution and what it would take to go on to transform society... you know, to forge a new economy and social system.

The Commune was this inspiring and world-historic breakthrough for

oppressed humanity. In that fleeting moment of the Commune was the embryo of a communist society without class distinctions and social oppression.⁹

It was Lenin who applied the lessons of the Commune and led the Russian revolution that created the world's first socialist state.

Less than 50 years after the defeat of the Commune, a far more sweeping and deep-going revolution takes place... in Russia. As I was just saying, Lenin was summing up lessons of the Commune, and developed the understanding of the need for vanguard leadership. Because the fact of the matter is... a key reason that the Commune couldn't make good on its incredible potential was because of the absence of unified leadership. Some people say that was the great thing about the Commune. But the absence of leadership was one of the reasons that they got crushed... and that's not a great thing!

Question: But what you're saying goes against this whole view—I'm thinking about the kinds of movements that you pointed to, like Occupy—that highly organized leadership suffocates people.

RL: Yes, that's out there, big time, and it's profoundly wrong. Lenin developed the scientific understanding of the need for a vanguard party based on two critical insights. One, the masses of people cannot spontaneously develop revolutionary consciousness and scientific understanding of how society is structured and functions and the ways, the only ways, it can be radically transformed... from their own daily experience and struggle. Look at Egypt. People have been truly courageous in standing up, but you have all these illusions about the Egyptian military. You need leadership to bring this understanding to the masses of people. On the basis of this understanding, masses can be unleashed to consciously transform the world—and this is part of what has been proven by the history we're going to get into. Making revolution requires science. Revolution requires passion, heart, courage, and creative energy. But that won't change the world in and of itself... without a scientific

grasp of what it takes to make revolution and emancipate humanity.

Question: And the other point?

RL: The need for centralized leadership. To actually enable the masses to break through the obstacles and what the enemy is going to throw at you, not least its military strength. And to be able to navigate through all the twists and turns, including the maneuvering and deceptions of the ruling class in a revolutionary crisis, and to lead people to actually overthrow the old order and to go on to revolutionize society. You need a *strategic approach* and the *strategic ability* to marshal all the creativity and resolve of the masses. When people do break free of “normal routine” and lift their heads, where is this all going to go? The question of leadership is decisive. And, look, there is no such thing as “leaderless-ness.” Some program and some force, representing different class interests, is going to be leading, no matter how much people might want to shun leadership. And let’s be honest: “leaderless-ness” is actually a program that is being led—and it doesn’t lead anywhere radically transformative.¹⁰

You need centralized leadership. How are you going to coordinate an uprising when conditions change and the opportunity emerges? How are you going to coordinate the rebuilding of society following the destruction of revolutionary war? How are you going to coordinate the functioning of a new economy? How are you going to coordinate support for world revolution? You need centralized leadership.

Now Lenin wasn’t arguing, “Well, we’ll just substitute ourselves for the masses.” No, the whole point is that the more that leadership plays its vanguard role, the greater is the conscious activism of the masses. The masses make history, but they cannot make history in their highest interests without leadership. Having that leadership is why the Russian revolution took place and changed the whole course of world history.

Chapter 3: 1917—The Revolution Breaks Through in Russia

Question: So, let's get into the Bolshevik revolution and the conditions of Russian society. In most schools, they don't even teach the basic facts.

Raymond Lotta: It's called the Bolshevik revolution, because the communist party was originally called Bolshevik (the word meaning "majority," referring to the majority of forces grouped around Lenin who resolved to forge a party of revolution).

The Russian revolution took place in the turmoil of World War 1. The war started in 1914 and lasted until 1918. This was a war in which two blocs of imperialist great powers fought each other. One bloc included Great Britain, France, and the U.S. (and Russia was part of this alliance); and the other was led by Germany with its allies. They were fighting for global supremacy, particularly control over the oppressed colonial regions of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

This was monstrous, mechanized, modern war. Combatants were gassed, torpedoed, mined, bombarded by unseen artillery, machine-gunned. Slaughter on a scale unseen before in human history... 10 million dead, and another 20 million wounded.¹¹

When Russia entered the war, all the major parties in Russia and most of the major parties in Europe supported the war in the name of patriotism... all except the Bolshevik Party led by Lenin. It took an internationalist stand, training people to see how this war was not in the interests of oppressed humanity and calling on people in the imperialist countries to rise up in

revolution and defeat their own governments.

Most of Russian society at the time was made up of peasants. They had small plots of land that many of them worked on (almost like sharecroppers of the South in the U.S.). Conditions were very backward and people were locked into tradition. Peasants planted seed according to the religious calendar. Women faced horribly oppressive conditions.

The cities were places of crowded housing and disease.

Russia was an empire. The dominant Russian nation had colonized areas and regions of Central Asia (like Uzbekistan), and it also subordinated more developed areas like Ukraine. Russia was called “the prison-house of nations.” Non-Russian nationalities made up about 45 percent of the population, but minority cultures were forcibly suppressed and their languages could not be taught or spoken in schools.

Russia was an autocratic, repressive society. The Tsar relied on secret police, jails, and surveillance.

World War 1 intensified all the suffering in society. Some 1.5 million Russians died in the war, and three million were wounded. People were going without food. The war set off a “crisis of legitimacy” in Russian society... and a revolutionary climate took hold. Workers rioted and struck for better conditions. Women took the streets. Many soldiers refused to suppress the protests, and mutiny spread. The Tsar was overthrown.¹²

But the new government did nothing to change the fundamental conditions facing the masses of people... and it made secret deals with the British and French imperialists to keep Russia in the war.

Lenin and the Vital Role of Communist Leadership

Question: But it's often said that the Bolsheviks were scheming behind the scenes and basically staged a coup in October 1917.

RL: Nonsense. The Bolshevik Party led by Lenin was prepared to act and lead as no other force in Russian society was. It had grassroots strength and organization in factory committees, in the armed forces, in the *soviets*. These were the illegal, anti-government representative assemblies of workers contesting for power in the big towns and cities....

The Bolshevik program and vision resonated widely and deeply in a society in crisis, upheaval, and looking for direction. The Bolshevik Party led the masses of people to see through the various maneuvers of this new regime. It formulated demands for “land, peace, and bread” that spoke to overriding needs in a situation of horrible suffering and privation—but which no other party would speak to. And in October, Lenin and the Bolsheviks led the masses in an insurrection. This was the October Revolution.¹³

Question: But, again, the way it's told, the Bolsheviks were just tightening power for themselves.

RL: Look, a new state power was being created. Immediately, the new government issued two stunning decrees. The first decree took Russia out of the war and called for an end to the slaughter, and called for a peace without conquest or annexation. The second decree empowered peasants to seize the vast landholdings of the tsarist crown, the aristocratic landholding classes, and the church (which itself owned large tracts of land).

But there was a larger significance to what was happening. That “long dark

night,” that darkness of exploitation and oppression, was being broken. For the first time since the emergence of class society, society was not going to be organized around exploitation. And this reverberated around the world.

In Europe, soldiers, sailors, and workers exhausted by the continuing war followed the news of what was happening in the new society. In Germany, in Kiel and Hamburg, rebel sailors of the German navy mutinied against orders to continue the war. In 1918, insurrections broke out in parts of Central Europe, and were viciously suppressed. There were many countries in Europe where revolutionary situations emerged, and in some revolutions took place. But nowhere else, other than in Russia, did revolution break through and hold on. A big part of the reason was that there was no genuine vanguard party in these societies. But because of the influence of October, new communist organizations spread to different parts of the world. And the Bolsheviks took the standpoint of spreading revolution, and promoted Marxism and vanguard party organization. On this basis, a new international body that coordinated the activity of communist parties and organizations around the world was formed—a tremendous advance for the revolution.

World capitalism would never be the same. World history had been profoundly changed.

Question: You’ve painted a picture of who supported the communist revolution in Russia. And why. But didn’t some people bitterly oppose this revolution?

RL: Yes. There was civil war between 1918 and 1921. The country was thrown into a state of near chaos and collapse.

Just a few short months after the 1917 insurrection, reactionary forces inside of Russia, representing the old overthrown order, launched a counter-revolutionary assault against the new regime. Fourteen foreign powers, including the U.S., intervened with troops and military assistance to support the counter-

revolution. You know, in October 1918, when the first anniversary of the Revolution was being celebrated, *three-quarters* of the country was in the hands of counter-revolutionary forces. Think about that.

The new proletarian state was isolated internationally, and there were acute shortages of food and armaments.¹⁴

Here you can see the vital role of vanguard leadership. The Party took responsibility to coordinate military activity. It developed economic policies to meet social needs and hold society together. It led in creating new social institutions. The revolutionary press and other means of communication spread Marxism and the socialist vision of a new economy, new political institutions, and new values. This ignited a whole new emancipatory “discourse” in society—and this was a very powerful and positive mood-creating factor.

The new society was facing international onslaught. Yes, the economy was on the verge of collapse at times, and people were suffering. But communist leadership held strong and set out to expand and solidify and mobilize the base among those who wanted to hold on to liberation with everything they had. And people could mobilize and stand up because there were now new *organs of proletarian state power* that expressed their will and determination.

[A New Kind of Power](#)

Question: What do you mean by “organs of proletarian state power”?

RL: That’s a good and central question. In capitalist societies, the armies, the courts, the police, the prisons, and—at the very top—the executive branch all serve the capitalists. These organs repress the people when they stand up—take what was done to Occupy, for instance—or even *before* they stand up, just so they “know their place” in capitalist society—like in stop-and-frisk, in New York and other cities. The legislatures are just talking shops, places to enable the different competing capitalists to wrangle out their disagreements and/or to serve as harmless safety valves for mass discontent. So you could say that those are organs of reactionary state power, or organs of bourgeois—that is, capitalist—state power. Like I said earlier, it’s a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, or capitalist class.

The socialist revolution has to set up new, revolutionary organs of power representing the proletariat. These organs of power, which should, over time, involve increasing numbers of people from both the bedrock of society and more middle class sections too, have to be able to suppress the counter-revolution. For instance, you need public security forces—but on a completely different basis, serving completely different ends, and behaving in a completely different way than what we have today. But these new organs of power also have to be able to back up the people in making transformations in every sphere, leading them and enabling them to organize their efforts in creating a whole new society on a whole new basis. This is what is meant by *dictatorship of the proletariat*.

The masses forged new practices in the really dire situations of all-out civil war. For instance, there was the practice of cooperative voluntary labor, where people came together to maintain sanitation and hygiene of the cities under

terrible duress. People were changing human nature, pitching in together and forging new relations based on cooperation. And the new state was giving this backing.

Question: You never really hear about this civil war when the revolution is being referred to. What actually happened?

RL: The counter-revolution was defeated at great cost. One million people died in the fighting and three million more died of disease during the Civil War. Nine-tenths of the engineers, doctors, or teachers left the country. Some of the most dedicated worker-communists were killed on the front lines. And the working class itself was vastly reduced in size—by the fighting and by the dislocation and destruction, with people fleeing to the rural areas.

Bourgeois commentators act as though the Bolsheviks were taking over a country that was basically intact and that the imperialists were just benignly looking on. No, things were in this state of near ruin and the imperialists and reactionaries were coming at them. The world's first oil embargo was applied to the new Soviet state.

But state power was held on to... and fragile as it was, the Soviet Union was still a beachhead in the fight for a new world. This had everything to do with Lenin's leadership and the existence of a vanguard party.

Radical Changes: Women

Question: But there's a line of attack that holds that the emergencies and threats became an excuse for the Bolsheviks just to betray people's hopes.

RL: Look, this was a revolution fighting for its life, but it was a state power fighting to carry forward a social revolution. Take the oppression of women.

The revolution moved quickly to take important measures. It abolished the whole church-sanctioned system of marriage that codified male authority over women and children. Divorce was made easy to obtain. This was very important in providing women with greater social freedom. Equal pay for jobs was enacted. Maternity hospital care was provided free; and in 1920 the Soviet Union became the first country in modern Europe to make abortion legal.¹⁵ This was way in advance of the capitalist countries of the time, coming when the right to divorce was usually subject to all kinds of religious restrictions if it was even allowed at all, and where women couldn't even vote in many capitalist countries or had just won that very basic right—and this took place just a few short years after U.S. authorities tortured imprisoned suffragette hunger strikers by force-feeding them.¹⁶ Pretty closely connected to this in spirit was the fact that the Soviet Union legalized homosexual relations.

In the mid- and late 1920s, you had something else going on too. You had struggles against patriarchal customs in some of the Central Asian republics. A lot of this was connected with oppressive Islamic... Sharia law. Women were challenging this, and the socialist state gave backing to women (and enlightened men) involved in these struggles... and was actually encouraging these struggles.

The government provided funds for local organizations of women. A big focus of struggle was the practice of arranged marriages that still persisted in different areas, and also bridal price... the payments made between the marrying

families. For a while, communists from the cities went to these areas to aid the campaigns. And this got very intense at times, with backward forces attacking organizers. And local women activists came forward. In 1927, a major offensive was launched against the centuries-long practice of the forced veiling of women—an oppressive signifier, then and today in the world, of patriarchal control over the faces, bodies, and humanity of women.¹⁷

In Soviet newspapers and schools, there was lively debate about sex roles, marriage, and family. Science fiction works envisioned new social relations. And, frankly, when you compare what was going on in the Soviet Union with the state of patriarchy, enforced patriarchy, in the rest of the world then and now... this does sound like science fiction!

Never before had a society set out to overcome the oppression of women... never before had gender equality become such a societal focus. People need to know about this. People need to learn from this. We need to learn from the strengths of this, which were by far principal, especially in this period, and we also need to learn from some of the weaknesses in their understanding, which I'll address a little later.

Radical Changes: Minority Nationalities

Question: You mentioned minority nationalities. How was discrimination being taken on? Obviously, here we are in the U.S., and racism is alive and well. But there's a question among progressive and radical activists about whether socialism, communism, can really tackle racial and national oppression.

RL: The Bolshevik revolution created the *world's first multinational state based on equality of nationalities*.

The new socialist state recognized the right of self-determination—that is, the right for an oppressed nation to separate itself from an empire or from a dominant nation and gain independence. Finland, for instance, which had been held in a subordinate position in the Russian Empire, became independent. The 1924 Soviet constitution gave formal shape to a multinational union of republics and autonomous regions. That's why you have this Soviet *union*... the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which included 12 large national republics and 25 autonomous regions (and many smaller districts and other units). The new central government recognized the right to autonomy—this meant self-government, in republics and regions.

In a 1917 decree, all minority nationalities were granted the right to instruction in native languages in all schools and universities.¹⁸ There were incredibly exciting things that were happening in the 1920s and early 1930s. Many minority nationalities that had no written languages were supplied with scripts. The Soviet state devoted considerable resources to the mass production of books, journals, and newspapers in the minority regions, and the distribution of film and encouragement of folk ensembles.

Books were being published in over 40 non-Russian languages. Let's stop

right here. What's going on in the U.S. right now? You see "English only" campaigns in parts of the country! Compare that to the Soviet Union. In the 1920s, Russians were being encouraged to learn non-Russian languages—and great-Russian chauvinism, similar to white-American privilege and dominance, was publicly and strongly rebuked as a poisonous influence in society.

The nationalities policy called for "indigenous leadership" in the new national territories. The idea was to bring forward leaders from the populations of these areas. And all kinds of efforts went into training Party leaders, government, school, and enterprise administrators from among the former oppressed nationalities.¹⁹

The persecution of the Jewish people—who, by the way, had been overwhelmingly confined to a specific area called "the Pale" under the rule of the Tsar and had been periodically subjected to lynch-mob-like "pogroms"—was ended. After the victory of the revolution, the new state officially outlawed anti-Semitism. Jews entered into professions from which they had long been banned, and occupied important positions of authority in the state administration. Theater companies performing in Yiddish were formed. During the Civil War, the Bolshevik leadership fought against the influence of anti-Jewish ideas among sections of the peasants and others.²⁰

This spirit of combating national oppression and the active encouragement of ethnic diversity permeated the early Soviet Union. It was one of the defining features of the new society and state.

Where else in the world were things like this happening at the time? A one-word answer: nowhere. But we do know, or at least people should know, what the situation was in the United States. Segregation was the law of the land. Jim Crow was in full effect. The Ku Klux Klan marched down the streets of Washington, D.C. in full regalia during this time, and the rule of the lynch mob terrorized African-American people in the southern U.S. And in the "enlightened North," white mobs would run amok through northern cities, killing 23 Black

people in Chicago alone in one 7-day rampage in 1919, one of 25 similar outrages in that summer alone—the very year that the “Reds” were fighting a civil war to create a new world in what would be the Soviet Union.²¹

When Paul Robeson, the great African-American actor, singer, and radical, first visited the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, he was deeply impressed by the revolution’s efforts to overcome racial and national prejudice and deeply moved personally by the way he was treated both by officials and ordinary people in the new socialist society. Ethnic minorities weren’t being lynched in the Soviet Union like Black people were right then in the U.S. South.²² The new Soviet Union wasn’t a place where racist films like *Birth of a Nation*, which extolled the KKK, and *Gone with the Wind*, which glamorized white plantation culture, were being produced and upheld, and still are, as cinematic icons. The new culture in the Soviet Union was promoting equality among nationalities, and celebrating the heroism of people fighting oppression.

The U.S. and the Soviet Union were two different worlds.

The Arts

Question: You've mainly focused on economic and political changes. But what happened in the realm of the arts?

RL: Well, first off, the things I just talked about were definitely political—but they also took in the ways in which people related to each other in social life, and how they even thought about the world, and themselves. And this also got reflected in the arts. From the time the revolution came to power in 1917 through the 1920s and early 1930s, there was tremendous artistic vitality in the Soviet Union. There was a lot of debate about the role and purpose and character of revolutionary art in contributing to building a new society and world.

You had world-class innovation in the arts. I mean leading avant-garde visual artists like Rodchenko and Malevich, filmmakers like Eisenstein and Dovzhenko²³... were creating very exciting work fired by a radical re-imagining of the world, by a desire to radically remake the world... and doing that through all kinds of new and unprecedented techniques, like montage in film.

You know, I heard the curator of a recent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art dealing with the early 20th century movement of abstract art. She was interviewed on TV and was asked about where at the time this art was actually influencing society. And she quipped: You know, the only place in the world where the avant-garde ever held state power... was the Soviet Union. She was being whimsical but making a real point.

Artists in the Soviet Union were doing incredible and pathbreaking work as part of a bold transformation of society and consciousness. One famous architect designed structures to convey internationalism; other architects and urban planners were rethinking the grid of cities and housing, to foster community and cooperation... even involving things like the redesign of household furniture.

All kinds of views and debates were reaching the public... issues of the

importance and role of art, or the relation between artistic experimentation and new social relations. There were all kinds of groupings and associations of artists and cultural workers, journals, manifestos and proclamations.

And world-class artistic innovation and theoretical exploration became joined to mass needs and, if you want to use the term, “everyday acts.” Especially in the visual arts, where you had these great breakthroughs in poster art, in lithography, that aided the battle against peasant illiteracy.

There were mass campaigns to overcome illiteracy, and very quickly the Soviet population achieved high levels of literacy.

You had public health campaigns—I mean basic things like encouraging people in the countryside to practice essential hygiene—where visual artists were called on to help find ways to get the messages across. They festooned trains with bold graphics.

You had lots of open-air theater, theater to the masses. You had artists taking part in street festivals and pageants... these were very popular forms of mass cultural expression. Poets and satirists had mass followings.²⁴

My point is that the Soviet Union was an exciting, a great place to be, in the 1920s and early 1930s. Unlike anything else on the planet.

Joseph Stalin

Question: You never really hear about those things. What was Stalin's role in all that? And maybe you could speak to what his role was overall, too. The conventional wisdom is that he was some kind of lunatic or tyrant.

RL: There's a lot here. There is, and here I use the phrase of the historian Arno Mayer, there is this "ritualized demonization" of Stalin.²⁵ And let me say straight up... people who just accept this "ritualized demonization" and repeat it... are victims of "brainwashing."

We have to set the record straight and we have to look at individuals and events in a scientific way, getting at the real context: what was happening in society and the world; how they understood what they were facing; and, on that basis, what were their goals and objectives. In short, we have to demystify.

Stalin was a genuine revolutionary. The kinds of radical social changes taking place in Soviet society that I have been describing... all this was very much bound up with Stalin's leadership. Lenin died in 1924. Joseph Stalin assumed leadership of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. Now the question had been posed in the mid-1920s. Could you build socialism in the Soviet Union? Could you do this in a society that was economically and culturally backward?

Marx had expected that socialist revolutions would break out first in the more advanced capitalist countries—because there you had a large industrial working class and modern industrial economy that could be the basis for a developed socialist economy and society. But that's not how history developed.

Lenin said, Okay, we don't have what was theoretically expected to be the developed base for socialism... these are the cards we've been dealt, we have to build socialism and create a better foundation... and we have to promote the

world revolution. And the Soviet Union played the initiating role in forming an association of communist parties... this was the Third Communist International.

But the challenges actually mounted and intensified. A decade into the revolution, 1927, and the Soviet Union still stood alone, as the world's only proletarian state... and there was no certainty that revolutions would take place in other countries. So, again, could you hold out, and carry out socialist economic and social transformation?

Stalin stepped forward and fought for the view that the Soviet Union could and must take the socialist road in these circumstances. If you didn't do this, the Soviet Union, the world's first socialist state, would not be able to survive. It would not be able to aid revolution elsewhere. Anything less would squander the sacrifices of millions in the Soviet Union, and betray the hopes of oppressed humanity worldwide. This was the orientation that Stalin was fighting for... and Stalin led complex and acute struggles to socialize the ownership of industry and to collectivize agriculture.

Constructing a Socialist Economy

Question: Are you referring to the debate over building “socialism in one country”?

RL: Yeah. At the time, this was in the late 1920s, Stalin saw socialist construction in the Soviet Union as part of and contributing to the advance of the world revolution. And he and others in top leadership were expecting a new tide of revolution, especially from Germany. Their thinking was that the Soviet Union could help spark that new wave... although there was still going to be necessity to “go it alone” for a while.

Question: Could you briefly describe the economic situation in the Soviet Union in the mid-1920s?

RL: Agriculture was still backward, and couldn't reliably feed the population. Industry was limited and could not furnish the factories and machines needed to modernize the economy. Russia had been a society where intellectuals were a tiny segment of the population, where only a narrow slice of the population had higher technical and liberal arts education. And, always, there was the looming threat of imperialist attack.

These were the real economic and social contradictions faced by real human beings trying to remake society and the world.

The Soviet state under Stalin's leadership moved to create a new kind of economy. For the first time in modern history, social production was being carried out consciously according to a plan designed to meet the needs of the people and shaped by overall social aims and goals to end oppression and poverty and change the world... a plan that was coordinated as a whole. This was an amazing breakthrough. Production no longer hinged on what could make a

profit for a capitalist.

I've talked about the "long dark night" being broken. Here in this one piece of liberated territory in the world, surrounded by hostile imperialist and reactionary powers, something utterly radical was being undertaken. Instead of being exploited by a minority, dominated by a minority of owners... instead of the social product of people's labor and energy serving the maintenance of the division of society into classes... now there was an economy serving the needs of society and revolutionary change.

Question: But the way this is portrayed is that there was this top-down master plan imposed on society.

RL: The First Five-Year Plan in the Soviet Union was launched in 1928. The slogan of the First Five-Year Plan was "we are building a new world." Millions of workers and peasants were fired with this spirit. In factories and villages, people discussed the plan: the difference it would make for their lives—and for the people of the world—that such an economy was being built. At factory conferences, people talked about how to reorganize the production process. People volunteered to help build railroads in wilderness areas. They voluntarily worked long shifts. At steel mills, they sang revolutionary songs on the way to work.²⁶

Never before in history had there been such a mobilization of people to consciously achieve planned economic and social aims.

And let's ask again: what was happening in the rest of the world? The world capitalist economy was languishing in the Depression of the early 1930s—with levels of unemployment reaching 20 and 50 percent. People were starving in major cities like New York and Berlin, and if you've ever seen the movie *The Grapes of Wrath* you get a picture of what small farmers in the U.S. faced... the richest country in the world.

Back to the Soviet Union, there was also the transformation of agriculture,

collectivization...

Struggle in the Countryside

Question: That's one of the things that people raise to me as a negative thing.

RL: Well, they're dead wrong. Collectivization spoke to real needs and contradictions in society... and the world situation the Soviets were facing.

We have to go back to the Civil War that I was talking about. It had caused tremendous destruction and dislocation to the economy and society. Conditions were desperate. People in the towns and cities were hungry, industry was barely functioning, and peasants were reluctant to grow crops because during the war the government had been channeling large amounts of agricultural produce to feed the army and the population.

It was necessary to restore and stimulate economic production and to rebuild transport and communications. The revolutionary leadership took certain measures, known as the New Economic Policy or NEP. These included the reintroduction of some private markets and various forms of capitalist ownership and activity—although the socialist state kept control of large-scale industry and banking. And foreign investors were allowed in. These measures were seen by Lenin and the revolutionary leadership as a temporary retreat in order to revive the economy. The NEP did that, but over time, it also gave rise to new problems.

There were food shortages in the cities, especially with the urban population growing. Land had been redistributed to peasants after the seizure of power in 1917. But through the 1920s, a section of rich peasants were gaining strength in the rural economy that was still a private-based economy of small landholders. The rich peasants, or kulaks, as they were called, had large land holdings, and were consolidating greater ownership. And the NEP had given rise to forces (the popular expression was “NEP men”) who dominated the milling and marketing of grain and finance in the countryside. Social polarization

between the kulaks and the poor peasantry was increasing.²⁷

Stalin and others in leadership felt they had to move quickly to create large units of agriculture in the countryside. This would raise productivity and surround the kulaks. It would also accelerate the “proletarianization” of the peasants, bringing more people into the cities and industry, and lessening tensions between the new society and peasants who were still wedded to private ownership.

