

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

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

Part 1: Introduction and Paris Commune

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. We thought it urgent that we answer the questions and tell the TRUTH 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, we 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.

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 directs the "Set the Record Straight Project," which brings out the truth of the Soviet and Chinese revolutions and provides web resources.

Question: What exactly are you referring to when you say the "first stage" of communist revolution?

RL: 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. For the first time the long dark night 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.

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 (online at revcom.us/i/quiz.pdf).

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.

Question: But people say that Lenin and Mao just took power for a small group.¹ How do you answer that charge?

RL: Lenin in 1917 in Russia, and then Mao 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.² 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.

The First Dawn—The Paris Commune

Question: Could you say more about the Paris Commune?

RL: 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.

In March 1871, workers and lower-middle-class and other sections of the population rose up in Paris against the old regime. They drove the French army out of the city and established the Paris Commune. The Commune separated church and state, workers seized factories