Collectivization was a huge social movement that drew in, activated and relied on the poorest farmers as its base, and worked to involve as many people as possible. Dedicated worker-volunteers from the cities went into rural areas to forge collectives. Artists, writers, and filmmakers went to the front lines to tell the stories of what was going on. Traveling libraries were sent to teams in the agricultural fields. In some regions, farms had their own drama circles. Religion, superstition, and mind-numbing tradition were challenged.

People lifted their heads and became tuned in to what was happening in society overall. They discussed the national plans and national developments. Women, whose lives had been determined by oppressive tradition and patriarchal obligation, became tractor drivers and leaders in the collectives.²⁸

Question: But collectivization did meet a lot of resistance.

RL: Yes. On the one hand, this had to do with the class struggle in the countryside—where you had the kulaks and other traditionally privileged forces digging in and mobilizing resistance to the changes and social forces that I’ve been talking about. That was the main thing.

On the other hand, some of this resistance was connected to mistakes that were made. Mao wrote about this in the 1950s. While recognizing the tremendous and unprecedented character of collectivization in the Soviet Union, at the same time he also had serious criticisms of how Stalin approached it. It took place before the peasants themselves had gained experience cooperating

with each other, working the fields and using tools cooperatively. There wasn't sufficient political and ideological work done, to create the understanding and atmosphere enabling peasants to act more consciously to achieve collective social ownership. And the state took too much grain from the countryside—this put unnecessary pressure on peasants and led to resentment. [29](#)

Changing Circumstances and Changing Thinking

Question: Wait a minute—what do you mean by “ideological work”?

RL: I mean work to change not just what people do, but to win them over to think in new ways and to unleash their initiative on that basis to transform the world. The lives of small farmers—each person owning their own land, surviving or not by dint of their own efforts, in opposition to others who compete with them—pit them against each other, and this shapes their thinking. Stalin tended to think that if you mechanized agriculture and made it collective, people’s thinking would sort of be naturally transformed; but the whole process is way more complex than that, and you actually have to work on transforming not just what people think, but how people think, well before the revolution, AND through each phase. As I said, this was a point of Mao’s and it’s something that Bob Avakian—BA—has both built on and taken to a new level in the new synthesis of communism.

So to return to Stalin. He was trying to solve real problems in society, like how to move forward and out of private agriculture at a time when the Soviet Union was facing international encirclement. But, as I mentioned, the approach was a bit mechanical; he was seeing the creation of higher levels of ownership and bigger farms with more advanced technology as the crux of the matter... and downplaying the whole ideological dimension and not grasping that people’s values and thinking have to change, and their relations with each other in production and society have to change, and leadership has to be working on this.³⁰

The same problem existed in the approach to industrial planning—a mechanical view that by building up socialist heavy industry, you would be

securing the material foundations for socialism. But as Mao said, this was years later, “What good is state ownership of factories, warehouses, if cooperative values are not being forged?” And socialist economic development has to be oriented to breaking down gaps between industry and agriculture, between mental and manual labor, between worker and peasant. Stalin paid some attention to overcoming these contradictions, but it was seen as a secondary task in relation to creating a more modern industrial-agricultural foundation.³¹

A Turning Point: The Revolution Is Crushed in Germany and the Nazis Come to Power

Question: As I understand it, there was a clear turn towards more, if you want to use the word, conservative policies overall in Soviet society from the mid-1930s onward. Is that right? And if so, why?

RL: The Soviet leadership and masses did not get to choose the circumstances in which to make, defend, and advance the revolution. And by the mid-1930s, the revolution was under heavy assault and facing a very unfavorable and perilous world situation. In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria on the Soviet Union's eastern borders. In 1933, the Nazi party, led by Hitler, consolidated power in Germany.

As I said, the Soviet leadership had been expecting a revolution to take place in Germany. But the Nazi regime effectively crushed the German Communist Party and began to embark on a program of militarization. At the same time, pro-fascist forces had gained strength in Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania, and the Baltic countries, including Poland. In Spain, the Western powers stood idly, as General Franco led an uprising against the Spanish Republic, actively aided by Hitler and Mussolini. Germany and Japan had signed an Anti-Soviet Pact.

The growing danger of inter-imperialist war and the likelihood of a massive imperialist assault on the Soviet Union was profoundly shaping economic and social policy in the Soviet Union.

Question: So what were the implications of that?

RL: War was looming. And, as with all of the challenges facing the Soviet revolution, there was no prior historical experience for dealing with the

magnitude of a situation like this... the likelihood of a full-scale onslaught by German imperialism against the Soviet Union. Stalin and the Soviet leadership approached this in a certain way. The assessment was that there had been this big leap in socialist state ownership and the development of the productive forces. And it was time to hunker down and prepare for the eventuality of war.

There was a push for greater discipline and stepped-up production in the factories to have a war-fighting capacity. There was great emphasis on administrative measures, material incentives (paying people more to work harder), and on management technique and technology.

The radical social and cultural experimentation of the 1920s and early 1930s was reined in. It was seen as being too removed from urgent production and political tasks and too alienating of the broader ranks of workers and the newer educated technical strata that were rallying around the regime.

There was a premium put on unity in the face of the growing war threat... and unity was being forged around a kind of national patriotism.

Internationally the Soviet Union was calling for and attempting to build a global united front against the fascist imperialist powers. It subordinated, and even sacrificed, revolutionary struggles in various parts of the world to the goal of defending the Soviet Union. The Soviet leadership saw the defense of the Soviet Union as being one and the same as the interests of the world revolution.

All this was very problematic. It went against, and stood in contradiction to, what the revolution was about and to its overall main character. The revolution was facing the need to prepare for attack and war that could destroy the whole revolution. This was real and monumental. But Stalin's approach was seriously flawed.

Mistakes and Reversals

Question: Could you elaborate on that a little—like, how did they justify this turnaround?

RL: Well, I talked about Stalin's tendency to see things mechanically and statically—that is, to not see how there are contradictions within societies, processes, individuals—really, everything—that may not be on the surface, but that are actually driving forward change within that thing. You know, like you look at an egg and just by going by the surface you wouldn't know that there was this potential chicken inside, growing and growing and eventually going to burst out of that egg and become a whole different thing.

This kind of mechanical or static thinking crept into and began to increasingly color his view of socialism... that there was this socialist state that had to be defended at all costs against the onslaught he could see coming, and a lot of things got justified in the name of doing that defense which were actually undercutting the socialist character of the state.

For example, Stalin began to make concessions to parts of the population that were still very religious and traditional in their thinking, or were strongly influenced by Russian nationalism, or both. Now, yes, you were 15 years into the new society—but one thing that we have learned is that there are huge sections of the people that don't give up all that old thinking overnight. So this presents challenges in terms of waging ideological struggle, carrying on educational work, and promoting a scientific world outlook in society, while upholding the right to religious worship. But, as Stalin saw it, you had to make concessions to that kind of thinking and those kinds of forces like the Russian Orthodox Church in order, as Stalin saw it, to strengthen unity for the war effort.

The government also began to go back on some of the earlier advances around women and gay people, for instance. Some of the tremendous, and at that

point in the world unique, advances I talked about earlier—including the right to abortion—got reversed. And the rights for gay people were also reversed. And more generally the traditional family was being extolled and traditional relations were being reinforced. This was both a very serious error and also betrayed a certain lack of depth to understanding the importance of gender relations in the overall transformation of society. And this kind of thing was based again on the assumption that the socialist character of the society was more or less assured and the main thing you had to do was to defend it.

Now I don't want to minimize in any way the scale of the threat the Soviet Union faced. Stalin and those around him were the first people to lead a socialist state, they had this tremendous responsibility to defend it, and here was the most powerful army in the world sitting next door with the leader of that army making very clear that he intended to destroy that socialist country. And let's remember that the Nazis very nearly made good on that threat, and killed some 26 million—yes, 26 million!—Soviet people in the course of trying to do that.

I'm not saying this to justify these errors in the least. I'm saying this so that we really grasp what they faced and how in the face of that kind of huge pressure we must and we can do better in the future. And without getting into all that now, this underscores the importance of the work done by Bob Avakian in grappling with this whole experience and the way that he has approached this, and through that process developing the new synthesis of communism.

Question: What about the gulags³² and executions? When you say Stalin, this is probably the first thing people start talking about.

RL: The international situation I just described—where the very existence of the Soviet Union was in the cross-hairs—also set the context for the purges and repression of the late 1930s.

And look, when we talk about literally grievous errors, some of what went on during the period of 1936–1938 is part of what we mean. Many innocent

people suffered repression: economic officials, military officers, Party members who had been in opposition in earlier years and others who were seen as potential sources of opposition, including people from the intelligentsia. People's basic legal rights were violated and people were executed on the basis of those violations. So this was, as I said, grievous.³³

Now there are two contending ways of understanding what was going on—and only one of them gets you to the truth. You can declare that Stalin was a monster, a paranoid despot who just wanted to accrue “absolute power”... end of discussion. That's the line of attack of anti-communist historians and cold-war propagandists.

Or, you can bring a scientific approach to this moment in the history of communist revolution, to understand what happened and why. You look at what Stalin and the leadership were actually facing at that point in terms of the virtual certainty of massive attack, you look at the fact that there were indeed *some* counter-revolutionary groups and some elements in the Party and army who seem to have been intriguing with one or another imperialist power in the face of that, you analyze the framework they were using to understand all that, and then you evaluate what was done politically in the face of that. And if there were errors—and as I said, there were, some of them very serious—then you strive to understand what it was in their understanding and approach to those problems that gave rise to these errors.

[A Matter of Orientation](#)

So I want to get into what led to those errors. But before I do, there's something else to bring to this discussion... as a matter of basic orientation. Even acknowledging the serious excesses that took place, still, what happened in the Soviet Union does not hold a candle to what happened as a result of one single event in U.S. history: Thomas Jefferson's decision to make the Louisiana Purchase, which played a key role in expanding and prolonging slavery in the U.S.

One hundred thousand slaves, a third of them children, would be sold in the markets of New Orleans before the Civil War.³⁴ Slaves picked cotton from before dawn to after dark. They cleared disease-infested swamps. They were worked as if they were beasts of burden. Jefferson's slave-owning peers carried out pervasive and massive rape, barbaric punishments, and even the selling of children away from their parents. Slave owners on the Eastern seaboard, including Jefferson himself, profited greatly by the expansion of slave territory. And in the newly acquired territory, the genocide against the Indian peoples gained terrible new impetus.

Thomas Jefferson acted consciously and methodically to expand and consolidate the system of chattel slavery, literally. He created a living hell that would last for nearly six decades, all in the pursuit of empire and profit.³⁵

Or you look at the massive amount of killings carried out by the U.S. over the past decades at a time when nobody could argue that they were facing any kind of serious threat to their very existence—and we're talking several million killed in Korea, several million more killed in Indochina, the hundreds of thousands killed and millions displaced in Iraq, all of those as a result of direct U.S. military intervention—and that's not even touching on the many murderous proxy wars they have sponsored in Latin America and Africa—and again, for what? For the maintenance of a worldwide system of exploitation and misery.

Stalin, on the other hand, made errors, even serious errors, in a situation in which the Soviet Union was in desperate circumstances and facing dire threats. But he made those errors in the context of defending *a world-shaking revolution aimed at ridding the world of slavery in its modern form.*³⁶

People have to judge any historical figure, or any historical event, in the whole context of what was taking place, what vital interests were in play and at stake, and what were the aims and objectives of the person or group in question—in order to determine the *essence* of the matter. At the same time, as I said, we need to evaluate Stalin's and much of the Soviet leadership's understanding of the tensions and contradictions in society, and their approach to dealing with this. And there were serious problems.

Two Different Kinds of Contradictions

Question: What do you mean by that? Problems in how he was understanding things? Does this tie in with what you said earlier about a static view of socialism?

RL: Yes. Earlier I mentioned that by the mid-1930s, socialist and collective ownership had been achieved in the main sectors of the economy. The old propertied classes had been overthrown and private capitalism had been pretty much transformed.

Stalin analyzed that there was no longer an economic basis for exploitation... and therefore there were no longer antagonistic classes in socialist society. The understanding was that there were two non-antagonistic classes: the workers and the collectivized peasants, and then a stratum of new and old intelligentsia and white-collar professionals. The old ruling class had been overthrown by the revolution and civil war. As Stalin saw it, there were remnants of the old order—but, as I said, no antagonistic classes... no bourgeois forces internal to society. And these remnants of the old order... again I'm characterizing the understanding... they could only be propped up externally.

So the threat to Soviet society was seen as coming from agents of the deposed classes, cultivated and supported by foreign capital. And you had this whole discourse of foreign spies and wreckers, of plots and conspiracies from outside. There was real subversion, but Stalin tended to view all opposition in society as coming, in some way, from the outside. And the struggle against counter-revolution was seen as a kind of counter-espionage operation. It was this mindset that led to the serious mistakes I described earlier.

But Stalin's analysis was wrong. In fact, society was teeming with class differences and contradictions. And not all coming from the outside... though, as I've been pointing out there was the threat of intervention and war and what's

going on in the world profoundly shapes the struggles in socialist society. All this was discovered by Mao, and on that basis he was able to lead the Chinese Revolution in a profoundly different way of handling these contradictions, and the different kinds of struggle they give rise to.³⁷ And I'll get into that, later in the interview.

Stalin was mixing up these two types of contradictions. You had people in Soviet society in the 1930s who were raising objections to different policies of the socialist state... really who were dissenting. But Stalin was treating all these differences as antagonistic ones, and he linked all this to external threats... to external subversion. Repression should only have been directed against enemies. But it was used against people who were expressing disagreements and against people who were making mistakes in certain responsible positions. As I said, Mao grasped the problem here and got deeper to the truth of the dynamics of socialist society. And Bob Avakian has built on this pathbreaking insight of Mao, and the experience of socialist society more broadly, and developed a deeper scientific understanding of socialist society and a more expansive vision of the importance of dissent and struggle between contending ideas in that society.

But Stalin didn't have this understanding. And he was relying on purges and police actions to solve problems—rather than, and this was what happened during the Cultural Revolution in China... rather than mobilizing the masses to take up the burning political and ideological questions on the overall direction of society and *opening things up*. Instead there was this whole approach of *hunkering down* to defend the socialist state.

And you had this serious departure from internationalism... the Soviet Union backing away from the socialist state's responsibility to promote the world revolution. There was this view that nothing was more important than protecting the socialist state and that nearly anything was justified in doing this—including entering into a sort of *realpolitik*, or political intrigue—with the imperialists. Now just to be clear, there is a role for diplomatic relations that

socialist states undertake with imperialists—you can't exist in a constant state of war, for one thing, you're going to need to trade, and so on—but these have to be on the basis of principle... on the idea that those relations are subordinated to the advance of the revolution. But too often, in navigating that period, this got lost.³⁸

A Crucial Relationship: Advancing the World Revolution, Defending the Socialist State

Question: But you've been emphasizing the real need to defend the Soviet Union, and how this was impacting the decisions Stalin was making.

RL: Yes, but there was not a correct scientific understanding of this. You see, Bob Avakian identified—and no communist leader and theorist before him even conceptualized things in these terms—that there is this real contradiction between defending the socialist state and advancing the world revolution and at times this can be very sharply posed. This is a key element of the new synthesis of communism, in the further development of the science of communism.

You don't let the imperialists just destroy the new socialist society. It has to be defended. But that can come into contradiction with supporting revolution in other parts of the world... in terms of where you are putting resources, how you are carrying out diplomacy, and how you are organizing socialist society, and preparing people ideologically in terms of sacrificing for the whole world revolution. So you are going to have to recognize that contradiction and learn how to handle it.

Stalin, and even Mao, later, when he led the revolution in China, tended to equate defending the socialist state with acting in the interests of the advance of the world revolution. And again, in evaluating this, you have to remember that this was the first time anyone had ever faced this situation and there was no previous experience to go on, you have to remember the real and existential threat they faced, and you have to remember that both of these leaders never caved in to imperialism and that Mao, in particular, fought for revolution and made advances in the revolution up until his very death. But this objectively amounted to putting the defense of the socialist state above advancing the world

revolution.

It's not that Stalin and Mao consciously set out to subordinate the world revolution to the defense of the socialist country. Rather, because they understood this extremely complex and sharp contradiction in a certain linear way—revolution would be won in this country, then in that country... and the world revolution would proceed through a process of defending and adding on new socialist countries—because of that understanding, they made errors in policy.

On the basis of digging deeply into this, Bob Avakian has brought forward new, scientific understanding: the *principal* role of the socialist state is to be a *base area* for the advance of the world revolution. It has to defend itself on *that* basis and be prepared to put its survival on the line in periods when the world revolution can make great advances. And it has to handle the real and very difficult contradictions involved correctly in all of this.³⁹

So these are some important lessons from what was going on in the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

Question: And of course, then the Soviet Union was invaded by German imperialism in 1941.

RL: You know, the history of the Soviet Union, when it was socialist, was a history of a society waging war, preparing for war, or dressing the wounds of war. In June 1941, the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union. They threw the most modern army in the world and most of their military might against the Soviets. Hitler made it clear to his troops that he expected them to discard every principle of humanity in what was to be a war of total annihilation.⁴⁰

The Soviets fought with incredible heroism. Twenty-six million Soviet citizens lost their lives in World War 2, more than 1 of 8 in the population.

But you have this contradiction. The Soviet Union came out of World War 2 militarily victorious. But the revolution was weakened politically and

ideologically. By that I mean that the errors I described above had corroded and undercut people's understanding of the goals of communist revolution and had actually reinforced weaknesses in the way people were attempting to understand the world, and how to transform it. People were still fighting to build socialism and refusing to cave in to imperialism, and this definitely was being led by Stalin. But they also had become muddled in their understanding of the difference between nationalism and internationalism... between revolution and reform... and about what really constituted a scientific approach to nature and society.

After Stalin's death in 1953, new bourgeois forces within the Communist Party maneuvered to seize power; and in 1956, Nikita Khrushchev, a high official in the party and government, took over the reins, consolidated the rule of a new capitalist class, and led in systematically restructuring the Soviet Union into a state-capitalist society.⁴¹ This was the end of the first proletarian state.

Question: So how do you put this in perspective?

RL: The Soviet revolution was about the slaves rising up with vanguard communist leadership—and forging a whole new way to organize and run society, a whole new way to relate to the world... not to plunder and conquer it but to contribute to the emancipation of humanity. Its defeat was a bitter setback, made more so by the fact that people did not have the scientific tools at the time to understand the character and source of that defeat.

Despite the errors I've described, the revolution of 1917–56 represented the first steps, apart from the short-lived Paris Commune, along the road of emancipation, towards a world free of oppression and exploitation. It inspired people throughout the world. But that road has to be forged... the understanding of what it's going to take has to be deepened and extended. It doesn't come automatically or spontaneously. There's a "learning curve," if you will.

But to learn and learn deeply requires a scientific understanding of society

and how to transform it. It requires the further development of that science... I'm talking about the science of communism. It's a question of identifying and analyzing the problems and challenges in the process of getting to a classless world... and forging solutions, and developing new insights into how to understand what you are facing.

This is what Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese revolution, did... he took the project of emancipation, the communist revolution, to a whole new place of understanding and practice. This was a new breakthrough for humanity, more radical and more emancipating. And that's what we'll get into next.

Chapter 4: China—One Quarter of Humanity Scaling New Heights of Emancipation

Question: So this brings us to the Chinese Revolution in 1949. Could you say something about *how* the communists came to power there?

Raymond Lotta: This was a vast social and political upheaval, a mass revolutionary armed struggle of extraordinary daring and sacrifice. Mao Zedong led this epic revolution. But to understand how this revolution came to power... we have to understand its historical setting.

In the 19th century, the major world capitalist powers began to penetrate China, pushing their way in militarily and economically... and by the end of the century came to dominate China. They imposed treaties that gave them commercial advantage. They sliced China up into foreign spheres of influence, which meant that one power would be controlling, plundering, and exploiting one part of the country... and another doing the same in another part.

China had long been ruled by a monarchy. It was brought down by a revolt of insurgent military officers and civilian opponents in 1911, and a republic was declared in 1912. But the Republic was weak... and was weakened by the corrupt old order. Warlords divided the country up into their own mini-state-like fiefdoms. All this made it easier for imperialism to continue to batter its way into the country, especially Japanese imperialism.⁴²

[A Revolution Is Born](#)

Question: So where do Mao and communism come in?

RL: There had been different attempts by the Chinese people to cast off this foreign control, often involving huge upheavals; there had been courageous peasant risings. But these did not succeed in fundamentally changing the conditions of Chinese society.

The Bolshevik revolution dramatically changed the equation. It awakened and inspired a section of Chinese youth and intellectuals to take up communism. The Chinese Communist Party was formed in 1921. Beginning in 1927, there was a fierce battle between the Guomindang, which had started as a nationalist party-government but had been taken over by reactionaries backed by different imperialist powers, and the Chinese Communist Party. The communist movement suffered huge bloodbaths and persecution at the hands of the Guomindang. In this setting, Mao developed and then fought for a correct political and military strategy to actually win liberation.⁴³

A major turning point was the Long March, one of the most extraordinary military feats of the 20th century. In 1934, Mao led 100,000 Red Army fighters and communist organizers on a 6,000-mile long march to regroup and reorganize forces for revolution. They trekked through dangerous swamplands and treacherous mountains. They fought warlord and reactionary armies. They spread revolution wherever they went. When the Long March reached its destination, only 10,000 people had made it. But because of the Long March the revolution was able to go forward.⁴⁴

In 1931, Japanese imperialism began to aggressively expand into China... and in 1937 it went to war with China. The Japanese military forces captured Shanghai and also took the capital city of Nanjing where they carried out one of modern history's worst atrocities... systematically raping, torturing, and

murdering 300,000 civilians.⁴⁵ Japan ravaged China for raw materials... for industrial production by slave labor... and carried out horrible war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons. This was happening in the context of World War 2 of 1939–1945... as the imperialist powers sought, once again, to violently re-divide the world.

The Chinese communists were determined to fight the Japanese invasion and occupation, as part of the fight for national and social liberation. By 1940, their military forces had grown to some 500,000. Mao and the communists rallied and led the Chinese people to stand up to and fight the occupying forces of Japanese imperialism. And in 1945, they inflicted defeat on the Japanese forces in China.

But the country was devastated. Some 14 million Chinese died as a result of World War 2! Most of China's rail network, major highways, and factories were destroyed. And just as the war ended in 1945, civil war broke out between the communist-led forces and those of the Guomindang... equipped and financed by the U.S. imperialists. After four years of intense combat, the Chinese revolution triumphed in 1949.⁴⁶

But the U.S. imperialists were soon moving up the Korean peninsula and threatening to invade China itself and threatening to use nuclear weapons. The U.S. 7th Naval Fleet was stationed in the Far East. All that was during the Korean War, which started just nine months after the victory of the revolution.

The revolution came to power in these conditions. In winning this incredible victory, the Chinese revolution was a beacon to the oppressed of the world... and a target for imperialism. The conventional wisdom in the communist movement at that time was that it was not possible in an economically backward country like China with hundreds of millions of peasants to make an anti-colonial revolution leading to communism. Mao applied and further developed the science of communism in forging a revolutionary path for oppressed nations—developing both the political program and the military strategy for making a

liberating revolution in such countries. And Mao's breakthrough has had great implications for revolution throughout the world.

China on the Eve of Revolution

Question: What was Chinese society like in 1949?

RL: China was a semi-feudal society. The great majority of the population were destitute peasants, subjected to the cruel and arbitrary rule of landlordism.

The peasant rented land from the landlord who, when crops were good, might take half of the wealth created by the peasant... extracting grain as rent. In bad crop years, the extraction would be higher. The peasant kept what was left, and even in good times this generally wasn't enough... so the peasant had to borrow from money-lenders, paying interest anywhere from 30 percent to 100 percent. And on top of this, the peasant had to pay taxes to government authorities. In famine years, which came often... peasants would be reduced to eating leaves and bark, and were often even forced into the horror of selling one of their children so others could survive. You know, famine was considered part of the normal life experience... one of the things a peasant might expect to die of... like sickness or old age.⁴⁷

For women, life was a living hell. I'm talking about wife beating, arranged marriages, and forced prostitution. One of the most oppressive and hideous customs in Chinese society was the practice of foot binding. Seven- and eight-year-old girls had their feet tightly wrapped and bent until the arch was broken and the toes permanently bent under. This horrible practice was done to keep women's feet small and forced women to sway when walking... considered erotic and aesthetic in patriarchal Chinese society. The intense pain and suffering were summed up in an old saying: "for every pair of bound feet a bucket full of tears." Foot binding became the symbol of the circumstances of Chinese women before the revolution.⁴⁸

In the cities, the situation was desperate. In Shanghai, before the outbreak of World War 2, 25,000 dead bodies were collected from the streets each year.⁴⁹

In the textile factories, young women workers were locked in at night. Shanghai had also been carved up by different foreign powers.

China had an undeveloped industrial base... mainly producing light manufactured goods, like cigarettes and textiles. This was a country of 500 million people, but there were only 12,000 doctors trained in Western medicine. Four million people died each year from infectious and parasitic diseases.⁵⁰ Life expectancy was 32 years. People were so desperate that you had this huge scourge of opium addiction... 60 million opium addicts.

This is why people make revolution. This is why it is necessary to overthrow the old exploiting classes, and destroy their state system.

Mobilizing the Masses to Transform All of Society

The Chinese revolution did just that. It established a new state power, a form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, based on the alliance of workers and peasants. This new state power protected the rights of the people, suppressed counter-revolution, and made it possible to carry out the all-round transformation of society and to support world revolution. In the cities and rural areas, new institutions were established at every level of society... led by the Communist Party... but involving millions and millions of the formerly exploited in taking initiative to transform and administer society.

You know, for millennia, the oppressed had been treated as no more than a pair of laboring hands. Now they had the right and capacity to stand up... and the backing of a people's liberation army to transform economic, political, social, and cultural life.

Under the leadership of Mao and the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese revolution immediately set out to change conditions.

Question: Where did they begin?

RL: One of the first measures was land reform. By the early 1950s, the new revolutionary state power had distributed 30-40 percent of China's cultivated land away from landlord-exploiting classes... to some 300 million peasants. The Chinese land reform was the most massive expropriation and distribution of property and repudiation of debt in world history.⁵¹ This was truly a mass movement from below, led by the Party. It was different from the more top-down way that change often took place in the Soviet countryside under Stalin.

Throughout China, peasants divided up the land, tools, and animals. They confronted the old landlords. They held mass meetings to talk about how they

had suffered under the old society and how they would farm in the new society. They came into political life, overturning the old appointed village magistrates, replacing them with elected councils. They began to throw off superstition and to study science. In a country where women had never been treated as equals, not just the men but women received land. The revolution had decisively broken the back of landlord oppression.⁵²

Question: You mentioned women getting land, but how else were things changing for women?

RL: Let's step back here for a minute. I talked earlier about what was done in the Soviet Union, especially in the first decade or so and in comparison with the rest of the world. And we have to really grasp that this question—I'm talking about the oppression of women more universally—wasn't even seen as a "question" until the late 1700s when the first major works taking this up were written. Marx and Engels saw this as integral to the communist revolution right from the beginning, and Engels wrote a major work on it—*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*—detailing how this oppression arose and, in very broad strokes, how it could and would be eliminated in the struggle for communist society.⁵³

So this was the most advanced understanding and practice on the planet, on the one hand, but there were still ways in which all of this—Engels' pathbreaking theoretical work, the transformations in the Soviet Union, and even the initial breakthroughs I'm going to talk about in China—were still the first steps. First steps... but giant steps. Even something like the right to have land—this was major in the context of a country that in many ways had not yet fully emerged from feudalism.

So in liberated China in 1950, a new marriage law put an end to child and arranged marriages. The new law guaranteed the right to divorce for women as well as men. But the revolution, Mao emphasized, was about more than new

laws. People were changing society through mass mobilization, but this was deeply connected with the struggle to transform oppressive social relations and backward ideas, to change values and thinking as well.

Where there was land reform, there was struggle against the treatment of women as objects of male authority, struggle against the narrow confines of the family, against the authority of the clan. Something very important in this: the Party developed a practice of relying on widows and orphans even in waging the struggle for land reform and cooperative forms of agriculture—drawing in the most oppressed and in the process drawing women much more fully into public life, and in a very dynamic way.

In society broadly, there was ideological struggle against the notion of the inferiority of women. Mao popularized the slogan “women hold up half the sky.” It was not simply a declaration of equality but a call to take on all that stood in the way of that. In less than a decade, prostitution disappeared as a major social phenomenon; the shame was lifted from those previously forced into this and a new, productive life was possible, and women could walk down the streets in major cities without fear. The practice of foot binding was ended once and for all. And all this then went even further in the Cultural Revolution, which erupted in 1966—and which I’ll speak to a little later.⁵⁴

Question: You had said that China was devastated after the war. How did the new power deal with that?

RL: Mass campaigns were launched to clean up the cities. Cholera and other epidemic diseases were eliminated or brought under control. New factories and housing for workers went up. Hospitals and medical schools were constructed. By 1965, China had trained 200,000 regular doctors.⁵⁵ A new countrywide educational system was created. Mass literacy campaigns were launched. All kinds of volunteers went to the countryside, and by the end of the 1950s most peasants had acquired a basic reading knowledge. This is what the revolution

made possible.

The scourge of opium addiction was wiped out through mass treatment and education. People who had been addicted were now able to work productively... because a whole new economy based on meeting social need was established, including the ability to cultivate agricultural crops for the good of society. The most important thing, the most precious thing, was people and their ability to be healthy, to learn, to contribute.⁵⁶

An Unsettled Question: What Direction for Society?

Question: So these were great advances.

RL: Yes, but the direction in which society would go... that was not settled.

Question: What do you mean by that? They had power, didn't they?

RL: Let me go back for a second. When the revolution came to power in 1949, Mao gave this famous speech in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. He declared to the crowd, "The Chinese people have stood up." But he also looked beyond the moment and declared that this was "but a beginning... only a brief prologue to a long drama."

It was Mao's poetic way of saying that the revolution couldn't stop. It was entering a new stage of socialist transformation of the economy, the creation of new political institutions, and the forging of new values of working for the common good. The revolution had to continue.

The goal of communist revolution is to overcome the division of society and the world into classes and to create a world community of humanity. Marx used this very descriptive phrase to capture the essence of communism: "the two radical ruptures"... with traditional property relations *and* with traditional ideas. That's why these early changes that I was describing, amazing as they were... were just "the beginning."

But there were powerful forces in the Chinese Communist Party who had a very different vision. They saw revolution as a vehicle to overcome China's economic backwardness and dependency, and to turn China into a modern, industrial power. China had been humiliated and dominated by foreign powers.

They saw socialism as a means for, and in the context of, achieving national liberation and national independence.

And they came to the opposite conclusion as Mao. From their perspective, the political-social revolution essentially *ended* in 1949. The task now, as they saw it, was mainly economic modernization.

They were basing themselves in part on shortcomings of the Soviet Union when it was socialist. They advocated a program of rapid industrialization. Development, in their eyes, would then trickle down to the countryside. Their vision drove them in a certain direction: to concentrate resources on big and modern factories and advanced technology... to build up a big centralized planning apparatus... to create armies of experts... to motivate people through wage and bonus incentives. But here is the rub: much of their thinking actually reflected the dominant understanding of socialism in the international communist movement. They were adopting the Soviet model of development.

Question: And Mao disagreed?

RL: Yes. Mao saw the need to build up industry... but he was against the idea of rapid industrialization based on concentrating resources in the urban areas, and at the expense of peasants in agriculture. He was for developing technology, especially for technology appropriate to China's conditions... but was against the idea of putting technology and expertise above people and their creativity. He was for improving people's livelihoods... but against motivating people by narrowly appealing to people's immediate material interests.

He saw this approach of the other leaders in the Party as one that would lead to the reinforcement and widening of inequalities and one that would be robbing the masses of initiative. He was searching for an approach that would actually enable the masses to gain all-around mastery of society, and to prevent new elites from forming.

You had to plan economic development, but there was a need for a

different, for a more radical, dynamic, and participatory system of planning than what had existed in the socialist Soviet Union. For one thing, if China was going to be able to withstand imperialist attack and invasion, it had to decentralize industry and not concentrate development in the vulnerable cities and coastal areas; but I'm actually talking about a more profound point, having to do with drawing the masses of people more deeply into the actual process of knowing and transforming society.

So there was this contention between two camps in the Communist Party over the direction of society. These conservative forces had strength and influence in the Communist Party and in society. In the 1949–76 period, intense struggle raged at the highest levels of the Party over the direction of society, over going forward to communism... or back to capitalism.

And there's a further dimension. In the mid-1950s, Mao and the revolutionary forces were struggling against *two legacies*. Bob Avakian has spoken to this.⁵⁷ First and foremost they were struggling against the continuing threats and influence of capitalism and Western imperialism, which had historically dominated China and which was encircling and pressuring China. Second, Mao was struggling against the political and ideological legacy and influence of the Soviet model of development, which even before its degeneration into state capitalism had significant problems. By state capitalism, I mean a system where the factories, mines, transportation—the means of production, in short—are owned by the state, but are run according to capitalist principles of “profit in command” rather than supporting revolution and meeting social need.

Question: I know we've talked about this a bit, but why was this not a model for socialist development?

RL: Well, one of the problems of the Soviet approach, or model, was the view that once you had achieved state ownership of the major productive resources of

society, then the key task was to develop the productive forces, to go all-out and really build up the economy. But Mao looked at it differently. He argued that this view did not actually lead to the masses changing material conditions and changing themselves... changing all the social and ideological relations of society. Instead, this model of just “produce your way” to communism, will actually lead to the emergence of a new privileged stratum that will begin to install itself in a position over the masses.

Now Mao did not have a fully formed theorization of this at this time. And there would be big struggles over the next years, culminating in the Cultural Revolution. These struggles were crucibles through which Mao began to forge a pathbreaking understanding of the nature of socialist society and getting to the goal of communism, an actually new understanding of what communism is. But at this time in the early and mid-1950s, Mao was already seeing real problems with what I am calling “the Soviet model.”

So, this was the situation confronting the revolutionary leadership in China. Would China be able to stand up to the pressures of Western imperialism, the U.S. in particular? Would it be able to resist pressures to come under the wing and control of the Soviet Union? Or could it go a different way, a liberating way?

[The Great Leap Forward](#)

The Great Leap Forward of 1958 began to carve out that different way. There was tremendous potential and enthusiasm for change in the countryside. And the revolutionary leadership was able to turn that into a powerful force for transformation.⁵⁸

Question: There's so much confusion and misinformation about the Great Leap Forward. What was it about? And then I'd like you to talk about the attacks on the Great Leap Forward.

RL: At the heart of the Great Leap Forward in the countryside were the communes. The communes brought together peasants in a way that combined economic activity, political and social activity, militia, and administration. This was something new. These were units of power in which the masses, especially the formerly oppressed and exploited, were exercising power under the leadership of the Party. They were changing the productive base of society, specifically in the countryside. And as they were doing this... as part of doing this, they were changing the relations between and among the people.

Now the communes came about through a process. The peasants had taken part in the great movement of land reform... they had stood up to the old landlords and gained land, implements, and livestock. But things didn't stop there. The revolutionary leadership encouraged people to form mutual aid teams, to help each other farm and share implements... and then into cooperatives in which peasants pooled and collectively used their individually owned land, animals, and large tools... and then into bigger cooperatives.⁵⁹

People were working together in new ways and seeing the benefits of working together and sharing resources. Growing numbers of peasants actually began to burn deeds to land, because they were working in and gaining security

from these new arrangements.

In one rural area, peasant cooperatives joined with others to begin a vast project of bringing water across mountains to irrigate dry plains. Mao summed this up and it became a model for the communes.

Question: So what were the communes doing?

RL: People could mobilize together and unleash all kinds of energies and creativity. They worked to reclaim land, to plant trees, to construct roads. They built irrigation projects and various flood-works projects to protect against calamities. It became possible to use tractors and machinery in more rational ways to meet the needs of food production, because the land was collectively owned. And small-scale industries took hold in the countryside—fertilizer, cement factories, and small hydroelectric plants. Peasants began to master technology; scientific knowledge was spread; and it became possible in a whole new way to innovate and solve problems at the local levels. The socialist state was also ensuring that prices for industrial goods and manufactured consumer goods purchased by the communes and peasants were kept low and agricultural prices regulated at a level that aided the peasants.

In these and other ways the gaps between the city and the countryside, and between peasants and workers were being tackled and transformed. This was very important, because unequal development between urban and rural areas is a source of social and class privilege and domination. Historically, capitalist development and industrialization have involved cities draining resources from the countryside—with farmers in rural areas facing low prices for the agricultural goods they sell and much higher prices for manufactured goods they buy. These kinds of unequal urban-rural relations contribute to impoverishment in the countryside, and force many farmer-peasants in the Third World to leave the rural areas for the slums and shantytowns of the cities. This was also an alternative to, a rejection of, the Soviet approach to collectivization which

unduly squeezed peasants in order to accumulate capital for industrial development.

A major feature of the Great Leap Forward was how it challenged the oppression of women. Women were no longer constrained, and contained, by the suffocating narrowness of family-based production. People came out of the household. The Great Leap Forward created communal kitchens and dining rooms, nurseries, and cooperative home repair. Women entered into the swirl of the economic, political, and ideological battle to create a new society. Old habits and values were questioned. People were struggling against superstition, fatalism, and feudal customs that still persisted, like arranged marriage.⁶⁰

The communes also established networks of primary and middle schools, as well as medical clinics.

This was a way of developing self-reliance and balanced development, with technical and industrial capabilities being spread, better enabling China to resist imperialist attack and to support the world revolution.

The communes marked a leap of the masses' direct participation in all spheres of society, relative even to what the revolution had accomplished up until then.⁶¹

[A Sane and Rational Path of Development](#)

Question: But if you read any of these anti-communist books or articles on the Great Leap Forward, they all say it was “insane and irrational.”

RL: Let me tell you what is insane and irrational. Corporate-based agribusiness that relies on mono-crop specialization for export and huge inputs of petroleum-based fertilizer... that harms local ecosystems and drives peasants from the countryside into the cities, into shantytowns and slums... that’s insane. Turning lands previously geared to food cultivation into land to grow fuel crops like ethanol, and the development of an export-oriented agriculture where you have exotic flowers being raised for export while poor people go hungry... that’s insane. Making countries become increasingly dependent on the world market for food staples that are subject to the vagaries of world prices... that is the height of irrationality and insanity.

When 250,000 poor Indian farmers commit suicide between 1995 and 2011, because they are trapped in the networks of global agribusiness, like Monsanto, and go into debt to pay for seed and fertilizer monopolized by these firms... that is the tragic outcome of an insane and irrational mode of economic organization that is based on profit and imperialist domination of agriculture and scientific knowledge.⁶²

You know, I was in Manila in 1996, and people took me to what’s called Smoky Mountain. It’s a huge dumping ground, where people pick through what they can to survive, to use or to sell. There was smoke from fires and toxic fumes (that’s where it gets its name). A lot of these people were displaced peasants. And this was at a time when the Philippines was being pressured to grow so-called “nontraditional agricultural exports,” like asparagus, which people told me wasn’t mainly part of people’s diets. Some of the women who

had previously grown rice but had no title to land... under these pressures to shift crops... they could no longer farm and migrated to Manila where the only work for many was in the sex trade. This is crazy.

Look, we live in a world where 18,000 children die each and every day of hunger and preventable disease.⁶³ *That's insane.*

From the standpoint of meeting people's basic needs and developing a sustainable agriculture, from the standpoint of breaking down all these enslaving divisions... from the standpoint of what is in the interests of humanity—the Great Leap Forward was totally rational. It was an example of what Mao called “putting politics in command” of economic development... creating an economy that was serving the needs of the people and contributing to the revolutionary transformation of society.⁶⁴

Through the Great Leap Forward, and later the Cultural Revolution, revolutionary China was doing something that is unprecedented in human history. This was the first time that a process of economic development and industrialization was not simultaneously a process of chaotic urbanization.

[The Truth About the Famine](#)

Question: But there was a famine, and it is alleged that it was because Mao was reckless, trying to do fanatical things in the countryside, just trying to get as much out of peasant labor as possible, and unconcerned about the welfare of the people.

RL: I want to speak about this, and clear the air of a lot of distortion. First, as I have explained, the Great Leap Forward was not reckless but guided by coherent policy goals. It tapped the energy and enthusiasm of the peasant masses.

Now there was a massive food crisis starting in late 1959, and it worsened in 1960. But it wasn't because of Mao's policies or indifference. The hunger crisis was *not* the result of the commune system, the diversified economic path that was being forged, or the reclamation projects. The difficulties of 1960–61, and these did reach famine proportions, had complex causes.

First, there was a sharp decline in food production in 1959. China had suffered its worst climatic disasters in a century. Floods and drought affected over half of China's agricultural land.⁶⁵

Second, the international situation took a turn that impacted developments in China. There was sharp ideological struggle between revolutionary China and the Soviet Union. As I said earlier, the Soviet Union was no longer socialist; new capitalist forces had come to power in the mid-1950s. The Soviet leadership was now trying to consolidate the international communist movement around a revisionist line. By revisionism, I mean a capitalist and anti-revolutionary outlook that cloaks itself in Marxist terminology to justify and legitimize reformist policies that do not touch the essential relations of capitalism. Mao analyzed that the Soviet Union had gone off the socialist road and was selling out the interests of the world revolution to U.S. imperialism. He denounced this.

The Soviets retaliated, by withdrawing advisors and technicians, halting

aid, walking off with blueprints to unfinished industrial installations. This caused dislocations in China's economy. There were not the expected spare parts and equipment, and the original economic plan was disrupted. In addition, the Soviets left China with a debt burden for military equipment supplied during the Korean War.⁶⁶

So there was the sudden and sharp decline in food production because of this weather calamity; and then the sudden Soviet withdrawal of aid created additional strains and disruptions in the economy.

Third, there were also certain policy mistakes by the Maoists. One problem was that in many rural areas too much peasant labor time was spent on nonagricultural projects. This hurt food production. Another problem was that the communes were initially quite large; and there was also a problem of trying to organize and manage farm production, the distribution of income, and other activity at too high and centralized a level in the commune structure. More flexibility was needed.

Fourth, the top revolutionary leadership was not getting as reliable information about what was actually happening in the local areas as would have been desirable, especially as the hunger situation rapidly worsened. On the one hand, the vast changes and experimentation of the Great Leap Forward disrupted some of the established planning procedures, as well as the systems and channels of reporting. On the other hand, pressures from the central leadership to meet goals combined with the euphoric spirit of the times resulted in local leaders often exaggerating grain and other output figures. So all this combined to make it harder for leadership to get the kind of accurate picture that was needed... and this affected the ability to respond quickly.

There was a real crisis. But leadership *did* in fact respond. Investigations were conducted and adjustments were made. The amount of grain to be delivered to the state was lowered. Certain nonagricultural projects were scaled back, so that people could spend more time on food production. The communes

were reduced in size, to create more flexibility.⁶⁷ Importantly, grain was rationed countrywide and emergency grain supplies sent to regions in distress.⁶⁸ Grain was imported to help the cities and to make it possible for the communes to keep more grain.

And of great importance, the commune structure, the cooperative institutions and values, actually made it possible for people to join together to deal with the problems.⁶⁹

This 1960–61 famine had the causes that I’m describing. It was responded to in the way that I am describing: based on the needs of the people and the further advance of the revolution.

Let’s compare this situation with the famine that took place in India during World War 2 and that killed 1.5 to 3 million people. That famine was caused by the British government’s agricultural procurement and pricing policies during the war. This was Churchill’s doing and he persisted in these policies long after he knew the suffering that was being caused.⁷⁰

And more recently, there have been—and still are—horrific famines in Africa. These are the legacy of imperialist domination and distortion of these economies... of civil wars that have been taken advantage of, if not directly fueled, by imperialism... and of global warming and its impacts, which have everything to do with the functioning of world imperialism. And in these cases of famine, “relief” often ends up further undercutting sustainable, subsistence peasant agriculture.

So in one set of cases, famine grows out of and is exacerbated by the relations of capitalism-imperialism. In the case of the Chinese revolution, the crisis of 1960–61 occurs in the context of trying to solve the food problem that long plagued China.

Question: But what about the sheer scale of deaths—there are studies that say that 30, 40, 50 million people died.

RL: Look, there's a veritable cottage industry of inflating deaths during the Great Leap Forward. It's based on unreliable census data and all kinds of statistical manipulation. A lot of the estimates of deaths are based on the difference between what would have been the expected normal population growth, and what the actual population was. The methods are very dubious. For instance, because of the hardships during the food crisis, birth rates fell, but some of those unborn get counted in the numbers of "excess deaths." Or, to take another example, there was migration out of villages during the Great Leap, to some degree when the Great Leap started and later as food shortages mounted—and this phenomenon contributed to miscounts of population.⁷¹

The whole enterprise of inflating death counts serves the attack on the Great Leap Forward and the Maoist revolution more generally. And it's important to know that census numbers used by Western scholars to calculate numbers of deaths... this census data was initially released by Deng Xiaoping. Deng had opposed Mao and led the counter-revolutionary coup of 1976. In the early 1980s, he was pushing for dismantling collective farming... and death counts and higher death counts were part of the official discrediting of collective farming that was going on.⁷²

Often, the anti-communist Western scholars use the methodology that if someone died, that was Mao's doing, and they didn't just die... they were "killed" by Mao... and Mao "killed" people because he was an unforgiving tyrant.

People should go to the [Set the Record Straight](#) website, where we make available material that critiques the methodology.

The main point is this: By 1970, China was, for the first time, able to solve its historic food problem. I mean, for hundreds of years China had suffered devastating cycles of drought and privation. But now there was the ability to provide for basic nutritional needs and food security, the ability to actually have a sustainable, needs-based agriculture—not one that serves world capitalism.⁷³

This had everything to do with the Great Leap Forward and the formation of communes. It had everything to do with the collective mobilization of people to build irrigation and flood works, to reclaim and improve land, to master new agricultural techniques, and to establish small industries in the countryside. It had everything to do with the spirit of working for the common good promoted by socialist revolution.

The Cultural Revolution: The Furthest Advance of Human Emancipation Yet

Question: Let's get into the Cultural Revolution that took place between 1966 and 1976. That's the next momentous episode of the Chinese revolution.

RL: The Cultural Revolution was the high point of the first stage of communist revolution. It is the third "milestone" of the first stage of the communist revolution... I'm speaking of the Paris Commune and the Bolshevik revolution as the first two milestones.

Now the Cultural Revolution was eventually defeated in 1976. And China is not a socialist country today. But the Cultural Revolution still inspires and is incredibly rich in lessons. Anyone who aspires to a just and liberating society and world needs to learn about... and learn *from* the Cultural Revolution.

Question: But Raymond, there's all this vilification that surrounds the Cultural Revolution. How do you begin to go at this and help people see things in a scientific light?

RL: Yes, the bourgeoisie never lets up in its attacks on the Cultural Revolution. And we have to wage a real battle for the *truth* because this has everything to do with *human possibility*. What was the Cultural Revolution about? What problems in society and the world was it confronting? What were its actual aims? What were its predominant forms of activity and struggle? What did it actually accomplish? How did society and people change through it?

To even pose these questions for serious investigation and exploration takes us to a different plane of discussion. And by pursuing and answering these questions on this scientific foundation, we do get at the actual truth of the

Cultural Revolution.

Now in evaluating any historical period or figure, there will always be countervailing or secondary trends, anomalies, what have you... but the first and main question to answer is: what is principal, what is the *essence* of the society, or social movement, or historical figure in question... what *mainly* characterizes things?

The Cultural Revolution was the most far-reaching attempt in modern history, and in human history, to revolutionize and restructure a society away from all exploitation and oppression... on the basis of the conscious involvement, the conscious activism of tens and hundreds of millions of people. During the course of this, millions and millions of people revolutionized their world outlook—that is, their basic values, their approach to reality—and the whole ethos, or spirit, of society was transformed.

The Danger of the Revolution Being Reversed

Question: So what was the crux of the Cultural Revolution? We hear so much about factions and struggles and criticism and people being denounced.

RL: To get at the essence of it, we have to step back. You see, Mao had been searching for a solution to the problem of the revolution being reversed. Not from invasion or attack, real as those dangers were—but being reversed from within... I mean within the socialist system itself. This was the danger that the communist party could be turned into an instrument of a new exploiting class exercising bourgeois control and domination.

You see, a new elite could gain control of the organs of state power and then adapt those organs to reinstall relations of exploitation and oppression... while the state could remain socialist in name, and some of the outward features of socialism could be kept.

This was not an abstract question in China in 1964–66.

We were talking about the Great Leap Forward before. It was a radical break with the Western and Soviet models of development. It was a blow to the bourgeois-technocratic forces in the Party. But owing to the food crisis and famine in 1960–61 and because of the industrial dislocations caused by the sudden withdrawal of Soviet aid and technical assistance, it was necessary to make certain economic and organizational adjustments. But this gave openings to conservative forces in the Communist Party who announced themselves as the “economic realists” who could get the economy where it needed to be. And they moved with a vengeance to try to undermine the policies and spirit of the Great Leap Forward.

These forces had vast organizational strength within the Communist Party. By 1964–65, they were gaining ground. They had a coherent program. They

wanted to use profit measures to decide investment priorities. They wanted an educational system, patterned after the Soviet model, to turn out professional elites and “communist elites.” They were very much entrenched in the cultural realm—opera, a highly popular art form, was still dominated by old feudal themes and characters. In effect they told workers and peasants to forget politics —“leave that to the Party and you keep your nose to the grindstone, and we’ll take care of your social welfare.”

As I explained earlier, for these conservative forces at the top levels of the Party and state, the main thing was to build China into a modern, powerful, industrialized country. This is what they identified socialism with... and they pushed and, where they could, adopted policies that served that goal and program.

Internationally, the struggle with the Soviet revisionists was intensifying. Mao was leading the struggle worldwide to demarcate real revolution from the revisionism of the Soviet Union—and the Soviets were trying to isolate China. Meanwhile, the U.S. imperialists were rapidly escalating the war in Vietnam. North Vietnam borders on China, and there was a real danger at the time that the U.S. would escalate further and attack China. In this setting, some of these revisionist-conservative forces argued to cool out the ideological struggle with the Soviets. And they were positioning to adopt for China the Soviet model (which had become a capitalist system within an institutional framework of state ownership and state planning that was socialist only in name).⁷⁴

Remember, we talked about how Mao had studied the Soviet experience very deeply. He analyzed that Stalin’s purges of the 1930s did not solve the problem of preventing counter-revolution in the Soviet Union. For one thing, the masses of workers and peasants were largely left passive. They didn’t develop the conscious understanding to enable them to distinguish between programs and outlooks that would propel society forward to communism... and programs and policies that would lead back to capitalism. And the Communist Party and the

institutions of the state were not revolutionized by the purges.

Mao was dealing with a world-historic problem of communist revolution. How do you prevent counter-revolution, but prevent it in a way that is consistent with getting to a communist world? How do you prevent counter-revolution in a way that enables the masses to play the decisive, conscious role in changing society and changing themselves? How do you keep the party on the revolutionary road, and fight against the pulls to “settle in” and become a new exploiting class?

This was the challenge. And it was getting posed very acutely in terms of what was going on in Chinese society in the early 1960s... because these capitalist-roaders were poised to seize power.

The broader situation in society was going in their favor, if you want to put it that way.

Unleashing the Youth to Initiate the Cultural Revolution

Question: What do you mean by that? Wasn't Mao still leading things?

RL: Look, the Party had become very calcified, with these revisionist forces having a lot of authority and influence... that was a big problem. But there was another big problem. People were too accepting of routine. You know, over the course of the previous 17 years, there had been great improvements in people's material and social well-being. This created a certain pull, especially among those who suffered greatly in the old society, not to question things. Also, because of all that was accomplished under the Party's leadership, many peasants and workers assumed that their leaders, if they called themselves "communists," must be good, must be communists. And in many factory units and rural areas, people were simply too scared to criticize leadership. How do you puncture this willingness to go along with the status quo?

So this was the situation, the necessity, that Mao was facing. Mao was searching for a solution. And the Cultural Revolution marked the breakthrough. It wasn't going to be a top-down removal of revisionist authority. It was to be a revolution that would involve and require mobilizing the masses, in their millions, from below. Through mass political and ideological struggle led by the revolutionary core of the Party, the masses could come to understand issues of right and wrong, of revolution and revisionism... and on that basis play the decisive role in politically striking down the bourgeois power centers within the Communist Party. The Cultural Revolution was about revolutionizing all of society and people's thinking.

In deciding to launch the Cultural Revolution, Mao was taking an incredible risk. I talked about the international situation, with the U.S. imperialists in

Vietnam and the Soviets' maneuvering.

So how could you shake things up and initiate this kind of momentous struggle? Mao was looking for a source of dynamism and rebellion. Where was it in society? Mao looked to the youth. They were not, as many older people were, so much comparing things to how they used to be... but to how they *could* be.

Mao looked to the youth to be catalysts. Mao wanted to unleash the questioning and rebellious spirit of youth.

You had the Red Guards. These were organizations of revolutionary high school and college students and other youth. They organized protests and demonstrations. They called out university administrators for acting like overlords. They launched criticisms of various Party leaders. This was the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. The Red Guards helped spread the message that "it is right to rebel against reactionaries," as Mao had put it.⁷⁵

The schools shut down for a year, and the government allowed the youth to ride the trains free. They fanned out to different regions, hiking even to remote areas, meeting with people, like the peasants, whom they'd been taught to look down upon. They emboldened people to raise their heads and ask: "What policies serving what goals are in command here? Where's the revolution here?"⁷⁶

The Contradictory Nature of Socialism

Question: Raymond, you've used phrases like capitalist-roaders, and maybe you should explain what this is about.

RL: Mao discovered that the roots of the problem of the revolution being reversed are in the very nature, the contradictory nature, of socialist society. On the one hand, *socialism is a great leap*, a leap beyond exploitation and the class rule of the bourgeoisie. Socialism makes it possible to carry out fundamental economic and social change in the interests of the masses and enables the masses to transform society.

On the other hand, socialism is *a society in transition*. It is a transition from capitalism—with all its class divisions, exploitation, and inequalities—to communism, a world without classes. And socialism carries the economic, social, and ideological scars of the old society. There are still differences in development between industry and agriculture, between town and country, and between regions. There is the ages-old division between mental and manual labor. There are still differences in pay, and money and price are still in use.

These “leftovers” from capitalist society contain the seeds of capitalism. Take money and prices, which are used under socialism in the exchange of goods and to assist economic planning and to help evaluate efficiency. But the existence of money and prices can also influence decision-making in a capitalist direction... towards producing according to what yields the most money.

There are also the oppressive institutions and ideas that reinforced the old society. I'm talking about patriarchy, racism, and national chauvinism. These things do not just “automatically” disappear once their material basis is undercut with the overthrow of capitalism. They actually have to be gone after in their own right. And there is also the force of habit and thousands of years of exploiting class ideas and ways of thinking.

Getting to communism requires overcoming these economic and social inequalities, these commodity relations, and these oppressive social institutions and ideas. This is not going to happen overnight. Marx actually thought this transition would be relatively brief, but this has proven to be wrong. It's going to require a protracted and complex process of revolutionary struggle and transformation—on a world scale.

So there's going to be struggle at any given time over how—or even whether—to transform and restrict these birthmarks of socialist society that I have been describing. Mao summed up that this is actually a struggle between the *socialist road* and the *capitalist road*... between policies and lines that would continue the advance to communism, and those that would take society in a different direction, back towards capitalism, as has happened today in China.

Now Mao analyzed that the social inequalities and differences that continue to exist in socialist society, along with the fact that money, prices, and contracts continue to play a significant role in the socialist economy, are all part of the soil out of which new privileged forces and a new bourgeoisie grow in socialist society.

And he took this analysis further. He showed that the core of a new bourgeois class under socialism is found within the top reaches of the communist party and socialist state. These are the capitalist-roaders. They fight for policies that widen these gaps and rely on methods and means handed down from exploiting class society and, because they have the power to influence how production is carried out, they actually become the concentration point of a new bourgeoisie, right within socialist society and right within the party itself. They were trying to seize power... and that's why Mao and the revolutionary core launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966.⁷⁷

You have to realize what a theoretical breakthrough Mao was making. Mao was applying Marxist categories to the political economy of socialism, and in the process extending and enriching these categories. He showed that socialist

relations of production are highly contradictory, that there are bourgeois aspects within them. He showed that capitalism could re-emerge within the framework of formal socialist state ownership. And he took Lenin's insight that "politics is concentrated economics" to elucidate how certain high-party leaders can actually become the personification of capitalist relations of production. Mao and the revolutionary leadership were putting these kinds of issues before the masses through the course of the Cultural Revolution. The revolutionary headquarters, as it was called, was leading people to study and understand the "deep structure" of society and to interrogate the fabric of society.⁷⁸

You know, the anti-communist narrative is that Mao was this paranoid despot, just inventing enemies for his own convenience. No, the Cultural Revolution was about the fate of a revolution that involved one-quarter of humanity. It was monumental struggle about continuing the struggle for a new, liberating world... against those capitalist-roaders who wanted to take China back to capitalism.

“It Was a Real Revolution”

Question: Could you tell us more about the feel and flow of the Cultural Revolution?

RL: It was a real revolution. It was full of invention and innovation. It inspired tens of millions but also shocked and disturbed tens of millions at its outset. It became very wild: street rallies, protests, strikes, and demonstrations. There were what were called “big character posters” going up all over the place, with people posting comments and critiques of policies and leaders. Some of these were very sophisticated, and some were simple. Public facilities were made available for meetings and debates. Small newspapers flourished. In Beijing alone, there were over 900 newspapers. Materials and facilities for these activities were made available free, including paper, ink, brushes, posters, printing presses, halls for meetings, and public address and sound systems.

Then, as the Cultural Revolution took hold among the workers, it took a new turn. Forty million workers around the country engaged in intense and complicated mass struggles and upheavals to seize power from entrenched municipal party and city administrations that were hotbeds of conservatism. Sometimes these were work stoppages, sometimes these were struggles *not* to stop work... sometimes these were massive demonstrations, sometimes all-night mass debates, often involving students and Red Guards. Posters were up everywhere, with crowds gathered round intently reading them and debating them... as I said, it was very wild, very revolutionary.

It got very intense. In Shanghai in the autumn of 1966, there were some 700 organizations in the factories.⁷⁹ The revolutionary forces were mobilizing. These capitalist-roaders, they fought back. They had their mass organizations, they tried to discredit the revolutionaries, and they tried to buy people off with wage increases.

Eventually, the revolutionary workers, with Maoist leadership, were able to unite broad sections of the city's population. And in January 1967, they broke the hold of the revisionist capitalist-roaders who were running the city. They seized the main municipal building, took over the communications hubs, and began organizing distribution of basic goods in the city. This was the Shanghai "January Storm."

And what followed was extraordinary: people began to hold mass discussions and mass debates about how to run the city, about what kinds of political structures would best serve the goals of the revolution. They began to experiment with new institutions of citywide political governance. There was debate... and real challenges were being thrown up about what kinds of organs of political power, what kinds of institutions, correspond to the needs of advancing the revolution.

Big questions were getting posed and were also getting summed up at the highest leadership levels of the Cultural Revolution. For instance, how can you allow for the greatest and most meaningful decision-making by the masses? But at the same time, how can you develop institutions and structures that are strong enough to prevent counter-revolution? How can you have broad involvement and debate... but at the same time maintain revolutionary leadership and give revolutionary direction to the institutions of power?

Because you're not just dealing with a city like Shanghai as a city unto itself, but trying to develop a system of governance and exercising power that is taking account of the larger needs of the revolution—for instance sending doctors or skilled technical personnel to other parts of the country where they might be needed... or even to other parts of the world to support revolution.

This was the kind of process of experimentation, debate, and summation going on in the first year or two of the Cultural Revolution. And eventually a new institution of political power was established, called the "revolutionary committee." It combined great mass involvement and a special leading position played by the Party. These lessons were being applied and changes were taking

place at basic levels of society... in factories, hospitals, schools and so forth.⁸⁰

Mao said there could be no revolution if it doesn't transform customs, habits, and ways of thinking. When I was talking about the Soviet Union, I mentioned Mao's statement, "What good is state ownership of factories, warehouses, if cooperative values are not being forged?" A theme I've been hammering at, I mean it's what Mao was emphasizing and what communism involves... you have to be changing circumstances and changing thinking and values. And for whom and for what: for narrow self-interest or for the betterment of humanity? People were discussing these kinds of things in the midst of the great battles of the Cultural Revolution. People were transforming society and the world, and the relations between people, and their own world outlook and understanding, in a very intertwined process.

You know, early in the Cultural Revolution, Mao made this crucial observation. He said that while the *target* of the Cultural Revolution was the capitalist-roaders, the *goal* was to change world outlook—enabling the masses to more deeply and scientifically understand society and the world, their own transformative role, and questions of ideology and morality.⁸¹

Mass Debate, Mass Mobilization, Mass Criticism

Question: What about the level of violence during the Cultural Revolution?

RL: Violence broke out at times, but that was not what Mao was calling for, nor was it the main character of the Cultural Revolution. Its main forms of struggle were *mass debate*, *mass political mobilization*, and *mass criticism*.

Mao's orientation was clearly spelled out in official and widely publicized documents. In the *16-Point Decision* that guided the Cultural Revolution, it was stated, "Where there is debate, it should be conducted by reasoning and not by force."⁸² This wasn't some esoteric Party document. It was popularized throughout society.

There was sharp ideological and political struggle against revisionist authority and capitalist-roaders, on a societal scale. And as I was saying, the capitalist-roaders fought back. They organized among the youth, among the workers, and among intellectuals. Look, this was a *two-sided* struggle.

Now with regard to the violence that did happen... first off, it's important to understand that some of the violence that did occur during the Cultural Revolution—and as I said this was not the main way it was fought—was actually fanned by high-ranking capitalist-roaders seeking to defend their entrenched positions and to discredit the Cultural Revolution.

Also in this situation, you had Red Guards who got carried away in their zeal to rid society of bourgeois influences and committed excesses, roughing people up. You had some people who were using the Cultural Revolution to settle old scores and grievances.

Another thing that made the Cultural Revolution complicated was the fact that there were cliques, or organized groupings, within the Party that posed as supporters, even "hard-core supporters," of the Cultural Revolution... but who

were actually pursuing a different, and ultimately sharply opposed, “agenda.”

Mao and the revolutionary leaders had to lead the masses to sort things out, to sum up lessons and methods of struggle, and to consolidate gains in understanding. Acts of violence were criticized, condemned, and struggled against by the Maoist revolutionary leadership—through statements, directives, editorials, and on-the-ground intervention.

When you actually study what people who were working with Mao said and did, it is clear that they fought for people to unite around their most fundamental interests and highest aspirations, to wage struggle over principle from a lofty plane, and to help people resist getting caught up in sectarian feuds. For instance, there was a famous incident at a university in Beijing. Student activists got caught up in factional fighting, and it took a violent turn. The Maoist leadership dispatched unarmed teams of workers to help stop the fighting and help people sort out differences.⁸³

“Socialist New Things”

Question: So was it just endless struggle? I mean, where was this going?

RL: Well, the Cultural Revolution went through phases. There was the period of 1966 to 1968 where people rose up, and you had the overthrow of many of these top capitalist-roaders, with all the kinds of struggles and debates that I’ve been describing. Then the Cultural Revolution takes another turn. It becomes possible to consolidate gains and carry forward with social and institutional transformation, and this is actually coming out of the struggles and experimentation going on.

And we see these great changes that take place in the basic institutions and running of society.⁸⁴

Question: Maybe you could give us some examples.

RL: Okay, well, one big emphasis of the Cultural Revolution was taking up the question of overcoming, and working to overcome, the historic division between people who work with ideas and those who work with their backs. How to do this? I want to get into that whole topic more later, but for now the important thing is that in most societies this isn’t even a question—it’s just taken for granted that some people are going to work with ideas and get the training to develop those skills, and others aren’t; that’s going to lead to relations of inequality. It’s an oppressive division, and the educational system under capitalism is geared to reproducing that, and so if you just take over the old educational system under capitalism and try to spread it around, you’re still going to have this oppressive relation taking root and spreading.

So, with that in mind, the educational system was totally changed. The old

teaching methods, where students are just passive receptacles of knowledge and are driven to grub for grades, and the teachers are absolute authorities—that was challenged, very sharply. Instead, the critical spirit was fostered. Study was combined with productive activity. The elite admissions policies into the universities that gave sons and daughters of Party members and professionals a kind of special track... these were overhauled. There was a big push to bring young people of peasant and worker background into those universities. After high school, students of different social backgrounds would spend two years in factories or on communes, then they would apply to college... and part of the entrance process was recommendations and evaluations by people on the communes and in the factories.⁸⁵

Under capitalism, knowledge is viewed in a certain way: as a tool to gain competitive advantage over others, as a ladder to individual success, as a source of private gain and prestige. And some of this mentality carries over to socialist society, and is another seed of capitalism. Under socialism knowledge is put in the service of society and the world, in the service of a society breaking down inequalities and changing the world for the benefit of humanity, and going after, again, that very oppressive and deep-rooted division between people who are trained to work with ideas and those who are locked out of that.

Out of the Cultural Revolution came what were called “socialist new things” that reflected new socialist relations and values.

One of the most exciting breakthroughs was what was called “open door” research. Scientists would go to the countryside to conduct experiments among peasants. Research stations were set up close to the fields. Specialists from the cities alongside and with peasants carried out experiments... in hybrid grains, insect-life cycles, and other aspects of science. Scientists would be learning about the lives of the peasants and from the questions and insights of the peasants, and the peasants would be learning about the scientific method.

In the cities, leading educational institutions and research institutes

developed cooperative relationships with factories, neighborhood committees, and other organizations. People came to laboratories and laboratories went to the people. You had innovative arrangements, like women from a neighborhood factory that was producing parts for an advanced computer—they weren't working as super-exploited outsourced labor, as in the world capitalist system today, but as part of an economy serving the people... anyway, these women would be going to the research institutes and seeing how the computers were used, and people in the institutes would be going to the local factories.⁸⁶

All this was about breaking down walls and social distinctions.

Question: You're describing a very different kind of social fabric.

RL: Totally. We're talking about two different worlds.

There was the “barefoot doctor” movement. Young people in the cities and young educated peasants were being trained to provide preventive medicine and basic medical care. They went to different parts of the countryside. They were called “barefoot doctors” because they were in the rural areas and it was very rudimentary... but this was contributing to meeting basic health needs of people. There were 1.3 million barefoot doctors.⁸⁷

And this was just one breakthrough in health care practices during the Cultural Revolution. There was a tremendous push to combine traditional medicine, like acupuncture, with modern medicine. There was further revolutionization of doctor-patient relations, challenging the notion of patients as mere passive recipients of treatment. There were great advances in research and actual discovery. Insulin was synthesized.⁸⁸

One of the great, untold medical stories of the Cultural Revolution concerns malaria treatment. The Vietnamese liberation fighters, taking on U.S. imperialism, were suffering from new strains of malaria—and in the late 1960s the Vietnamese leadership appealed to China for assistance. Mao initiated a major crash collective program. One group of researchers screened 40,000

chemicals while another researched traditional medicines, sending envoys to villages. An incredibly effective new cure for malaria was developed, and it only became acknowledged as a major breakthrough by the international medical community in the 1980s.⁸⁹

People don't realize that revolutionary China established the most egalitarian health care system in the world, based on the principle of serving the people, and that essential primary care was reaching practically the entire population. Life expectancy doubled, from 32 years in 1949 to 65 years in 1976.⁹⁰ And by the early 1970s, Shanghai had a lower infant mortality rate than did New York City.⁹¹

In terms of innovations and transformations in other spheres. You had the practice of criticism and mass supervision of Party members, where basic people would make criticism of Party members. These were things institutionalized through the great upheavals and challenges of the Cultural Revolution.

There were big changes in factory management, the practice of what was called "the two participations"—workers participate in management and managers participate in productive labor. The old system of tight control through rules and regulations that often turned workers into no more than extensions of the machinery was challenged.

The Cultural Revolution created a larger culture, where people were paying attention to the big questions of society. The factories weren't simply production units. They became sites of political struggle, of political study, theoretical study. Cultural troupes were formed in the factories.⁹²

Question: Going back to your earlier argument about how you see what is a rational way to organize society depends on what kind of world you're trying to get to, I can envision capitalists, and people who think like them, exclaiming, "That's no way to run a factory! That's insane!" What about the arts?

RL: There was an explosion of artistic activity among workers and peasants—poetry, painting, music, short stories, and even film. Mass art projects and new kinds of popular and collaborative artistic undertakings spread, including to the countryside and remote areas. One of the most famous of these was the Rent Collection Courtyard.⁹³ This was a group of statues that movingly illustrated the suffering in the old society... you see the peasants handing over their meager harvests as rent and taxes. This was a joint sculptural work of students and teachers, and it was installed on site in the house of a former landlord. This kind of work reached a very high level of artistic expression and revolutionary content.⁹⁴

The Cultural Revolution also produced what were called “model revolutionary works.” They were pacesetters, which people all over China could use as models in their development of numerous artistic works. Revolutionary model operas and model ballets put the masses on stage front and center. They conveyed their lives, and their role in society and history. These model works were of an extraordinarily high level, combining traditional Chinese forms with Western instruments and techniques.

And strong women figured prominently in the revolutionary operas. Where before the ballets still had that sort of dainty, delicate influence—now the ballets were infused with athleticism. So they were not only dealing with themes of women’s emancipation, but you actually saw women dancing in far more innovative and athletic ways. You were seeing new syntheses, new hybrid forms, through the creation of these model operas. So this is what was going on—and different Peking Opera companies would tour in the countryside, helping local culture groups to develop while learning from local performances.⁹⁵

You know, the Cultural Revolution actually had a very big social and cultural impact in China’s countryside. There had been big changes prior to the Cultural Revolution. I talked about what happened during the Great Leap Forward, and how people’s material lives had improved. But the influence of old

ways of organizing village life, the role of the family and extended family... and just the fact that life was more contained in the countryside, without the same bustle and intensity and diversity of the city... this had a conservatizing effect. Well, the Cultural Revolution began to shake this up too.⁹⁶

“Human Nature” and Social Change

I remember reading an account from someone who grew up in a rural village during the Cultural Revolution. He talked about how the people in his village learned to read and write by getting into the texts of plays and operas produced during the Cultural Revolution and incorporated local language and music into adaptations. He wrote about how cultural and social life in the villages changed, including sports and study, and how this gave people a chance to meet and communicate... and fall in love. A new public sphere was replacing the more narrow household and village clan.⁹⁷

You know, people are always told that communism won't work because it “goes against human nature”... that people are “by their nature” selfish. But that's not a statement about human nature... it's a statement about “human nature under capitalism”... what gets promoted and reinforced by a system based on competition and private ownership, where people have to compete for jobs, education, everything, even personal relationships... and where you have a system based on profit which promotes “me-first” “winner take all...”

But socialism opens up a whole realm of freedom for people to change their circumstances and change their thinking. This is what happened during the Cultural Revolution. You had an economic system based on using resources for the betterment of society and humanity. You had new social relations and institutions that enabled people to cooperate with one another and maximize their contributions towards liberating society and the world. Through the Cultural Revolution, people's sense of social responsibility changed... a new social environment was created that valued cooperation and solidarity.

This was real and it affected what people felt was meaningful and important in their lives... and how they acted. It wasn't some perfect utopia... but real people changing society and their ways of thinking. The slogan “serve the people” was popularized during the Cultural Revolution, and people were really

measuring their lives, and the lives of others, with that in mind.⁹⁸

And when capitalism was restored in China in 1976, and the old dog-eat-dog economic relations brought back... people changed back again—back towards the old “me against you” outlook. They changed not because a primordial human nature had somehow reasserted itself, but because *society had changed back* to capitalism!

[Sending Intellectuals to the Countryside](#)

Question: You've touched quite a bit on the countryside and cities. What about the policies of sending intellectuals and professionals to the countryside? This is very controversial.

RL: The policies of sending intellectuals and artists to the countryside were not punitive. During the Cultural Revolution, artists, doctors, technical and scientific workers, and all kinds of people were called on to go among the workers and peasants: to apply their skills to the needs of society, to share the lives of the laboring people, to exchange knowledge, and to learn from the basic people.

We're told that going to the countryside was a form of persecution. But having workers and peasants come into the universities and having professionals go to the countryside—this was not about rewards and punishments. One of the objectives of the Cultural Revolution was to break down the cultural lopsidedness that existed in China. It was a social situation in which artists, intellectuals, and professionals were concentrated in the cities, and in which their work was often carried out in ivory tower-like separation from the rest of society, especially from the 80 percent that lived in the countryside.

The policy of sending professionals to the countryside has to be seen in the larger social-economic context of Maoist China's quest to achieve balanced and egalitarian development. In the Third World, there is a crisis of chaotic urbanization and distorted development: overgrown and environmentally unsustainable cities with rings of squalid shantytowns; massive inflows of rural migrants who cannot find work; economic policies, educational systems, and health care infrastructure skewed to the well-off in the cities at the expense of the urban poor and the people in the countryside.

The Cultural Revolution spawned society-wide discussion about the need to narrow the inequalities between mental and manual labor, between city and

countryside, between industry and agriculture, and between men and women. Breaking down these inequalities and gaps was part of a process of overcoming social division and advancing society's knowledge and understanding and capabilities—for the benefit of society as a whole.

Question: I see your point about inequalities between the cities and the countryside. But why was there such an emphasis on sending intellectuals to the countryside? Some people allege that intellectuals were simply being ordered to take part in physical labor and farming and working in factories, and that was it. How do you answer this?

RL: What's really important to grasp here is that the Cultural Revolution was addressing this world-historic question... of the great gulf between mental and manual labor, which I was talking about earlier and which I want to get into more deeply now.

Now most people today take it for granted, or as a given, that there will always be some people who mainly work with their backs and hands, and those who work with their minds. And it's certainly true that this divide has existed for a long, long time. It goes back thousands and thousands of years and emerged with the division of early human society into classes.

So there has been this condition of human society in which intellectual life and activity, responsibilities of administering and running affairs of society, artistic and cultural endeavor... these things have been the province of a very tiny slice of society. But this is a product of the way human society has evolved and developed, especially since the emergence of classes and economic systems of exploitation in which a small section of society controls the labor and the product of labor of others... it's not "hard-wired" into human beings.

The division between mental and manual labor has two big effects.

One is that people engaged in these forms of “mental labor” have certain advantages and privileges... even to just to be able to engage in this activity, and there is a superior social status that goes with that. Obviously there are the rulers of society, who have control of the means of enforcing oppressive rule: to preserve systems of exploitation and to reap the rewards of the labor of others. They monopolize the major decision-making in society. Their status is, yes, that of rulers, and the contradiction between mental and manual labor in this case is an antagonistic one. But even people who are not ruling but engaged mainly in mental labor... they still have advantages and social prestige.

As for those engaged in manual labor, they are kept in a subordinated position, “good for their hard labor” and then tossed off. And historically, manual labor has been devalued and looked down upon.

But there’s another negative effect of this division of labor. It stunts the all-around development of the individual. The masses of working people are spending the bulk of their hours doing just that, working... and working in conditions of drudgery, repetition, and often under the whip or mastery of others. They don’t have the chance to engage in the realm of working with ideas, to gain an understanding of society, and to take responsibility for managing the affairs of society. Meanwhile, those who are mainly engaged in mental labor are generally cut off from productive activity... and this stunts their all-around development and understanding of the world. People in the towns get cut off from the natural world, while people in the countryside can lead very isolated lives and become wholly immersed in the struggle with nature.

Now the founders of the science of communism, Marx along with Engels, saw this division of labor and the class antagonisms that it reflects and reinforces as a key problem that the communist revolution has to overcome. They envisioned a future communist society in which a new and higher *unity of mental and manual labor* is achieved—where people are both productive and creative. But getting there is a complex process... and as with so many other issues we’ve been discussing, if I might put it this way, we “learn about the

learning curve” through the first stage of communist revolution.

The Soviet Union under Stalin tried to deal with this mental-manual contradiction in certain ways. One of the biggest initiatives was to promote people of working class origin into positions of management and authority, with resources devoted to training and educating workers. This was a great advance over the old society. But you know, simply putting workers into administrative positions doesn’t in and of itself solve the problem. For one thing, these administrative positions are themselves embodiments of production relations that carry the seeds of capitalism. For another, as Mao pointed out, if these workers have a bourgeois world outlook, then, from their new positions, they can be acting against the broader interests of the masses, becoming “big shots” of “humble origins.”

The Cultural Revolution was going at the mental-manual labor contradiction differently. For instance, as I mentioned, it was not just putting workers in management positions but *revolutionizing the whole concept of management*. And in addition to undertaking differing tasks and responsibilities, the masses were being led to take up the big social, political, and ideological questions of society and the world. So the mental-manual contradiction was being worked on in a fuller way in the Cultural Revolution than had been the case in the Soviet Union. It wasn’t just “promote the workers.”⁹⁹

The policy of sending educated youth and intellectuals to the countryside was another important part of this. Enabling intellectuals to learn from the life experience of basic working people and to share knowledge, and to get a living sense of how their intellectual work was part of a larger project of transforming and revolutionizing society.

And this was very exciting and very meaningful for lots of people. There’s a professor of literature I know who grew up during the Cultural Revolution. As a young woman she went to the countryside... and she’s written about this. She came from an intellectual background in the city. She worked alongside

peasants, she studied local languages, she got into theory with peasants. And for her, this was an incredible and life-transforming experience... a life of purpose that doesn't exist for young people in U.S. society.¹⁰⁰

Question: But people will tell you that, in a country like the U.S., you can make your purpose out of your own lives.

RL: Look, in 1968–69 in the U.S., if you were a young man without a college education or deferment, there was a good chance you'd be drafted into the army to commit genocide against the Vietnamese people. That's a life of purpose? In China, young people and professionals were going to the countryside as part of creating a new world.

You know, I remember after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, there were all kinds of people—nurses, engineers, drivers, all kinds of people—who wanted to go down there to help. But it wasn't possible, at least not on a large scale... that's not how U.S. society is set up. I mean, it's not an economic-social system where real social priorities inform what happens in society. I also remember how during the Easter break following Katrina, college students from different parts of the country went to New Orleans to join with the masses in rebuilding their lives. But this was small scale and very temporary.

Imagine a society where this is the norm, not the exception. Where people have the capability to work for the common good, to apply their skills and energy to this, and where social decisions are being made to further that. Imagine a society where that kind of impulse we saw with Katrina is given backing by the state power... even as that power is careful not to “suffocate it with support”... in other words, there has to be room for people to try new things and go in new directions.

As I pointed out earlier, in revolutionary China educated people were called on to apply their skills to the needs of society, to share the lives of laboring people, and to learn from the basic people. And great numbers of youth and

professionals answered the Cultural Revolution's call to "serve the people" and go to the countryside and set examples for others. There was an appeal to people's higher interests and aspirations of serving the people.

And this was made a mass question: What's more important, that a skilled doctor have the "right" to a privileged life in the city, or that health care be made widely available, so that people in the countryside have a right to decent care? This was a major question, because on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, 70 to 75 percent of government health expenditures were concentrated in the cities, where only 20 percent of the population lived. But by the early 1970s, you now had a situation where, at any given time, about one-third of urban hospital personnel were in the countryside, in mobile teams.¹⁰¹ This was a tremendous thing.

But great as these breakthroughs were... still, there were problems in how this contradiction between mental and manual labor was being worked at... in how Mao and the revolutionary leadership were approaching overcoming the differences between intellectuals and other sections of society, especially the formerly oppressed and exploited.

Question: What kinds of problems?

RL: This is something I'm going to get into later, when we talk about Bob Avakian's new synthesis of communism.

But in terms of the policy of sending intellectuals to the countryside... it was strongly guided by this idea of "remolding the intellectuals." This was problematic. Now, that phrase, "remolding the intellectuals," which was used in China at the time, doesn't mean anything like the anti-communist translation: "force the intellectuals to stop thinking." It involved struggling against elitist attitudes. But the approach was one-sided. As though the intellectuals, just because they were engaged in mental labor and had associated privileges... were a source of problems in society. And *their* values and thinking, those of the

intellectuals, were being singled out.

There was one-sided emphasis on overcoming the division between mental and manual labor—from the side of overcoming the privileges and prejudices of the intellectuals. Now there are elitist attitudes and values of intellectuals stemming from the particular position they occupy in society. But workers and peasants are also influenced by bourgeois ideology, including resentments towards intellectuals, or bowing down to them. Everyone's thinking must be transformed... as part of becoming emancipators of humanity.

What I'm saying is that the Cultural Revolution, overall, marked a real advance in working on the contradiction between mental and manual labor. It was pathbreaking. But it wasn't the full synthesis needed. And we can get into this more later.

What's Wrong with "History by Memoir"?

Question: There are these memoirs about how bad it was to go to the countryside and how people suffered. What should people make of these memoirs?

RL: Let me emphasize this about memoirs... and any historian worth her salt will tell you the same thing. While some memoirs actually can capture and analyze the main lines and trends of the whole historical period the author lived through, most tend to be limited to what the author directly experienced. Memoirs are not, in general—and again, there are and can be exceptions—works of scientific investigation and synthesis. Memoirs don't necessarily capture the broad, diverse, and complex social canvas that is history... or get to the essence of different and contending social and class forces, of programs and outlooks that get battled out in society and the world. That doesn't make them useless... they can shed light on certain things, but we just have to be aware of what they are... what their limitations are. There are bigger social dynamics, and these are the context for everyone's individual experience.

Now when you get to a situation like the Cultural Revolution, where there was huge social upheaval and this included some people losing privileges and others being the victims of excesses in what was overall a righteous cause, it gets very complex.

You know, I was reading a discussion on memoir literature by J. Arch Getty. He's an historian of the Soviet revolution. And he made the point that you would never attempt to understand a major event like the French Revolution through personal stories... you know, the telling of "here's what I went through," or "what I heard," etc. But somehow, he went on to point out, when it comes to the Soviet revolution during the Stalin period, it's perfectly permissible to make grand analytical generalizations on the basis of history-by-anecdote.¹⁰² And the

same applies in spades to the Cultural Revolution. You can't understand all of what we've been getting into in this interview, in terms of the mainsprings and main character, as well as the complexity, of the Cultural Revolution... through memoir literature.

It's important to keep this point of methodology in mind.

In addition, there's the fact that only a certain kind of memoir, those that are the complaints of those who saw their privileges come under attack during the Cultural Revolution—these are the memoirs that get promoted in U.S. society, in the schools, what have you... as part of the bourgeoisie's ideological assault against communism. It's as if someone from another country were to try to understand the 1960s and 1970s, without knowing anything about the whole history of slavery and Jim Crow and then further oppression and discrimination in the northern U.S., solely by reading the memoir of a white person denied admission to a college that had an affirmative action program for minorities. (See [“A Reader Responds to ‘What’s Wrong with “History by Memoir”?’”](#) in [Appendix](#).)

Mao's Last Great Battle

Question: Raymond, let's move on to the course of the Cultural Revolution. You've talked about these two phases of the Cultural Revolution—the big upheavals of the early years and then some of the consolidation and transformation. What was going on in the later years of the Cultural Revolution?

RL: The Cultural Revolution began in 1966—and then it went through these phases I've described. And by the early 1970s, the class struggle was sharpening. It was a complex situation. There was resistance and opposition to the Cultural Revolution from reactionary forces. Among the masses, there were the really radical-minded who were fighting to defend and carry forward the Cultural Revolution... there were those who were with it some of the time and not so excited at other times... and there were backward people who just opposed it.

Most importantly, the capitalist-roaders were mobilizing continually around their program... even as they had suffered these big setbacks and defeats during the early years of the Cultural Revolution.

Mao had analyzed that the two roads that open up after the seizure of power, the capitalist road and the socialist road... this is not a situation for a few years or something. It is a defining feature of a relatively long socialist transition period. And, as Mao also emphasized: who wins out... that's *not* a settled question, until you actually get to communism and overcome the division of world society into classes.

Mao kept warning of the danger of capitalist restoration. The masses have state power under socialism, but the revolution has to continue. As we were talking about before, you're dealing with the scars of class society—with continuing differences between town and country, with the lingering hierarchy of

specialization, with money still playing a role in the management of economy, with the fact that there is that gulf between mental and manual labor.

There is the influence of old ideas and values, of the force of habit... of going along, bowing to convention, keeping to “tried and true” ways, and so on. The position of women in society, achieving the full emancipation of women, and waging struggle against the roots and persistence of patriarchy in its many forms... this is a crucial question of the socialist transition.

This is what faces the revolution in power.

Question: You’re talking about the general character and the general challenges before socialist society. But what did that mean at the time, in terms of these phases of the Cultural Revolution?

RL: The specific situation, the concrete juncture facing the revolutionaries, was very difficult from 1973 until 1976. And it’s not just what was going on in China at the time. There was the whole international situation, and how this was interpenetrating with and impacting the class struggle in China. I can only touch on some of the key aspects of what was going on.

Let me start with the international situation in the early 1970s. There was a growing danger of war, including the possibility of an attack on China by the Soviet Union. People might not know... but by the early 1970s the largest concentration of land troops in the world was on the Chinese-Soviet border, with two armies facing each other. At the same time, there had been developments in China, including outright betrayal, among some people who formerly played a leading role in the Cultural Revolution. This created a great deal of confusion among people, and this had to be sorted through and understood.

One of the defining challenges facing Mao and the revolutionaries in this period was how to confront this danger of war and at the same time keep the Cultural Revolution going. You see, a grouping of capitalist-roaders associated with top party leaders Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai was trying to seize on this

sharp and fraught international situation to put an end to... to reverse the Cultural Revolution. They were arguing: “enough of this Cultural Revolution, we need to get down to the business of creating a modern army and efficient economy.” By which they meant a capitalist economy and military. They were fighting for their program at the top levels of the Party... and mobilizing social forces in society.

They still had vast strength in the Party, in the government, and in the military. And they appealed to the masses in a certain way. They were saying that if China plugged into the world economy, society would be better off: living standards of the basic working people would rise, China’s economy would be strengthened, and would be in a better position to meet the war danger. They appealed to the young people of more privileged backgrounds that the Cultural Revolution was robbing them of “careers.”

Mao and the revolutionary headquarters in the Party were mobilizing the masses to confront this situation that I am describing. Leading the masses to defend the new changes in education, including enrolling young people of worker and peasant backgrounds in the universities... leading people to defend the revolutionary cultural works, like the operas... the new types of management in factories... the whole thing we talked about in terms of young people going to the countryside.

It was a complicated struggle that the revolutionaries were waging. They were calling on people to defend these “socialist new things” in the face of efforts by the capitalist-roaders to discredit and undermine them... again in the name of stability. And the revolutionaries weren’t just arguing to defend what had been gained through the Cultural Revolution but calling on people to go further in the struggle to revolutionize society and people’s thinking.

They were promoting the study of Marxist theory. They were exposing the program and line of the capitalist-roaders. They were raising to society the great stakes... for the masses in China and for the cause of communism... the great stakes of this struggle to beat back the attempts by the capitalist-roaders to reverse the achievements of the Cultural Revolution. There were outbreaks of

protest—some organized by the capitalist-roaders... others by the revolutionary masses against them. The revolutionaries looked, always, to mobilizing the conscious activism of the masses in this complicated struggle.

The struggle went through sharp twists and turns. And as it wore on and intensified, the mood among sections of the masses was affected. Some people who had gone along with the Cultural Revolution in its early phases were now beginning to tire. This is the reality of the class struggle. But in the face of all of this, the revolutionaries fought very hard in the struggle—to bring out the issues and to re-seize initiative.

This was “Mao’s last great battle.” It was heroic... it was epochal.

It was also in this period of 1973 to 1976 that Mao and the revolutionaries he led made important theoretical contributions to our understanding of the nature of socialist society, the class struggle under socialism, and the goal of communism. The revolutionaries also made some secondary mistakes and errors... and these too carry important lessons.¹⁰³

These are just broad brushstrokes here. If people want to get a deep analysis of Mao’s “last great battle” and its lessons, they should look at works of Bob Avakian like *The Loss in China and the Revolutionary Legacy of Mao Tsetung*, *Mao Tsetung’s Immortal Contributions*,¹⁰⁴ and [*Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will*](#).

When Mao died in September 1976... that was the signal to the reactionaries within the Party. In October they staged a military coup. They immediately moved against the revolutionary core at the top levels of the Party and deployed troops in key parts of the country. There was resistance. But the suppression was quick and harsh, with large numbers of arrests and executions.

Socialism in China was defeated. The first stage of communist revolution came to an end.

Chapter 5: Toward a New Stage of Communist Revolution

Question: Raymond, we've discussed the first stage of communist revolution in some depth and you've brought into sharp and vivid focus these unparalleled transformations and achievements... and some of the problems as well. But at the end of the day, there was this defeat. What did that mean at the time and where does it leave us today?

Raymond Lotta: The defeat in China was a real turning point. There was confusion, shock, and disorientation in the international communist movement—I'm referring to forces generally describing themselves as Maoist. And you had this kind of response among broader radical and progressive forces as well.

Not a few so-called communists went along with the new leadership in China. They pointed to the apparent support that the new leadership had among sections of the Chinese masses... and were fine with the lip service paid to socialism and communism by the capitalist roaders who had staged the coup. Others sank into bewilderment and demoralization. Still others wallowed in the agnosticism of "who's to say, who's to know" and elected to "sit it out"... or just went on as though this massive reversal didn't really matter that much.

It was in these circumstances that Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, rose to fill a great and historic need: to make an accounting both of what had happened in China *and* the responsibilities this placed on genuine revolutionaries.

In 1977, BA wrote a comprehensive analysis of the coup. He explained that

a revisionist line had won out in China. He exposed how this line was expressed in various spheres. He delineated the fault lines of the class struggle in China, and how this got concentrated at the highest levels of leadership. He upheld Mao and his closest followers, the so-called “gang of four.” And he waged a very complex and very principled struggle to get the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA—the party he led and leads today—to take a correct stand on this issue, despite some very underhanded opposition by a faction within the RCP.¹⁰⁵

No one else in the world undertook this kind of analysis and evaluation. BA deeply confronted reality in its complexity, and drew scientific conclusions: the proletarian revolution suffered its second great loss... first the Soviet Union and now China... and it's on us, the genuine communists, to learn, to sum up, *and* to go forward.

In the period following the coup... I'm talking about 1977–79... Avakian also wrote the book *Mao Tsetung's Immortal Contributions*, in which he synthesized Mao's qualitative contributions to the science of revolution, the most important being the theory and practice of continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

BA brought scientific clarity to this crucial juncture and began to open up and chart the path to go forward. He defended the great accomplishments of Mao and the Chinese revolution, while digging deeply into the experience not only of China but of the whole first stage of communist revolution.

Question: So what does this say about what happened in China?

RL: With the benefit of the work of summation that Bob Avakian did undertake over the next three decades, we can now see more clearly two aspects of why there was this defeat. On the one hand, there were powerful objective factors working against the revolutionaries in China. I mentioned how the danger of war was affecting the situation and class struggle in China. And on a world scale, the force—and forces—of capitalism are still stronger, materially and ideologically,

than those of the newly arising communist revolution. And this gets reflected within socialist society.

But there is the other aspect of what happened in China. The objective factors do not fully explain the coup. There were real problems and shortcomings in the approach and conceptions of Mao and the revolutionaries. These shortcomings were not... and I repeat they were not... the primary cause of the defeat in China. But they did contribute to the defeat.

Again, this evaluation of the relationship between objective and subjective factors and the understanding of what these shortcomings are... BA worked and fought to develop this. It's a summation bound up with 35 years of deep and scientific wrangling and synthesis, which has led to a new synthesis of communism.

Bob Avakian Brings Forward a New Synthesis of Communism

Question: Could you take us forward from the period after the coup in China?

RL: Essentially, BA begins this process of deep exploration and critical examination of the first stage of communist revolution, indeed of the whole communist project, with the work *Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will*, which was written in 1981. From here he continued to probe and make new discoveries. And in the more than three decades since the counter-revolution in China, Bob Avakian developed and brought forward a new synthesis of communism.

And he has been doing this, I might add, against the backdrop of the bourgeoisie's relentless ideological assault on communism.

So let me turn to the new synthesis. It is a new, comprehensive framework through which to pursue the communist revolution. And the key link is a breakthrough in the scientific method and approach. If we are to understand and change the world in the highest interests of humanity, then we need science... we need to understand how the world really is and how the world can actually be radically transformed.¹⁰⁶

Avakian has also further developed the internationalist framework of communism—remember, I talked about the errors made by both Stalin and even Mao on this and how those errors ended up undercutting their own efforts to defend and advance revolution—and he's made extremely crucial advances on revolutionary strategy.¹⁰⁷

But given the topic of this interview, I want to focus on a few key points that mainly pertain to the exercise of power and the dictatorship of the proletariat as a transition to communism—even while these points I'm going to speak to

reflect Avakian's breakthroughs in method, especially the need to go unsparingly for the most comprehensive possible understanding of the truth, and the ways to get at that. And even what I'm going to get into can only touch on the richness and depth of how the new synthesis is going at these questions.

Avakian has brought forward new understanding about how power is exercised in socialist society. It is encapsulated in the formulation, "solid core with a lot of elasticity," and it's crystallized in the *Constitution for the New Socialist Republic in North America (Draft Proposal)* that the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA has published. How do you hold on to power, and keep society moving in the direction towards communism... and at the same time—and this is integral to the process of getting to communism—unleash the whole of society in the effort to grasp reality and the revolutionary potential *within* reality to transform it and bring into being a far different and far better world?

This is about socialism as a vibrant and dynamic transition. It's about discovering new truths and utilizing the unresolved contradictions of socialist society, like the question of the full emancipation of women... utilizing these contradictions as an engine for propelling society forward. And doing this together with the advance of the world revolution.

BA has emphasized that intellectual work and intellectual and cultural ferment are vital to the kind of society that socialism must be... and in getting to communism, to a world without classes. Intellectual work adds to the store of knowledge of... and about society and the world. The ferment and debate of intellectual life, and the application of the scientific method to problems and the critical thinking that goes with that... this is something that is essential and indispensable for the masses... for the ability of the masses of people knowing the world ever more deeply and being able to transform it ever more profoundly... and to transform themselves.

Intellectual ferment and dissent contribute to the critical and exploratory spirit that must permeate socialist society, to uncovering problems and defects of

socialist society... and to interrogating it on all levels. [108](#)

Learning From, Advancing Beyond the Cultural Revolution

Question: So how does this apply to the experience of the Cultural Revolution?

RL: Well, this was not fully appreciated by Mao. As I said just before, there were tendencies in Mao's orientation to see intellectuals, and again these tendencies were secondary... to see things more from the side of their ideological problems... and not to fully appreciate the ways in which intellectual activity can contribute to the atmosphere needed in socialist society—to the kind of society that people would want to live in and thrive in.

Look, you are not going to overcome the great divide between mental and manual labor if you are not unleashing intellectual ferment and providing real space and scope for that—at the same time that you are moving in some of the kinds of directions of the Cultural Revolution... breaking down social divisions and enabling intellectuals to understand the continuing inequalities of society and to see themselves and their work in the broader light of bringing a new world into being. Again, Mao did not have the full synthesis on overcoming this great divide in human history, even as the Cultural Revolution was an historic breakthrough.

Now one of the main purposes of the Cultural Revolution was to enable people to learn to distinguish between the capitalist road and socialist road. And here we come back to some of the points I was getting into earlier about intellectual ferment. You had this unprecedented flowering of debate and wrangling that went on during the Cultural Revolution. Remember I was talking about all those newspapers and great debates and wall posters. But great as that was, there was still a certain confining... a certain limiting of dissent. I'm talking about the *range* of debate and flowering.

You know, in China during the Cultural Revolution, communism was the “official ideology.” And while you had this incredible opening up of debate... still, certain trends and currents of thought were not going to get a hearing—because there was still this official framework and discourse, if you will, even as things, as I’ve been explaining, were getting very wild and blown wide open.

There’s a problem here. Not everyone was a communist... and it won’t be the case in socialist society. You have to create a situation where there is ease of mind and the ability to raise criticism and dissent... even, as Avakian emphasizes, from points of view *opposing* communism and socialism. The socialist state has to not only protect dissent—including dissent against socialism itself—but foster it!

And this is what’s paradoxical... really a contradiction. You see, this limiting approach in revolutionary China to dissent actually worked against the Cultural Revolution. It worked against enabling the masses to really comprehend all the views out there... uncovering all the contradictions... with the masses learning through the richness of debate, even from viewpoints opposing socialism.

Now this is not a risk-free orientation. You’re really on a razor’s edge. Because there will be the capitalist-roaders and varieties of counter-revolution working against you and seeking to overthrow you, and seeking to utilize this dissent in those efforts.

Avakian identifies the great challenge, in an interview from 2012 entitled *What Humanity Needs: Revolution, and the New Synthesis of Communism*, where he poses a critical question that arises out of the first stage of communist revolution... and that the new synthesis has broken through on:

How do you give the correct and necessary priority to the fundamental needs of the masses of people in society—especially those whose needs have been trampled under, under the old exploitative system, economically, socially, and politically and culturally—while at the same time not undermining the necessary

intellectual and cultural ferment, creativity, and even dissent that's essential in order to have the kind of process in society where both the masses of people as a whole, and also the leadership of the party and the government, is learning from this whole process, including the criticisms that are raised and the unconventional ideas that find expression in intellectual endeavor, and in the field of the arts, and so on—so that you have a richer process. [109](#)

That's a huge breakthrough, part of a larger breakthrough based on deep study and wrangling which is the new synthesis, and it provides a real basis for hope on a solid scientific foundation.

[The World Needs the New Synthesis of Communist Revolution](#)

Question: Raymond, we've covered a lot of ground. Any final words?

RL: We've talked at length about the whole first stage of communist revolution—of the really epochal struggle to bring a whole new world into being. And we went into great depth in particular on Mao and the Cultural Revolution, the high point of the first stage of communist revolution. And, yes, it was defeated. But what's remarkable is not that they lost power in China nor before that in the first attempt in the Soviet Union. No, when you think about what they were up against internationally and in terms of the birthmarks of the society in which they came to power... when you approach this with a scientific view of all that... what is truly remarkable is how long they held power and how far they got. What has to be celebrated is what a tremendous contribution this was to the storehouse of human knowledge and the reality of human possibility.

But we can't *just* do that. Look, for all we went into, in one sense I barely scratched the surface here. People need to dig more deeply and scientifically into the great achievements and lessons of this first stage, and they need to get much more deeply into the new synthesis of communism that Bob Avakian has brought forward. And all that has to be marshaled in the struggle we face right now—to really transform this whole world, which is a horror, but which really doesn't have to be this way. The whole history of communism thus far shows powerfully that the world does *not* have to be this way, that there is nothing inherent in human nature that dooms us to this, nor is the ruling class we face all-powerful. And the whole thrust of the new synthesis shows how, yes, we can make revolution AND we can go further and do better this time.

It all comes back to this: the world urgently cries out for radical change, for

revolution. And correctly grasping the REAL character, the liberatory character, of the first stage of the communist revolution AND immersing oneself in the contributions of Bob Avakian in summing up that stage and providing direction for a new, even greater one is critical and necessary... to continue on and to make leaps in the journey out of that “darkness” of class society. It’s about the need and basis for a world in which human beings can truly flourish. And it’s about all of us rising to the great need before *us*: taking up this science and using it to transform the reality humanity faces.

Notes

1. [Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage, A Manifesto from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA](#) (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2009).
2. The “pop quiz,” “[Everything You’ve Been Told about Communism IS WRONG: Capitalism Is a Failure, Revolution Is the Solution](#),” is at the Set the Record Straight website.
3. For an analysis of the uprising in Egypt and the need for genuine revolution, see Samuel Albert, “[Egypt, Tunisia and the Arab Revolts: How They Came to an Impasse and How to Get Out of It](#),” *Demarcations: A Journal of Communist Theory and Polemic*, no. 3 (Winter 2014).
4. V.I. Lenin was born on April 22, 1870 and died January 21, 1924. He was the leader of the Bolshevik Party, which later became the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In 1917, amid the turmoil of World War 1, Lenin led the Russian revolution that overthrew the old oppressive order and created the world’s first socialist state. Lenin’s contributions to the science of revolution include the decisive importance of the vanguard party, an analysis of the development of capitalism into imperialism, and a deep understanding and insistence on internationalism and the nature of the state.
5. Mao Zedong was born on December 26, 1893 and died September 9, 1976. In 1935, Mao emerged as the clear leader of the Chinese revolution. He forged the strategy of people’s war. When the People’s Liberation Army marched victoriously into Beijing in 1949, Mao proclaimed the People’s Republic of China. In 1966, Mao initiated the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Mao made vital contributions to the science of communism in philosophy, political economy, art and culture, and other spheres. But his greatest contribution is the theory of continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat.
6. Karl Marx was born on May 5, 1818, and died on March 14, 1883. Karl Marx made a world-historic breakthrough in human understanding. Marx brought forward the comprehensive, scientific historical explanation of the development of human society. As for capitalism, Marx identified its basic contradiction as that between socialized production and private ownership. This contradiction is resolved through proletarian revolution which overthrows capitalism and moves forward to eliminate all oppressive class and social relations and thinking. Marx described this revolution to achieve communism, a world without classes, as involving the “two most radical ruptures”: with traditional property relations and with traditional ideas.
7. The classic eyewitness account of the Paris Commune is Prosper Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871* (London: Verso, 2012). Other useful histories include Frank Jellinek, *The Paris Commune of 1871* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1965); and Carolyn J. Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 2004). The creative

film reenactment by Peter Watkins, *La Commune* (2010), is fascinating viewing.

8. Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1970).
9. An important overview of the significance of the Commune and related controversies within the international communist movement can be found in “The Paris Commune in Perspective: The Bolshevik and Chinese Revolutions as its Continuation and Deepening,” in the Appendix: “Democracy: More Than Ever We Can and Must Do Better Than That,” in Bob Avakian, *Phony Communism Is Dead... Long Live Real Communism*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2004), 141-156.
10. For relevant analysis, see Bob Avakian, “[A Reflection on the ‘Occupy’ Movement: An Inspiring Beginning... And the Need To Go Further](#),” *Revolution*, November 13, 2011.
11. For background on World War 1, see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* (London: Abacus, 2010), Ch. 13; and Raymond Lotta, *America in Decline* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1984), 174-187.
12. For a brief account of the societal setting of the Bolshevik Revolution, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution 1917–1932* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), Ch. 1.
13. For an account from a participant in the October Revolution, see John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook The World* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1919). The 1928 film directed by Sergei M. Eisenstein, [October: Ten Days That Shook the World](#), is available online. The 1981 film *Reds* by Warren Beatty, available on DVD, is a fictional account of Reed’s life set against the backdrop of the extraordinary sweep of the Russian Revolution.

See also, *The History of the Civil War in the U.S.S.R.*, Vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1937); and John L.H. Keep, *The Russian Revolution: A Study in Mass Mobilization* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976).
14. On the Civil War, see E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917–1923*, Vol. 2 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985); Bruce W. Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).
15. On Bolshevik policy and practice, see for instance, Richard Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978); and Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State & Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 1-58.
16. The 2004 film *Iron Jawed Angels* focuses on the suffragette movement in the U.S. in the 1910s and tells the true story of the arrest of a group of women protesters and how they were force-fed when they went on hunger strike.
17. See, for instance, Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle, WA: Univ. of Washington Press, 2008); and see also Adrienne Lynn Edgar, “Emancipation of the Unveiled: Turkmen Women Under Soviet Rule, 1924–29,” *The Russian Review* 62 (January 2003) for discussion of the struggle against “bridewealth” and other such feudal-patriarchal practices in Central Asia.

18. On the Bolshevik revolution's approach to and achievements in expanding education to minority nationalities, ensuring equality of languages, and promoting instruction in native languages, see, for example, Jeremy Smith, "The Education of National Minorities: The Early Soviet Experience," *Slavonic and East European Review* 75, no. 2 (April 1997).
19. See Terry Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2001) for important factual material on nationality policy and practice in the Soviet Union from 1917 until the end of World War 2.
20. See Arno Mayer, *Why Did The Heavens Not Darken* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 55-89. For a narrative and visual account of the establishment of the Jewish Autonomous Region in the Soviet Union, see Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998).
21. See Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America*. (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2012); and Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2008).
22. See Philip Foner, ed., *Paul Robeson Speaks: The Negro and the Soviet Union* (New York: Citadel, 2002), 240; and Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Knopf, 1989).
23. Aleksander Mikhailovich Rodchenko (1891–1956) was a painter, sculptor, photographer, and graphic designer, a founder of constructivism and Russian design. Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (1879–1935), painter and art theoretician, was a pioneer of geometric abstract art. Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein (1898–1948) was a film director and film theorist. Alexander Petrovich Dovzhenko (1894–1956) was a screenwriter, director, and film producer. Eisenstein and Dovzhenko pioneered Soviet montage theory—the cinematic technique of stark and rapid juxtaposition of images through editing.
24. On experimentation in the arts, see Vladimir Tolstoy, Irina Bibikova, and Catherine Cooke, eds., *Street Art of the Revolution: Festivals and Celebrations in Russia, 1918–1933* (New York: The Vendome Press, 1990); William G. Rosenberg, ed., *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, Part 2 (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1990); and Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989). To view representative artworks from this period, see the website for the 2013 Museum of Modern Art exhibit, [Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art](#).
25. Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), 607.
26. On the early experience of planning and socialist industrialization, see Maurice Dobb, *Soviet Economic Development* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948), chapters on the first and second five-year plans; E.H. Carr and R.W. Davies, *A History of Soviet Russia: Volume 4: Foundations of a Planned Economy 1926–1929* (New York: Penguin, 1974); and, out of print but well worth searching for, Anna Louise Strong, *The Stalin Era* (New York: Mainstream Publishers, 1956).
27. Dobb, *Soviet Economic Development*, Ch. 9.

- [28.](#) For informative accounts, see, for example Maurice Hindus, *Red Bread: Collectivization in a Russian Village* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988); Lynne Viola, *The Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Soviet Collectivization* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989); and Strong, *The Stalin Era*.
- [29.](#) See, for example, Mao Zedong, *A Critique of Soviet Economics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977); and “On the Ten Major Relationships (April 25, 1956)” in *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 5 (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), 284-307.
- [30.](#) There was a famine in 1932–33 in the Soviet Union. Stalin has been accused of intentionally causing the famine to punish the Ukrainians. Why this is wrong and not factually based is gone into in Raymond Lotta, Research Notes: “[The Famine of 1933 in the Soviet Union: What Really Happened, Why it was NOT an ‘Intentional Famine’](#),” at the Set the Record Straight website.
- [31.](#) On the Soviet approach to socialist construction and how Mao would rupture with it in very significant ways, see Raymond Lotta, Introduction: “[Maoist Economics and the Future of Socialism](#),” in *Maoist Economics and the Revolutionary Road to Communism: The Shanghai Textbook on Political Economy*, Raymond Lotta, ed. (Chicago: Banner Press, 1994), iii-xlv.
- [32.](#) “Gulag” is shorthand in Russian for “Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Labor Settlements,” a system of prison and labor camps.
- [33.](#) In part on the basis of the experience of previous socialist societies and what Bob Avakian has summed up on the importance of the rule of law and protection of the rights of the individual, the *Constitution for the New Socialist Republic in North America (Draft Proposal)* abolishes the death penalty, and sets out strict procedures for how it could only be temporarily used during war, invasion, insurrection, or other such extraordinary circumstances. Further, people will not be jailed or repressed just for raising disagreements with government policy, or with the socialist form of government—an actual crime will need to be proven.
- For more on the legal system in this Constitution—again, drawing on Bob Avakian’s summation of the achievements but also the shortcomings of the previous socialist societies—see the [Constitution for the New Socialist Republic in North America \(Draft Proposal\)](#), (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2010), at revcom.us.
- For an exploratory essay on what was going on in the Soviet Union during the period of the purges, see *An Historic Contradiction: Fundamentally Changing The World Without “Turning Out the Lights”*, Letter 9: “[When the Lights Went Out... Really Went Out: Further Findings and Reflections on the 1930s](#),” at revcom.us.
- [34.](#) Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001).
- [35.](#) On Jefferson and slavery, see Henry Wiencek, *Master of the Mountain: Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013); and see Bob Avakian, “[A Question Sharply Posed: Nat Turner or Thomas Jefferson](#),” *Revolution*, April 14, 2013.
- [36.](#) The spurious anti-communist theory of “totalitarianism” equates Stalin with Hitler, communist

ideology with fascist ideology, and the dictatorship of the proletariat with fascist regimes. This theory is built on grotesque distortions of the actual historical experience, and the actual goals and methods, of the communist revolution. And it is a crucial part of the bourgeoisie's ideological arsenal, particularly the notion that communism will only lead to a "utopia-turned-into-nightmare."

To understand why this theory is wrong, and the world outlook that informs it, see the comprehensive refutation of Hannah Arendt, perhaps the leading proponent of this theory, in Bob Avakian, *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986), 167-190; also see the refutation of Karl Popper, another influential theorist of "totalitarianism," in Bob Avakian "Marxism as a Science—Refuting Karl Popper," in [Making Revolution And Emancipating Humanity, Revolution](#), October 21, 2007.

37. Mao Zedong, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," in *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 5 (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), 384-421.
38. For an overall evaluation of Stalin, see Bob Avakian on "The Question of Stalin and 'Stalinism'" in "[The End of a Stage—The Beginning of a New Stage](#)," *Revolution* magazine (Chicago: RCP Publications, 1990), 13-18, at [revcom.us](#).
39. Bob Avakian, "[Conquer The World? The International Proletariat Must and Will](#)" (1981); Avakian, "[Advancing the World Revolutionary Movement: Questions of Strategic Orientation](#)," (Spring 1984); and the [Constitution for the New Socialist Republic in North America \(Draft Proposal\)](#); all online at [revcom.us](#).
40. On the Soviet Union in World War 2, the military struggle against German imperialism, and Stalin's role in leading the Soviet war effort, see Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939–1953* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006).

On the roots and nature of World War 2, see Raymond Lotta, *America in Decline*, 205-219.
41. On the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union in 1956 and the subsequent development of the Soviet Union into a social-imperialist formation, see Raymond Lotta, "Realities of Social Imperialism Versus Dogmas of Cynical Realism: The Dynamics of the Soviet Capital Formation," in Raymond Lotta vs. Albert Szymanski, *The Soviet Union: Socialist or Social-Imperialist? Part II, The Question Is Joined* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 1983).
42. For background, see Jean Chesneaux, et al., *China From the Opium Wars to the 1911 Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).
43. A classic account of this, based in part on interviews with Mao, is Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (New York: Grove Press, 1961).
44. Dick Wilson, *The Long March* (New York: Viking Press, 1972).
45. Iris Chang, *The Rape Of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust Of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).
46. See Han Suyin, *The Morning Deluge: Mao Tsetung & The Chinese Revolution 1893–1954* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972); Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937–1945* (New York:

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

47. On the incidence and horrific toll of famines in pre-revolutionary China, see Walter Mallory, *China: Land of Famine* (New York: National Geographic Society, 1926); and Carl Riskin, *China's Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 24.
48. See Elisabeth Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), Ch. 2.
49. Jonathan D. Spence and Annping Chin, *The Chinese Century* (New York: Random House, 1996), 84.
50. Fredric M. Kaplan, Julian M. Sobin, and Stephen Andors, *Encyclopedia of China Today* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 233.
51. See William Hinton, "The Importance of Land Reform in the Reconstruction of China," in *Hungry for Profit: The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment*, Fred Magdoff, et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 216.

By the early 1950s, radical land reform led by the Communist Party and based on peasant mobilization had effectively disempowered the old landlord classes. See John G. Gurley, *China's Economy and the Maoist Strategy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976), 236-241; and Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic, Third Edition* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 90-102.
52. This description draws from William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008). This is a riveting micro-study of Mao's agrarian revolution in its economic, social, and ideological dimensions, focused on one village. Hinton stood with the Chinese revolution but took a very wrong stand with respect to Mao's last great battle of 1973–76, condemning the so-called "gang of four" who in fact championed Mao's line and played a leading role in fighting to prevent capitalist restoration and continue the revolution.

Other valuable works about the agrarian revolution include: Isabel Crook and David Crook, *Mass Movement in a Chinese Village: Ten-Mile Inn* (New York: Random House, 1979); and the novel by Yuan-tsung Chen, *The Dragon's Village: An Autobiographical Novel of Revolutionary China* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), which tells of land reform work in the 1950s.
53. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2010).
54. Western studies written in the 1970s on the struggle for women's liberation in revolutionary China include Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*; Delia Davin, *Woman-Work* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976); and Claudie Broyelle, *Women's Liberation in China* (New York: Harvester Press, 1977).
55. See Kaplan, et al., *Encyclopedia of China Today*, 233.
56. See C. Clark Kissinger, "[How Maoist Revolution Wiped Out Drug Addiction in China](#)," at revcom.us.
57. Bob Avakian, "[The Cultural Revolution in China... Art and Culture... Dissent and Ferment... and Carrying Forward the Revolution Toward Communism](#)," *Revolution*, February 19, 2012.
58. Mao's differences with the Soviet model and his articulation of an alternative model of and profoundly

dialectical approach to socialist economic development, drawing from the experiences and lessons of the Great Leap Forward, can be seen to be taking shape in Mao Zedong, *A Critique of Soviet Economics*.

59. Articles written in China at the time about peasant experimentation and the development of and struggle for higher forms of cooperation were collected in *Socialist Upsurge in China's Countryside* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1957). Mao wrote prefaces and notes on this collection, in *Selected Works*, Vol. 5, 235-276.
60. Li Onesto, "[When Revolution Has its Day, People See Things a Different Way: How Collective Childcare Liberated Women in Maoist China.](#)" *Revolutionary Worker*, May 10, 1998.
61. For documentation and analysis of the Great Leap Forward and the communes, see Isabel and David Crook, *The First Years of Yangyi Commune* (New York: Routledge, 1966); Han Suyin, *Wind in the Tower: Mao Tsetung and the Chinese Revolution 1949–1975* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), Ch. 8; Keith Buchanan, *The Transformation of the Chinese Earth* (New York: Praeger, 1970); and William Hinton, *Through a Glass Darkly: U.S. Views of the Chinese Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006).
62. P. Sainath, "Farmers' Suicide Rates Soar Above the Rest," *The Hindu*, May 18, 2013.
63. UNICEF, *Levels and Trends in Infant Mortality, Report 2013*.
64. Some of Mao's important talks and speeches at the time of the Great Leap Forward are collected in Roderick MacFarquhar, Timothy Cheek, and Eugene Wu, eds., *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao: From the Hundred Flowers to the Great Leap Forward* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 1989).
65. See YY Kueh, *Agricultural Instability in China, 1931–1991: Weather, Technology, and Institutions* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995). Chinese weather station data are summarized at http://www.famine.unimelb.edu.au/weather_stations.php.
66. See Han Suyin, *Wind in Tower*, Ch. 9-11 on the Sino-Soviet split; and Riskin, *China's Political Economy*, 130-131, on the Soviet aid withdrawal.
67. See Buchanan, *Transformation of Chinese Earth*, 130-131.
68. See Franz Schurmann, *The Logic of World Power: An Inquiry into the Origins, Currents, and Contradictions of World Politics* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 330-331; and Han Suyin, *Wind in the Tower*, 170-171.
69. See, for instance, Dwight H. Perkins, *Agricultural Development in China: 1368–1968* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1969), 303.
70. Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
71. For an overview of the sensationalistic claims and dubious statistical methods, see Daniel Vukovich, "Missing Millions, Excess Deaths, and a Crisis of Chinese Proportions," in *China and Orientalism*:

Western Knowledge Production and the PRC (New York: Routledge, 2011).

Also see William Hinton, *Through a Glass Darkly*, 241-257; and Utsa Patnaik. "Republic of Hunger," in *The Republic of Hunger and Other Essays* (Pontypool, UK: Merlin Press, 2008).

72. Joseph Ball, "Did Mao Really Kill Millions in the Great Leap Forward," *Monthly Review*, September 2006, available at monthlyreview.org. This study also presents an important methodological critique of the ways that "statistical results" for the "massive famine thesis" are reached.
73. One Western scholar of agriculture in China, writing in 1975, characterized revolutionary China's breakthrough in food production and distribution this way: "First, China seems to have succeeded in eliminating the most extreme fluctuations in farm output, although several decades more of experience will be needed to fully confirm this achievement.... Second, the rationing of essential foods means that all people are guaranteed their minimum requirements as long as nationwide supplies are adequate. One does not see the phenomenon in China of rich areas holding onto large surpluses while tens of thousands are dying elsewhere in a famine region. Because China has largely solved the food distribution problem, both over time and between people, the nation could suffer through a fairly prolonged period of output stagnation before people began to suffer serious malnutrition. The same cannot be said of many other less developed nations." Dwight Perkins, "Constraints Influencing China's Agricultural Performance," in *China: A Reassessment of the Economy, A Compendium of Papers Submitted to the Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 352-353.
74. The Soviet revisionists, from the late 1950s until the collapse of the Soviet Union, were promoting a model of "socialist" development for countries of the Third World to take up. They gave aid towards its construction and various forces gravitated to it. One such country is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). Its leadership has at various times called itself socialist-communist, but in fact this society has nothing in common with socialism or communism. There is state ownership, a system of social welfare, and forms of "worker participation" and "worker democracy." But North Korea is in essence a *militarized, paternalistic* society ruled by a narrow stratum of *bureaucratic state-capitalists*. It is a society where the masses are kept in a passive and stifled state.

To learn about the difference between genuine socialism and the kind of society that exists in North Korea or in Cuba, see Bob Avakian, "[Three Alternative Worlds](#)," in *Basics from the talks and writings of Bob Avakian* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2011), 67-70.
75. See the interview "[Running with the Red Guards: Memories of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution](#)," *Revolutionary Worker*, December 22, 1986.
76. Jan Myrdal and Gun Kessle, *China: The Revolution Continued* (New York: Pantheon, 1970) especially pp. 75-108.
77. Some of the important theoretical work done by the Maoist revolutionaries in China on these themes is collected in Raymond Lotta, ed., *And Mao Makes 5: Mao Tsetung's Last Great Battle* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1978).
78. See the summation in Bob Avakian, *Mao Tsetung's Immortal Contributions* (Chicago: RCP

Publications, 1979), Ch. 6.

79. See Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun, *Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).
80. See the discussion in Raymond Lotta, Nayi Duniya, and K.J.A., “Rereading the Cultural Revolution in Order to Bury the Cultural Revolution,” in “[Alain Badiou’s ‘Politics of Emancipation’—A Communism Locked Within the Confines of the Bourgeois World](#),” Ch. IV, *Demarcations: A Journal of Communist Theory and Polemic*, no. 1 (Summer–Fall 2009).
81. See Mao Zedong, “Speech to the Albanian Military Delegation,” at www.marxists.org.
82. See the “[16 Point Decision](#),” “Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (Adopted on August 8, 1966), in *Important Documents on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1970).
83. The struggle in Tsinghua University is recounted in William Hinton, *Hundred Day War: The Cultural Revolution at Tsinghua University* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972). See Part III. “The Working Class Intervenes.”
84. For an overall analysis of the Cultural Revolution, see the interview with Bob Avakian, “[The Cultural Revolution in China](#).” On major events and turning points of the Cultural Revolution, especially in its early phases, see Jean Daubier, *A History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).
85. On the Cultural Revolution in the countryside and its effects on education, including the vast expansion of secondary schooling, see Dongping Han, *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Educational Reforms and Their Impact on China’s Rural Development* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 88; and Suzanne Pepper, “Education,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. XV, Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, eds. (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 416.
For a more general discussion of the transformations in education, see Ruth Gamberg, *Red and Expert: Education in the People’s Republic of China* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).
86. See Science for the People, *China: Science Walks on Two Legs* (New York: Avon, 1974). In the 1920s, the richest evidence of human evolution the world had ever seen was unearthed: Peking Man. After the revolution, Peking Man was part of the movement to bring science to the people: the story of human evolution was a lesson in Marxist philosophy offered to the masses. See Sigrid Schmalzer, *The People’s Peking Man: Popular Science and Human Identity in Twentieth-Century China* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008).
87. See Part 2 of the interview “[Running with the Red Guards: Memories of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution](#).” On the “barefoot doctor” movement as part of an integrated system of health care, see Teh-wei Hu, “Health Care Services in China’s Economic Development,” in *China’s Development Experience in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Robert F. Dernberger (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980).

See also the documentary film, *The Barefoot Doctors of Rural China*, produced by Victor Li, available on YouTube; and Revolutionary Health Committee of Hunan Province, *A Barefoot Doctor's Manual: The American Translation of the Official Chinese Paramedical Manual* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1977).

88. For an overview of health care in revolutionary China, see Victor W Sidel and Ruth Sidel, *Serve the People: Observations on Medicine in the People's Republic of China* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).
89. See Donald G. McNeil, Jr, "For Intrigue, Malaria Drug Gets the Prize," *New York Times*, January 16, 2012; and "Malaria: Rediscovered Cure," *Médecins Sans Frontières*, April 24, 2013, at msf.org.
90. Penny Kane, *The Second Billion: Population and Family Planning in China* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 172 and Ch. 5.
91. Victor W Sidel and Ruth Sidel, *Serve the People*, 256-258.
92. Through the Cultural Revolution, there were, as mentioned, great breakthroughs in the understanding of the political economy of socialism and in how to develop a socialist economy in a revolutionary way towards revolutionary goals. This understanding is concentrated in an important textbook written in China in the 1972–76 period and available in an English-language edition as: *Maoist Economics and the Revolutionary Road to Communism* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1994). The afterword essay focuses up the innovations in planning and provides empirical documentation of the impressive economic gains that were achieved through the Cultural Revolution: Raymond Lotta, Afterword: "[The Theory and Practice of Maoist Planning: In Defense of a Viable and Visionary Socialism](#)," 279-332.
93. *Sculptures of the Rent Collection Courtyard* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1970).
94. The baseless assertion that China was a vast "cultural wasteland" during the Cultural Revolution is part of the conventional wisdom of our times. A recent study by Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), discusses in great detail opera, film, dance, the visual arts, literature, poetry, and drama and shows that the Cultural Revolution was in fact a period of great and unprecedented creativity, innovation, and collective artistic production. Although this work suffers from some anti-communism and the author works within a frame of nationalist modernization, it is a valuable and well-documented study.

On poster art during the Cultural Revolution, see Lincoln Cushing and Ann Tompkins, *Chinese Posters: Art from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007).
95. The scripts of some of the model theatrical works can be found in Lois Wheeler Snow, *China On Stage: An American Actress in the People's Republic* (New York: Vintage, 1973). See also Li Onesto, "[Yang Ban Xi: Model Revolutionary Works in Revolutionary China](#)," *Revolution*, June 18, 2006.

See also the essay on two of the model ballets, by Bai Di, "[Feminism in Revolutionary Model Ballets *The White-Haired Girl* and *The Red Detachment of Women*](#)," and watch the film of the [Red Detachment of Women](#) ballet.
96. See Jan Myrdal, *Return to a Chinese Village* (New York: Pantheon, 1984); Jack Chen, *A Year in Upper Felicity: Life in a Chinese Village During the Cultural Revolution* (New York: McMillan Publishing

- Co., 1973); and Dongping Han, *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Life and Change in a Chinese Village* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).
97. See Mobo Gao, “Debating the Cultural Revolution: Do We Only Know What We Believe,” in *Critical Asian Studies* 34 (2002): 427-430; and Mobo Gao, *Gao Village: A Portrait of Rural Life in Modern China* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai’i Press, 1999), Ch. 9.
98. What this meant in terms of lived experience is conveyed in such reflections as: “[We had a dream that the world can be better than today](#),” Set the Record Straight interviews Wang Zheng, *Revolution*, September 3, 2006; and Dongping Han, *The Unknown Cultural Revolution*; see also the video of [Dongping Han on BookTV](#), at booktv.org.
99. Important theoretical articles produced during the Cultural Revolution on the question of revolutionizing management are collected in Stephen Andors, ed., *Workers and Workplaces in Revolutionary China* (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1977). For a study written from a different political-ideological perspective that casts light on the revolutionization of management: Stephen Andors, *China’s Industrial Revolution: Politics, Planning, and Management 1949 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).
100. For accounts like this, see the valuable collection of essays by women who grew up in Maoist China: Xueping Zhong, Wang Zheng, and Bai Di, eds., *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2001).
101. Teh-wei Hu, “Health Care Services in China’s Economic Development,” 234.
102. John Archibald Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 4-5.
103. Documents from this struggle are collected in Raymond Lotta, ed., *And Mao Makes 5*.
104. Bob Avakian, *The Loss in China and the Revolutionary Legacy of Mao Tsetung* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 1978) and *Mao Tsetung’s Immortal Contributions* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 1979).
105. See *Revolution and Counter-Revolution: The Revisionist Coup in China and the Struggle in the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 1978) for Avakian’s analysis and the key documents of this struggle.
106. For more on BA’s breakthrough in the science of communism, see “[Bob Avakian in a Discussion with Comrades on Epistemology: On Knowing and Changing the World](#),” “[Communism as a Science](#),” appendix to the *Constitution of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2008), *Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity*, Part 1: “[Beyond the Narrow Horizon of Bourgeois Right](#),” and *Birds Cannot Give Birth to Crocodiles, But Humanity Can Soar Beyond the Horizon*, Part 1: “[Revolution and the State](#),” at revcom.us.
107. For more on BA’s development of internationalism, see [Advancing the World Revolutionary Movement: Questions of Strategic Orientation](#); for more on strategy, see *Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity*, Part 2: “[Everything We’re Doing Is About Revolution](#),” and “[On the Strategy for Revolution](#),” a statement from the Revolutionary Communist Party, at revcom.us.

- [108.](#) Bob Avakian, *Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy* (Chicago: Insight Press, 2005).
- [109.](#) An Interview with Bob Avakian by A. Brooks, [What Humanity Needs: Revolution, and the New Synthesis of Communism](#) (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2012), at revcom.us.

Appendix: Two Essays **Concerning Epistemology**

These essays were submitted to revcom.us as part of the interview process.

“But How Do We Know Who’s Telling the Truth About Communism?”

Some people reading this interview may be saying to themselves: “Ok, *Raymond Lotta* says these socialist societies were incredibly liberating, and that all these amazing things happened. But my teacher... my textbook... that magazine article I read... my friend whose family is *from* Russia... everything I have ever learned or heard about these societies... says that they were nightmares. How do we know who’s telling the truth? Why should I believe Raymond Lotta?”

In response, two quick points must be made right away:

First, it’s not a question of what Raymond Lotta says vs. what your teacher, or textbook, or friend, or magazine article says. There are not two, or three, or four different competing “versions” of reality; there is ***one reality***. In other words: Either something is true, or it’s not. Either something is in line with reality, or it isn’t. Either something happened, or it didn’t.

Second, here’s how you definitely **don’t** decide what’s true: By looking at what most people think. **Very** often what most people think is wrong! For example: At different points in the history of the world, most people thought that the earth was flat... that the sun revolved around the earth... and that slavery was completely natural and acceptable... and most people today *still* think that god created human beings and all life on earth. 0 for 4!

*But then this leads to the question: How **do** we tell what is really true, and who is really telling the truth about communism?*

The short answer to this question is: **Be scientific. Examine the evidence, and examine the methods and criteria being applied.**

More specifically: Examine the evidence being offered, and criteria and methods being applied, in this interview with Raymond Lotta to argue that the past experience of the communist revolution was principally emancipatory... and

compare and contrast this with the evidence (or lack thereof) being offered, and criteria and methods being applied, by those who tell you communism was a nightmare.

There is a basic question that you should ask yourself again and again as you read this interview and compare it to everything you've heard and been told and will again encounter about communism: **Who is *proceeding scientifically* here, and who is not?**

Now, what does it mean to be scientific, or to proceed scientifically? And why is this important? Being scientific means starting from, and consistently returning to, **reality**. It means doing that as opposed to starting from conventional wisdom, what one *wants* to be true, what one subjectively “feels,” or one's prejudices and preconceptions about what is true.

As Bob Avakian has put it:

Let's not mystify science. Science means that you probe and investigate reality, by carrying out experiments, by accumulating data, and so on; and then, proceeding from that reality and applying the methods and logic of rational thought, you struggle to identify the patterns in the data, etc., you've gathered about reality. If you're approaching it correctly, you're struggling to arrive at a correct synthesis of the reality you've investigated. And then you measure your conclusions against objective reality to determine if they are in correspondence with it, if what they sum up and predict about reality is confirmed in reality. That's the way breakthroughs in science have been made—whether it's in the realm of biology, like the understanding of evolution, or whether it's things about the origins of the universe (or the known universe), like the Big Bang theory, or whatever. That's the process that goes on, and the question is: is it scientific? That is, does it, in its main and essential lines, correspond to reality?

—From *What Humanity Needs: Revolution, and the New Synthesis of Communism, An Interview with Bob Avakian* by A. Brooks

And why is it so important to be scientific? Because this is the only way to actually *get to reality* and to continue learning more about reality. To return to the examples given earlier: where would we be if Copernicus and Galileo, or Darwin, or the Abolitionists who fought against slavery, proceeded from “what everybody knows,” or decided that no one could really say what was true, or what was right and wrong, that there was no objective reality but simply “different versions” of that reality, or that truth depended on one’s individual perspective?

Now, to be clear, the point is *not* that if someone is applying a scientific method—and the communist method of dialectical materialism in particular—that automatically means everything that person says about communism is true, or that everything anti-communists say is not true. In fact, at the heart of the new synthesis of communism brought forward by Bob Avakian is an understanding that while the communist outlook and method represents the most systematic, comprehensive, and consistent means of arriving at the truth, this does not mean that communists have a *monopoly* on the truth, or that those who are not applying this outlook and method are incapable of discovering important truths. Rather, with anything that anyone says, the test should be: Does this, in fact, correspond to reality?

But it is also the case that with this interview, as is the case with *literally anything that one reads about any topic*, everyone who reads this is not going to be able to independently verify every single statement made or fact cited. And if you *just* look things up for yourself, without an eye towards all the points being made above, you are—to be blunt—going to run across a lot of lies and bullshit and unsubstantiated garbage about communism and not know what to make of it.

So, again, as you are reading this interview with Raymond Lotta and comparing it to everything you’ve been told about communism, consider the question: **Who is proceeding scientifically here? And who is not?**

Let’s Take Just One Example

Let's compare and contrast how Raymond Lotta discusses the Great Leap Forward in revolutionary China with how a recent *New York Times* article—which is representative of the standard anti-communist account of this experience—approaches the Great Leap Forward.

If you read how Raymond Lotta talks about the Great Leap Forward in this interview, you will notice that he consistently applies the method of **proceeding from, confronting and probing reality, and the complexity and contradiction within that reality**. He starts by talking about the context—the situation within China and the world as a whole—in which the Great Leap Forward was launched. He addresses the challenges Mao and the Chinese revolution were faced with, and the problems and obstacles they were trying to solve and overcome. He addresses the basic question of **why** Mao initiated the Great Leap Forward and what its goals were. He speaks to what the Great Leap Forward accomplished. And he does not shy away from, but rather directly engages and refutes, the anti-communist accusations that “Mao was responsible for tens of millions of deaths” through the Great Leap Forward, illuminating where these charges and figures come from and exposing how anti-communists both inflate the numbers of deaths and also treat the deaths that did occur as people “killed by Mao.” And in terms of the massive food crisis that hit China, Lotta does *not* attempt to cover up or shy away from this, instead explaining the various *actual* causes of this food crisis, the mistakes that the Chinese leadership made, and the ways that this leadership learned from and corrected these mistakes. And the basic criteria Lotta is applying to evaluate all of this is: To what degree were the Chinese communists seeking to—and to what degree **did they**—advance in the direction of overcoming all exploitation and oppression and the ways of thinking that go along with that?

It is very instructive to compare and contrast how Lotta approaches the Great Leap Forward in this interview with how it is approached in the *New York Times* article, “Milder Accounts of Hardships Under Mao Arise as His Birthday Nears” (October 16, 2013). In contrast to the interview with Raymond Lotta,

which is consistently proceeding from, probing, and synthesizing the lessons of reality, **the *Times* piece is proceeding from and returning to what “everybody knows.”**

The tone for this article is set in its opening sentence, which claims: “The famine that gripped China from 1958 to 1962 is widely judged to be the deadliest in recorded history, killing 20 to 30 million people or more, and is one of the defining calamities of Mao Zedong’s rule.” Right there, you have a combination of at least three standard anti-communist methods in a single sentence. **1)** Toss out a huge number of deaths without offering any actual evidence for the claim, which the *Times* never does in the article. **2)** Be sure to blame those deaths on communist leaders—again, evidence not included. **3)** Use phrases like “widely judged” to convey the impression that “everybody knows” the above two points to be true, thereby freeing you of the burden of having to offer any evidence.

From there, in addition to putting forward snarky, distorted, and crude misrepresentations of what the Great Leap Forward was seeking to accomplish and the reasons it was launched—read how Raymond Lotta explains this in the interview, and then compare it to the *Times*’ characterization—the basic method of the *Times* article is to lean on the “everybody knows” crutch over and over again, instead of offering any evidence or reality-based analysis to support its claims. For instance, the article refers to a mathematician, Sun Jingxian, whom the article says “asserts that most of the apparent deaths were a mirage of chaotic statistics: people moved from villages and were presumed dead, because they failed to register in their new homes.” **But the article never even attempts to show why what Sun says is inaccurate!** Similarly, the *Times* refers to a book by Yang Songlin, whom the *Times* identifies as a “former official,” who argues that the numbers of deaths in the Great Leap Forward have been severely inflated, and that the deaths that did occur were caused mainly by “bad weather, not bad policies.” But **again, there is not even an attempt by the *Times* to show why what Yang says is not true.**

We are not commenting one way or another here on Sun Jingxian and Yang Songlin, or their specific claims and methods. Rather, we are pointing to the *Times*' methods here, which is to start with what "everybody knows," and then measure everything else against that, rather than actually probing and investigating *reality* and using *that* as the yardstick to measure what is true.

The method, and message, of the *Times* article is clear: When it comes to negative things about communism, if someone said it, it must be true. If someone didn't say it, say it now. And if it can be claimed that *lots* of people say it—well, all the better!

Pieces like this article, which again is one of many examples that could be given, train people to think that Mao sat around and said: "Hmm, how can I implement a policy that will cause the most people to starve?" Among the things you would never know from these anti-communist slanders and methods is that there was mass starvation and mass inequalities in China *before* the Chinese revolution; that Mao launched the Great Leap Forward with the aims of *overcoming* mass starvation and inequalities, radically transforming social and economic relations, and developing the Chinese economy in a way that would **reduce, not widen**, the gap between the cities and the countryside; that within 20 years of the Chinese revolution, ***everyone in China indeed had enough food to eat***; and that the deaths that occurred in China during the Great Leap Forward were principally caused by a **massive famine** that gripped China as a result of the floods and drought that affected over half of its agricultural land, by hardships caused by the Soviet withdrawal of aid to China, and by *mistakes* that the Chinese leadership made *in that context*—NOT by some insane and evil plot by Mao to starve people!

Again, compare all this—and many other examples you will unfortunately encounter of anti-communist methods and accounts—to the evidence that Raymond Lotta presents and the methods and criteria that he applies, in this section of the interview, and in fact throughout the interview.

[A Reader Responds to “What’s Wrong with ‘History by Memoir’?”](#)

I think it is really important to recognize that “You Don’t Know What You Think You ‘Know’ About... The Communist Revolution and the REAL Path to Emancipation: Its History and Our Future,” is a phenomenal resource. I think it is critical to study, broadly spread, and stir up discussion, debate and controversy in society around this issue in all kinds of different ways, **as part of** working to bring closer and prepare for the radically different future conditions that would make revolution possible.

The statement “[On the Strategy for Revolution](#)” from the Revolutionary Communist Party makes the point that: “In order for revolution to be real there must be: **a revolutionary crisis, and a revolutionary people, numbering in the millions and led by a far-seeing, highly organized and disciplined revolutionary party.**” Key features of these future conditions will be that millions of people will be conscious of the need for revolutionary change and determined to fight for it; that millions of people will have come to view this system and its rule as illegitimate; and that there will be a core of thousands of people who have been brought forward, oriented and trained in a revolutionary way, reaching and influencing millions of people in society before a revolutionary situation and, quoting the strategy statement again, “then, when there is a revolutionary situation, those thousands can be a backbone and pivotal force in winning millions to revolution and organizing them in the struggle to carry the revolution through.”

All of this is going to necessitate transforming the thinking of people on a massive societal scale, and radically reshaping the political terrain! And we must be working on this transformation of people’s thinking and reshaping of the political terrain **now**, as part of working towards and preparing for the future conditions in which revolution would be possible. From that standpoint, I think

this interview has tremendous importance. Because *one of the biggest elements of people's thinking that needs to be transformed... one of the biggest dimensions around which the political terrain needs to be radically reshaped... one of the biggest factors keeping people from seeing the necessity and possibility of revolution and the illegitimacy of the current system... one of the biggest things standing in the way of them **getting with** the movement for revolution... is that people, broadly, in this society do not know that a whole different world is possible*, and/or they have accepted the idea that any past attempts to radically change the world through revolution have been a nightmare. In other words: The only actual solution to the horrors confronting humanity—the communist revolution—has been written off the agenda, and people broadly in society have no idea about decades of experience of that revolution in which humanity lived a radically different way than they do now. And people broadly in society do not know about BA's new synthesis of communism, which provides a framework for a new stage of communist revolution, for humanity to correctly understand and also advance beyond even the best of that previous experience. Again, all this keeps people locked into accepting and working within the confines of the capitalist-imperialist system. But getting this interview way out into society has the potential to change all of that.

So those were some brief general thoughts on how I see the importance of the interview. But in this essay, I wanted to focus on and share some thinking about one particular section of the interview with Raymond Lotta that I thought was really illuminating and important: The section titled, “What’s Wrong with ‘History by Memoir’?”

Think about it: How often, in the course of talking with people about communism—and more generally in the academic and societal discourse about communism—are individual memoirs and personal accounts from those who lived in past socialist societies cited as definitive “proof” that these societies were nightmares and disasters? Who, in the course of carrying out work building the movement for revolution, has *not* encountered from the masses of all

different strata some variation of the following objection (even if not expressed in these exact words): “If communism is so great, and if previous socialist societies were so liberating, how come I’ve read or heard all these stories from people who *lived* in these societies saying it was terrible?”

The way Lotta speaks to this in the interview ideologically equips people to correctly understand, speak to, and take on this objection.

So, in this essay, I wanted to highlight what I thought were some really important points from how Lotta goes at the question of “history by memoir,” and also share some brief additional thoughts provoked and inspired by this section of the interview.

How do you determine the essence of an experience?

This system of capitalism-imperialism, the ways in which its economic and social relations pit people against each other in dog-eat-dog competition, and the ethos, morality, ideas, and culture this produces, constantly train people to think, and to evaluate everything, in terms of the *individual*, and in terms of *individual/personal* experience. Individual accounts and “narratives” are held up as the ultimate yardstick to measure what is true, and what is right: “What are things like—or what *were* they like—for *me*?”

When you combine this pervasive individualism with the non-stop barrage of cartoon-like attacks on communism and the experience of the communist revolution put forth by this system’s ruling class, media, and educational system, and its advocates and representatives in different quarters—attacks that are, at this point, uncritically swallowed and repeated by the vast majority of people in society, including many progressives who should know better—you get a situation in which individual memoirs and accounts from people about how “horrible” communism supposedly was are both accepted at face value, no questions asked, and also treated as the “be-all, end-all,” the final word on the communist revolution and the experience of past socialist societies. This shit

gets over on people, and I think it is a significant part of shaping what people *think* they know—but in fact do **not** know—about the communist revolution.

This is why I think what Lotta speaks to in the “What’s Wrong with ‘History by Memoir’?” section of the interview is so important: With some exceptions, looking at memoirs is **not**, in fact, a good way to determine the **main character and essence** of a rich and complex experience that involved and impacted **hundreds of millions of people** and **radically changed society** as a whole and in so many different particular spheres, or to evaluate the various social and class forces, programs and outlooks in contention. This is a methodological point that not only applies to the communist revolution, but in fact to the question of how *any* major social experience should be evaluated. Lotta cites an example in the interview: “You know, I was reading a discussion on memoir literature by an historian of the Soviet revolution. He made the point that you would never attempt to understand a major event like the French Revolution through personal stories... you know, the telling of ‘here’s what I went through,’ or ‘what I heard,’ etc.”

And there are many other examples you could think of as well. Would you seek to evaluate the U.S. Civil War—its causes, its effects, its principal character—by looking at *individual accounts* from people involved in or impacted by the Civil War, or who lived at the time of the Civil War? Or, would you look at the broader, overall social and historical context and experience of the Civil War, asking some basic questions like: What did it mean that millions of Black people were brutally enslaved for centuries prior to the Civil War? And what did it mean that the Union side of the Civil War was seeking to, and—through emerging victorious in the War—in fact *did*, put an end to slavery?

As Lotta points to in the interview, it’s not that there is nothing to learn from some individual memoirs, and in fact there are some memoirs that *do* “capture and analyze the main lines and trends of the whole historical period the author lived through,” but: a) these are the exception, not the rule, and b) in an overall sense and as a methodological point, looking at individual personal

accounts is not a good way to evaluate broad, rich and complex historical experience.

Given the vicious and ludicrous anti-communist ideological assault that I mentioned earlier in this essay, and for reasons I will speak briefly to a bit further on, nobody should simply accept personal accounts of “horrors” experienced under communism at face value. In other words, some negative personal accounts—to be frank—are just going to be straight-up lies and bullshit in which people are wildly distorting experiences and events with the conscious aim and agenda of slandering communism and the past experience of the socialist revolution. But the methodological points Lotta emphasizes in the interview apply even in instances in which personal accounts of unjust persecution *are*, or may be, at least partly accurate. To illustrate this point, let’s look at a more recent example—the L.A. Rebellion of 1992. Obviously, to be clear, the L.A. Rebellion was *not* part of the past experience of communist revolution! But there are still many important lessons to be drawn from this experience, including in relation to the subject of this essay.

For those who don’t know the history of the L.A. Rebellion: In 1991, the LAPD was caught on videotape viciously and mercilessly beating Rodney King, a Black man whom they had pulled over and who was handcuffed as they were beating him. And in 1992, despite this videotape, the four white officers charged with beating King were found “not guilty.” This shit was **just too much to take** for many, many people in, and well beyond, Los Angeles, particularly masses of Black people and those most brutally oppressed every day by this system, for whom the beating of King and subsequent acquittal of the officers was a concentration of the brutality and injustice that the police and the system as a whole heap upon them over and over and over again and who, after learning that the beating was videotaped, felt that this time they would **finally** get justice, only to have those hopes crushed and mocked. The masses in L.A. rose up in rebellion in response to the verdict, an event that inspired people in this country and all over the world who experienced, or had a deep hatred for, oppression and

injustice. It forced people to confront, on a huge, societal scale, what the police and what this system do to Black people. It led those brutally beaten down under this system to raise their heads and fight back, to think about big questions and relate to one another differently.

In the midst of this rebellion, a white truck driver named Reginald Denny, who just happened to be passing through the area where the rebellion was taking place, was beaten. This was not good, and should not have happened. Now, if my memory is correct, Denny actually ended up taking a good stand and, in spite of what had happened to him personally, expressed sympathy for the rebellion. **But let's say, hypothetically, that he hadn't.** Let's say that Denny wrote a personal account of his experience during the L.A. Rebellion, using what happened to him to say how horrible this rebellion was. And let's even say for the sake of argument that his description of what happened to him personally was accurate. And let's say that he told this story divorced from the context of everything described in the previous paragraph about the situation for Black people in the U.S., the causes, effects, and circumstances of the L.A. Rebellion, and everything that this represented and concentrated. **What kind of picture of the L.A. Rebellion would one get from such an account?!** And which would actually be the correct way to arrive at an understanding of the main character and essence of the L.A. Rebellion: looking at everything that is outlined in the previous paragraph, and **on that basis** identifying and learning from individual experiences and excesses such as what happened to Denny? Or to approach Denny's experience in isolation and arrive at the conclusion: "I heard that a truck driver was unfairly beaten in the LA. Rebellion. Therefore, the rebellion must have been a horror."

Applying this overall point of method to the specific question of how one evaluates the experience of the communist revolution and the socialist societies it brought into being: Should one do this by looking at individual personal accounts of excesses, or supposed excesses, or unjust suffering—even if *some* of these accounts might even be true, or partly true, and important to learn from?

Or by looking at the totality of the experience, its principal character and objectives—the degree to which these societies were moving towards, and guided by the goal of, overcoming all exploitation and oppression; the degree to which people’s basic human needs were being met; the steps these societies took to overcome the horrors of the old societies out of which they emerged; the radical positive transformations that were made in education, health care, employment, the status of women and oppressed nationalities, in art and culture, just to name a few spheres of society; the degree to which the thinking and relations of people, and whole sections of people, changed radically and for the better; the steps that were taken to overcome divisions and inequalities between people; the way these societies related to, and inspired, people all over the world; the degree to which life dramatically improved for literally hundreds of millions of people?

Personal Accounts of “Horrors Under Communism” Should Not be Taken at Face Value!

In addition to speaking to the critical methodological points that Raymond Lotta raises in the interview about the correct means to evaluate the experience of the communist revolution, and broad social and historical experience more generally, I also wanted to briefly raise a few other points and questions that I think are very important in relation to this topic:

“Where, when, and what are you talking about?”

Whenever anyone says that they read, or heard, accounts from people “who lived in communist countries and said it was terrible,” one of the first questions that needs to be asked is: “*Which country, and which time period, are you talking about?*” One major element of the anti-communist ideological assault discussed earlier in this essay is that people’s sense of what socialism and communism even are, and which countries are or were genuine socialist countries, and when,

has been completely warped and distorted! So, it is quite possible that when people reference “horror stories” that they heard about communism, they are actually talking about societies that are/were **the furthest thing from socialist or communist**, such as North Korea, countries in Eastern Europe that used to be part of the “Soviet bloc” after the Soviet Union became thoroughly capitalist, countries in Latin or South America, or perhaps even Scandinavian countries. In addition, many people do not even realize that China and the Soviet Union have now been *capitalist* countries for decades! So, it is also quite possible that they are referring to China and Russia **after** these societies became capitalist countries!

So again, I think it is important to find out what countries and time periods people are referring to, both to continue to learn about people’s thinking about communism and what is shaping that thinking, but also—very critically—in order to set the record straight about what genuine socialism and communism *actually are* and what we are talking about when we talk about the communist revolution.

The next few points and questions I want to raise relate to “horror stories” that people tell, or repeat, in relation to Russia and China when they *were* genuinely socialist countries....

Consider the source

Two other basic questions I think need to be raised and explored when someone says—or references someone else saying—that they experienced horrors under communism: *Who* is saying that their experience in these societies was a nightmare, and *what* are they saying was horrible about it?

Now, I think it is very important to understand and approach this correctly, because there is a right way to understand and apply that point, and a *very wrong* way to understand and apply it. Whether or not something is true does **not** depend on the class background of the person saying it. This understanding is

one of the critical breakthroughs—one of the critical ruptures with the past experience of the communist revolution—that BA has made in forging the new synthesis of communism. In other words: The point is **not** that if someone who comes from privileged sections of society says that something happened to him or her in socialist societies, then he or she must be lying, or must have been hostile to the revolution, or that his or her experience is unimportant or simply representative of that person’s individual or class “narrative.” Similarly, if someone comes from the oppressed and exploited sections of society, this does not mean that what he or she is saying must be true, or must be representative of the interests of the proletarian revolution, or simply a reflection of *that* person’s individual or class narrative. There is *one reality*, **not** several different realities for different classes or billions of different realities for different individuals. Here, I would refer people to the points made in the essay in this [Appendix](#), “But How Do We Know Who’s Telling the Truth About Communism?” on why it is critical to take a scientific approach to all of reality, including the experience of the communist revolution, in order to determine what is true.

So, the point of saying “consider the source” is **not** that one should determine what’s true based on the source. The point is that you can’t look at these memoirs and personal accounts in a vacuum, or simply accept them at face value, without questioning and exploring who is saying his or her experience was terrible and what they are saying was terrible about it.

Let’s take the example of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) in China (1966–1976) which—as is pointed out in the interview—is one of the most vilified periods in the entire history of the communist revolution. As Lotta discusses in the interview, the GPCR was a society-wide struggle in China between the socialist and capitalist roads, a real revolution launched by Mao after he recognized that the persistence in socialist society of class divisions, inequalities, and the ideas that went along with this—if not overcome—posed the danger for capitalism to be restored in China, and after he recognized that the core of those fighting to restore capitalism in China were within the Communist

Party. To take just two examples of key things that happened in the course of this major social upheaval involving tens of millions of people: 1) The masses, with revolutionary leadership, identified, criticized, called out, struggled against, and in many cases overthrew Party leaders who were taking the capitalist road. 2) The educational system was totally changed. As Lotta describes it in the interview: “The old teaching methods, where students are just passive receptacles of knowledge and are driven to grub for grades, and the teachers are absolute authorities—that was challenged, very sharply. Instead, the critical spirit was fostered. Study was combined with productive activity. The elite admissions policies into the universities that gave sons and daughters of Party members and professionals kind of a special track... these were overhauled.”

What do we imagine capitalist-roaders who were overthrown in the course of the GPCR—or those who were sharply criticized and struggled against yet persisted on the capitalist road... or teachers who were determined to hold absolute authority over students and did not like having this authority challenged... or students whose special educational privileges as party members and professionals were overhauled... might have to say about the GPCR, and about their overall experience in socialist society? Would it be surprising if they had very negative things to say? And would these accounts be a good yardstick to use in evaluating the *essence, nature, and overall* experience of the revolutionary societies of which they were a part?

Or, to take another example: Let’s think about people who, prior to the Russian and Chinese revolutions, were wealthy landlords or landowners who bitterly exploited and oppressed the masses, and whose land was taken away after these revolutions as part of massive redistribution of land to the formerly exploited and oppressed peasants. Same two questions: What do we imagine that these former exploiters might have to say about their experiences under socialism? And would these accounts be a good way to evaluate the *essence, nature, and overall* experience of the revolutionary societies of which they were a part?

Now, again, the point is not that negative personal accounts about experiences under socialism automatically fall under the heading of capitalist-roaders, former exploiters, or the elites complaining about their privileges being challenged or taken away... nor, very importantly, is the point that whether or not negative personal accounts are accurate, or worthy of consideration, depends on the class background of the person providing these accounts. And neither is the point that there were not problems, errors, and shortcomings in the past experience of socialism; as discussed in the interview, there *were*—including in relation to how intellectuals and their role in society was understood and approached, and Bob Avakian has deeply analyzed, learned from, and ruptured with these errors and shortcomings as part of forging the new synthesis of communism that allows humanity to do even better in the next wave of communist revolution.

But the idea that personal accounts from people who lived in socialist societies and say their experiences were terrible should be uncritically accepted as true, portrayed as representative of the essence of these societies, or approached in complete isolation from the social context in which these experiences occurred... the notion that the existence of these memoirs somehow constitutes evidence that previous socialist societies have been a horror... is ridiculous!

Why Are Certain Memoirs and Personal Accounts Actively Promoted While Others Are NOT?

The following are just two of many excerpts that could be cited from personal accounts of people who grew up in socialist China and have **very positive** things to say about their experiences:

I am very grateful that I grew up in an extremely special moment in Chinese history. The dominant ideology was that women hold up half the sky; what men can do, women can do. Those may sound now as hollow slogans; but I lived

through that period really believing in myself, in my ability in bringing about changes in my own life and the lives of other people.

*Bai Di, from “[Bai Di: Growing Up in Revolutionary China](#),”
an interview with Li Onesto*

Before the Cultural Revolution, we were only doing farming. During the Cultural Revolution years, the high school graduates helped diversify our village economy. We had a forest team composed of high school graduates. They planted many different kinds of fruit trees, pepper trees, as well as other trees. And we also built a factory. And there were 175 people working in that factory. In China today, rural young people have to leave the village to find jobs in the cities. But during the Cultural Revolution years we didn't need to go anywhere. We were not anybody else's slaves. We worked for our own future. And the 175 people working in the factory were able to generate an income for the collective, which greatly improved farmers' livelihoods.

Dongping Han, from “[Dongping Han: The Unknown Cultural Revolution](#)”

People should ask themselves: Why is it that I have *not* heard *these* accounts, and others like them, but I *have* heard accounts from people saying communism was a “nightmare”?

It's not an accident. After Mao died and Deng Xiaoping came to power in China and brought capitalism back, he launched a very conscious, vicious and massive ideological attack on the Cultural Revolution. Here is how Wang Zheng, a professor of women's studies at the University of Michigan who grew up during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, described this:

‘Thoroughly negate the Cultural Revolution’ was a scheme by Deng Xiaoping to pave the way for his dismantling of socialism while consolidating political power. It was a way to whitewash or shift attention from his and his associates' crimes.

From “[Wang Zheng: ‘We had a dream that the world can be better than today’](#)”

But it's not just a question of what gets promoted within China. The rulers of and advocates for this capitalist-imperialist system—certainly including the ruling class and major media and educational system of the United States—which causes one horror after another after another for humanity, have **every interest** in promoting the idea that any attempts to bring a radically different world into being were, and could only be, a nightmare! On this point, I would highly recommend that people read, or re-read, “No Wonder They Slander Communism,” an excerpt from *What Humanity Needs: Revolution, and the New Synthesis of Communism, an interview with Bob Avakian by A. Brooks*. In this excerpt, Avakian brilliantly exposes and demystifies the barrage of slanders and ideological attacks on communism that are launched by the rulers of this system and its mouthpieces and advocates and then parroted by far, far too many people. People should really study both the content and method of this excerpt and keep returning to and struggling for the points Avakian makes there.

All This Highlights What a Huge Breakthrough BA's New Synthesis of Communism Is

To the degree that there were secondary problems and errors in the past experience of the communist revolution—and there were—BA's new synthesis of communism provides the framework for correctly identifying, understanding, and rupturing with these errors and shortcomings and doing better in the next wave of communist revolution.

After capitalism was restored in China following the death of Mao in 1976, causing great demoralization and disorientation for communists and others all over the world who had been inspired by revolutionary China, BA did the work—decades of work—to exhaustively and critically analyze the past experience, in theory and practice, of the communist revolution and the previous socialist societies it brought into being, synthesizing the lessons of what *actually* happened in the course of this experience and how this experience should

actually be understood and evaluated scientifically. On that basis, along with drawing from many diverse fields of human endeavor, BA developed a new synthesis of communism that stands on the shoulders of the first wave of communist revolution and upholds the experience of that first wave as principally and overwhelmingly positive and emancipatory, while also identifying and rupturing with secondary shortcomings and errors in that experience and areas where humanity needs to do better in the next wave of communist revolution.

For a much fuller discussion of these points, I really want to emphasize and refer people to Lotta's discussion—in [Chapter 5](#) of the interview—of BA's new synthesis of communism and the possibility it opens up for humanity.

And I want to close by quoting two excerpts from that section of the interview to illustrate some of the points made above.

The first excerpt is the one towards the end of the interview in which Lotta discusses the importance of, and then quotes, a point made by Avakian in *What Humanity Needs*:

Avakian identifies the great challenge, in an interview from 2012 entitled *What Humanity Needs: Revolution, and the New Synthesis of Communism*, where he poses a critical question that arises out of the first stage of communist revolution... and that the new synthesis has broken through on:

“How do you give the correct and necessary priority to the fundamental needs of the masses of people in society—especially those whose needs have been trampled under the old exploitative system, economically, socially, and politically and culturally—while at the same time not undermining the necessary intellectual and cultural ferment, creativity, and even dissent that's essential in order to have the kind of process in society where both the masses of people as a whole, and also the leadership of the party and the government, is learning from this whole process, including the criticisms that are raised and the

unconventional ideas that find expression in intellectual endeavor, and in the field of the arts, and so on—so that you have a richer process?”

That’s a huge breakthrough, part of a larger breakthrough based on deep study and wrangling which is—the new synthesis—which provides a real basis for hope on a solid scientific foundation.

And the second excerpt, with which I want to conclude this essay, is the very last paragraph in the interview with Lotta:

It all comes back to this: the world urgently cries out for radical change, for revolution. And correctly grasping the REAL character, the liberatory character, of the first stage of the communist revolution AND immersing oneself in the contributions of Bob Avakian in summing up that stage and providing direction for a new, even greater one is critical and necessary... to continue on and to make leaps in the journey out of that “darkness” of class society. It’s about the need and basis for a world in which human beings can truly flourish. And it’s about all of us rising to the great need before us: taking up this science and using it to transform the reality humanity faces.

Special Feature: Illustrated Timeline—The REAL History of Communist Revolution

The short-lived Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian revolution of 1917–1956, and the Chinese revolution of 1949–1976 were titanic risings of the modern-day “slaves” of society against their “masters.” Against incredible odds and obstacles, and in what amounts to a nanosecond of human history, these revolutions accomplished amazing things—and they changed the course of human history. For the first time, the long dark night of humanity—the period when society has been divided into exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed—was broken through. A whole new form of society began to be forged.



Fig. 1. Drawing of Karl Marx, author of the *Communist Manifesto*, being arrested in Brussels, Belgium, 1848.

The Communist Manifesto

Early to mid-1800s

Capitalism became dominant in Europe and brought tumultuous political, economic, and social change. Bourgeois (capitalist)-led revolutions rattled the old order only to replace it with new forms of exploitation and oppression. From Britain to Russia, tens of millions of laborers were violently driven from the countryside into rapidly expanding cities. Death among workers from cholera

and other diseases was widespread. A million Russians died in the cholera epidemic in 1847–1851. It was common for children—often orphans—to work in factories 12-14 hours a day.

1848

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels released the *Communist Manifesto*. It revealed for the first time that “the existence of classes is only bound up with particular historical phases” of human development. Another, far better world was possible for all humanity. The *Communist Manifesto* called on workers of all countries to overthrow capitalism and establish socialist societies with the goal of a world without classes.



Fig. 2. Revolutionary fighters at the barricades defend the Paris Commune, 1871.

The Paris Commune

1871

In March, workers and lower-middle-class and other sections of the population in Paris, France, rose up against the capitalist regime. The French army was driven out of the city. Revolutionaries established the Paris Commune. The Commune separated church and state. Workers seized and ran factories abandoned by capitalists. The Commune aimed to empower the whole population in running society. Women played an important and heroic role in the

uprising and brief development of the Commune.

The old regime regrouped its military forces and launched a savage assault on the Commune. The Commune was drowned in blood, and the message from the old regime was clear: never again will have-nots rise up, never will socialism and communism come to power.

The Commune announced to the world that the oppressed and exploited were taking the historical stage to scale the heights of human emancipation. Marx enthusiastically supported the Commune. He saw it as an historic first attempt to bring about a new form of class rule and a new mode of governance—the beginning outlines of the dictatorship of the proletariat. But he also pointed out that one of the Commune's fatal weaknesses was that it did not move decisively to thoroughly shatter and dismantle the old state machinery, concentrated in the permanent army of the old regime. To establish a whole new economic and social system, you have to create a new state power that can enforce the will of the formerly oppressed and exploited.



Fig. 3. V.I. Lenin, leader of the Russian revolution.

The World's First Socialist State

1914

With the outbreak of World War 1 in 1914, workers, peasants, and others were sent to the front lines to slaughter each other in a war fought by blocs headed by Germany on the one side, and by Great Britain and the U.S. coming in later on the other. This was an imperialist war for global supremacy, and particularly for control over the oppressed colonial regions of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Some 10 million soldiers died in that war.

The Russian communist leader V.I. Lenin fought to uphold and learn from the inspiring experience of the Paris Commune, from both its strengths and its

weaknesses. He identified the need for, and forged a vanguard communist party—known as the Bolsheviks. Lenin and the Bolsheviks stood out from all major parties in Europe for going up against “rally around the flag” patriotism that swept up sections of the masses in the imperialist countries to support and fight the war.

1917

Lenin called World War 1 an imperialist, “predatory, plunderous” war. People in Russia suffered terribly under the autocratic tyranny of the Tsar (emperor). It was an imperialist country but the vast majority of people were desperately poor peasants. In October 1917, Lenin and the Bolsheviks led a mass armed insurrection that swept the old regime from power. The revolutionary uprising was based at first among workers in Russia’s major cities, and then swept into the countryside, uniting especially with the poorest and most oppressed among the peasants.



Fig. 4. Bolshevik soldiers during the insurrection in Petrograd, Russia, 1917.

Capitalists Attack the New Society

1917–1921

The new revolutionary government immediately issued two stunning decrees. The first took Russia out of the war and called for an end to the slaughter and for peace without conquest or annexation. The second decree empowered peasants to seize the vast landholdings of the Tsar, the aristocratic landholding classes, and the church (a large landowner).

A new world was in birth—for the first time since the emergence of class society, a society was not organized around exploitation. The Bolshevik revolution reverberated and inspired the oppressed around the world. Revolutionaries worldwide forged communist vanguard parties. The Soviet Union was attacked furiously by capitalist-imperialist powers—with slanders

and guns. Fourteen foreign countries invaded to crush the revolution, and they allied with reactionary defenders of the old order in Russia.

Devastating civil war raged for three years. The “Red” Soviet forces fought heroically against “White” counter-revolutionary forces. By 1921, revolutionary rule was established throughout the Soviet Union.



Fig. 5. New collective farms, like the one pictured here, transformed the old, private exploitative system of agriculture that could not reliably feed the population. Collectivization in the late 1920s and early 1930s was also a great social upheaval that challenged old customs and brought the poorest of peasants into political life.

Soviet Socialist Economy

1920s–1930s

Lenin led the Soviet Union until his death in 1924. After Lenin’s death, Joseph Stalin, a great revolutionary, led the Soviet people to build a socialist society and economy. In 1928, the Soviet Union launched the first “Five-Year Plan.” Millions of workers and peasants were fired with the spirit of “we are building a new world.” In factories and villages, people discussed plans: how to reorganize production and the difference it would make for their lives—and for people of the world—that such an economy was being built. People volunteered to help build railroads in wilderness areas. Workers voluntarily worked long shifts. At

steel mills, they sang revolutionary songs on the way to work. Never before in history had there been such a mobilization of people to consciously achieve planned economic and social aims.

All this was in extreme contrast to the capitalist world wracked by the Great Depression. The unemployment rate in the U.S. was 24 percent in 1933. In the Soviet Union, there was essentially full employment and the Communist Party mobilized society to meet critical needs.



Fig. 6. Peasants on a collective farm discuss spring sowing, Uzbekistan, 1930s.

From Prison House of Nations to Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

1920s–mid-1930s

Pre-revolutionary Russia had been an empire—known as the “prison house of nations.” The dominant Russian nation had colonized areas and regions of Central Asia (for instance, Uzbekistan), and also had subordinated more developed areas such as Ukraine. Non-Russian nationalities made up about 45 percent of the population, but minority cultures were forcibly suppressed and their languages couldn’t be taught or spoken in schools. Jewish people were periodically subjected to lynch-mob-like anti-Semitic “pogroms.”

After the victory of the 1917 revolution, most of these nations and nationalities would become united in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Resources were

dedicated to raising the living standards for Central Asian nationalities, and promoting their previously suppressed and dismissed cultures. The educational system, media, and cultural institutions raised consciousness about conditions of oppressed peoples and combated prejudice. The new state officially outlawed anti-Semitism.



Fig. 7. Woman in Uzbekistan wearing oppressive head covering.



Fig. 8. Young Uzbeki woman after liberation, 1930s.

Women's Liberation in the Soviet Union

1920s–mid-1930s

In the first 10 years of the Bolshevik revolution, a vast social revolution transformed Soviet society. Men no longer had absolute patriarchal authority under the law over wives and children. Women received equal pay. Maternity care was provided free. The Soviet Union was the first country in modern Europe to make abortion legal. All these changes were momentous in their own right, but were part of a bigger vision and mission to build a new world free of all exploitation and oppression.

A major focus of socialist transformation in the Soviet Union was the liberation of women. One high point: on International Women's Day, 1927, the Communist Party launched a movement to overthrow deeply rooted, brutally oppressive traditions imposed on women in the Central Asian Soviet republics, including marrying young girls to old men, and men having multiple wives. In Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan, women were backed by the revolutionary state to cast off heavy head-to-toe coverings of horsehair and cotton that Muslim women and girls over the age of 9 or 10 were forced to wear in the presence of men outside their families.



Fig. 9. Soviet soldiers defending Stalingrad against Nazis, 1943.

World War 2 and the Soviet Union

1933–1938

Hitler and the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933. By the late 1930s, the Soviet Union was in the crosshairs of the powerful German imperialist military, which was driven to crush and dominate the Soviet Union. The new socialist society faced an extremely dire situation.

1939–1945

In 1939 World War 2 broke out between two blocs of imperialist powers that sought to violently re-divide the world. Contending blocs were headed by Japan and Germany on the one side, and the U.S. and Britain on the other.

The Soviet Union defeated invading German troops at the epic Battle of Stalingrad in 1943. Some 26 million Soviet citizens lost their lives in World War 2. The Soviet Union was victorious but suffered great devastation.

1956

After Stalin's death in 1953, new bourgeois (capitalist-imperialist) forces within the Communist Party maneuvered to seize power. In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev, a high official in the party and government, consolidated the rule of a new capitalist class and led in systematically restructuring the Soviet Union into a capitalist society, while calling itself socialist. This was the end of the first proletarian state.

Communists worldwide were confronted with the necessity to sum up, learn from, and advance off this experience. This great challenge was taken up by Mao Zedong, leader of the Chinese Revolution.



Fig. 10. People line up for food, China, 1909. Starvation was common in China before the revolution.

China Before the Revolution

Before the 1949 revolution, major capitalist powers had carved up and dominated China economically and militarily. The great majority of Chinese people were destitute peasants, subjected to the cruel and arbitrary rule of all-powerful landowners. With frequent famines and savage exploitation, peasants often faced starvation and sometimes ended up selling their children so that others in the family could survive. Women were subjected to wife-beating, arranged marriages, forced prostitution, and foot binding where young girls' feet were brutally wrapped and bent to keep them small and "attractive" to men. The situation in the cities was desperate. In Shanghai before World War 2, 25,000

dead bodies were collected from streets each year. In a country of 500 million people, only 12,000 doctors were trained in Western medicine. Four million people died each year from infectious and parasitic diseases. Life expectancy was 32 years. There were 60 million drug addicts.

This is the situation in which people made revolution.



Fig. 11. Mao in Yen-an, 1944.

Chinese Revolution Triumphs

1921

Mao Zedong helped found the Chinese Communist Party—the vanguard leadership for the Chinese revolution.

1934

Mao led 100,000 Red Army fighters and communist organizers on the Long March—a 6,000-mile dangerous trek through swampland and mountains to

regroup and reorganize from massive repression and to spread the revolution. They fought warlord and reactionary armies. Only 10,000 people made it to the end of the march, at Yen-an in northwest China, but the revolution was able to go forward. Mao, now the clear leader of the Chinese Communist Party, forged and applied a path to seizing nationwide power and establishing socialism—a path that included the military strategy of protracted people's war.

1937–1945

In 1939, World War 2 broke out. In 1937, the Japanese had invaded and occupied large parts of China. In the context of this, and with their eyes on the prize of seizing nationwide power, Mao and the Communist Party led the war against the Japanese occupation. The Japanese forces were defeated in 1945. Immediately, civil war broke out between the communist-led forces and the reactionary forces of the Guomindang, backed by the U.S. imperialists. After four years of intense combat, the Chinese revolution triumphed in 1949.



Fig. 12. New land reform law of 1950 is read out loud to peasants.

New State Power in China

1949–1957

The Chinese revolution established a new state power, a form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the heart of which was the alliance of workers and peasants. This new state power protected the rights of the people, suppressed counter-revolution, and made it possible to carry out the all-round transformation of society and to support world revolution. In the cities and rural areas, new institutions were established at every level of society, led by the Communist Party, and involved millions and millions of the formerly exploited in taking initiative to transform and administer society.

With state power, land reform was carried out as a revolutionary mass movement. A new marriage law gave women the right to divorce. Mass health

and educational campaigns were launched and widespread opium addiction was eradicated.



Fig. 13. Canteen in a people's commune, during the Great Leap Forward, 1959.

Great Leap Forward

1958–1960

The Great Leap Forward was launched in socialist China. Communes in the countryside brought together tens and tens of millions of peasants to collectively work the land. Beyond that, the communes combined economic, political, administrative, militia, and social activity.

People's energy and creativity were mobilized and unleashed. Communes worked to reclaim land, to plant trees, construct roads, and build irrigation

projects and flood-works projects. Use of tractors and machinery became more rational because land was collectively owned. Small-scale industries were developed, such as fertilizer and cement factories and small hydroelectric plants. Peasants began to master technology and scientific knowledge. In these and other ways, gaps between the city and countryside, peasants and workers, and mental and manual labor were reduced.

The communes have been blamed for a major famine in 1959–60. But the reality is that the communes did not cause this famine. And by 1970, due in large part to the changes made possible by the People's Communes, China had solved its ages-long hunger problem. This was because the communes and whole socialist economy established a reliable system of food production and of food supply for the people for the first time in Chinese history.

Women's oppression was challenged. Communal kitchens, dining rooms and nurseries allowed women to enter the battle to create a new society. Old habits and values that still persisted, such as superstition and fatalism, were struggled against, as were feudal customs, such as arranged marriage.

Communes were a leap in the masses' direct participation in all spheres of society and in changing relations between and among the people.



Fig. 14. Red Guard Youth During the Cultural Revolution.

Mao Launches the Cultural Revolution

1966

In part based on summing up the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, Mao saw that the Communist Party could be turned into an instrument of a new exploiting class. And in fact, there was sharp struggle in the leadership of the Communist Party between a core of revolutionaries led by Mao and, on the other hand, certain top leaders in the Party and state—“capitalist-roaders”—who had been gaining strength and were working to overthrow socialism and bring back capitalism.

To deal with this, Mao and the revolutionary core launched the Great Proletarian

Cultural Revolution in 1966. The Cultural Revolution marked a breakthrough in dealing with a world-historic problem of communist revolution—preventing counter-revolution but in a way that enables the masses to play the decisive, conscious role in changing society and changing themselves: not a top-down removal of capitalist-roaders. Through mass political and ideological struggle led by the revolutionary core of the Party, masses played a decisive role in politically striking down the bourgeois power centers within the Communist Party. The Cultural Revolution was about revolutionizing all of society and transforming people's thinking and values.



Fig. 15. People putting up “Big Character Posters” during the Cultural Revolution.

Seizing Back Political Power

1966–1969

Young revolutionary activists, the Red Guards, played a key role in initiating and spreading the Cultural Revolution. This struggle was full of invention and innovation: street rallies, protests, strikes, and demonstrations. “Big character posters” went up all over the country. These included large-type protest posters plastered everywhere, where people criticized policies and leaders. Public facilities were made available for meetings and debates. Small newspapers flourished. In Beijing alone, there were 900 newspapers. The revolutionary state made available materials and facilities for mass political activity and debate.

1967–1968

The Cultural Revolution took a new turn. Forty million workers around the country engaged in intense and complicated mass struggles to seize power from entrenched conservative municipal party and city administrations. There were work stoppages, and sometimes struggles *not* to stop work.



Fig. 16. Street rally during the “January Storm” seizure of power back from capitalist-roaders, Shanghai, 1967.

Shanghai “January Storm”

1967

Shanghai, autumn 1966: some 700 organizations existed in the factories. Revolutionary forces mobilized and capitalist-roaders fought back, attempting to discredit the revolutionaries and buy people off with wage increases.

Revolutionary workers, with Maoist leadership, united broad sections of the

city's population. In January 1967, they broke the hold of the capitalist-roaders who were running the city. They seized the main municipal building, took over the communications hubs, and began organizing distribution of basic goods in the city. This was the Shanghai "January Storm."

People held mass discussions and mass debates about how to run the city and what political structures would best serve the goals of the revolution. They experimented with new institutions of citywide political governance.



Fig. 17. Scene from the revolutionary ballet, *The Red Detachment of Women*.

“Women Hold Up Half the Sky”

1966–1976

The struggle against women’s oppression was a big part of the “revolution within the revolution.” Mass campaigns launched during the Cultural Revolution criticized feudal Confucian and capitalist thinking that uphold exploitative, oppressive, and unequal divisions in society.

In contrast to today’s world culture, which degrades women as weak or as sex objects, during the Cultural Revolution model operas and ballets put the masses on stage front and center, with women as physically and ideologically strong

central characters. Popularized throughout the country, these works conveyed people's lives and their role in society and history.

Young women in their millions participated in the broad revolutionary struggle. Women and men mobilized to fight against women's oppression as part of building a new society. And in building socialism, women were unleashed to "hold up half the sky"—not only in the fight against their own oppression but in the struggle to transform and liberate all of society.



Fig. 18. Revolutionary art during the Cultural Revolution: one of the peasant paintings from Hu County shows how fish are gathered by net in the fish ponds of the commune.

Revolutionary Art

1966–1976

Before the Cultural Revolution, popular culture like Chinese opera was dominated by feudal and bourgeois themes and characters, and capitalist-roaders in the Party promoted this.

The Cultural Revolution ignited an explosion of artistic activity among workers and peasants—poetry, painting, music, short stories, even film. Mass art projects and new kinds of popular and collaborative artistic undertakings spread, including to the countryside and remote areas.

Teams of cultural workers were organized to travel to remote areas, carrying

bicycle-powered generators to show movies and work with peasants to create and perform plays and concerts. The vast majority of people—Chinese peasants—had never seen a movie or a play, or had a chance to participate in cultural activity on this level. Artists moved to the countryside, they lived and worked with—and learned from—the peasants, and in turn taught art to the peasants. In this way, not only was fresh and lively revolutionary culture created, but divisions between city and countryside and between laboring people and artists and intellectuals were being broken down.



Fig. 19. A young “barefoot doctor,” trained to provide basic preventive medicine and health care in the countryside, 1971.

“Socialist New Things”

1966–1976

Education was radically transformed during the Cultural Revolution. Rote “teaching to the test” style teaching methods were challenged, and a critical spirit was fostered in schools. Study was combined with productive activity. Admission policies made it possible for children of peasants and workers to enroll in the universities. Struggle was waged against the bourgeois-elitist idea

of using knowledge for competitive advantage over others, individual success, private gain, and prestige. Instead, knowledge was to be used in the service of the revolutionary struggle to remake society and the world for the benefit of humanity.

“Socialist new things” reflected and promoted new socialist relations and values. “Open door” research brought scientists to the countryside to conduct experiments among peasants. Scientists learned about peasants’ lives and from their questions and insights; peasants learned about the scientific method. Educational institutions and research institutes in cities developed cooperative relationships with factories, neighborhood committees, and other organizations. People came to laboratories and laboratories went to the people.

In what was called the “barefoot doctor movement,” educated urban youth and young peasants were trained to provide basic preventive medicine and health care. There were 1.3 million barefoot doctors who lived in the countryside and contributed to solving people’s basic health needs.



Fig. 20. Yichiao, commune member of Tai nationality, of poor peasant origin, reads from Mao's Red Book with her great-great-granddaughter, 1970.

Serve the People

1966–1976

In revolutionary China, artists, doctors, technical and scientific workers, and many other educated people were called upon to go among the workers and peasants: to apply their skills to the needs of society, to share the lives of the laboring people, and to learn from them. Great numbers of youths and professionals answered the Cultural Revolution's call to "serve the people" and

to go to the countryside and set examples for others.

Mao's Last Great Battle

1973–1976

Mao kept warning of the danger of capitalist restoration. The masses had state power under socialism, but the revolution had to continue. But socialism emerges with the scars of class society, and struggle must go on to overcome this—or else society will be dragged back to capitalism, as has happened today in China. The Cultural Revolution raged for 10 years, through complex twists and turns.

When Mao died in September 1976... that was the signal to the reactionaries within the Party. In October of that year, they staged a military coup. They immediately moved against the revolutionary core at the top levels of the Party and deployed troops in key parts of the country. There was resistance, but the suppression was quick and harsh, with large numbers of arrests and executions.

Socialism in China was defeated. The first stage of communist revolution came to an end.



Fig. 21. Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA.

Bob Avakian Brings Forward a New Synthesis of Communism

The defeat in China was a real turning point. There was confusion, shock, and disorientation among everyone in the world who had looked to China as an inspirational model. It was in these circumstances that Bob Avakian (BA), Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, rose to fill a great and historic need: to make an accounting both of what had happened in China and the responsibilities this placed on genuine revolutionaries.

BA brought scientific clarity to this crucial juncture and began to open up and chart the path to go forward. He defended the great accomplishments of Mao and the Chinese revolution, while digging deeply into the experience not only of China but of the whole first stage of communist revolution. He deeply explored and critically examined the first stage of communist revolution, indeed of the whole communist project. And in the more than three decades since the counter-revolution in China, Bob Avakian developed and brought forward a new synthesis of communism.

Because of Bob Avakian and the work he has done over several decades, summing up the positive and negative experience of the communist revolution so far, and drawing from a broad range of human experience, there is a new synthesis of communism that has been brought forward—there really is a viable vision and strategy for a radically new, and much better, society and world, and there is the crucial leadership that is needed to carry forward the struggle toward that goal.

About the Author

Raymond Lotta is an advocate for Bob Avakian's new synthesis of communism. He is a political economist, author of *America in Decline*, and writer for *Revolution*. He lectures widely and directs the "Set the Record Straight Project," which brings out the truth of the Soviet and Chinese revolutions and provides web resources.

Relevant Websites

For more resources about the real history and real lessons of communist revolutions, go to: The [Set the Record Straight](http://thisiscommunism.org) project, thisiscommunism.org; and [Setting the Record Straight on Socialism and Communism](http://revcom.us), revcom.us.

For more about Bob Avakian and the new synthesis of communism, go to revcom.us.

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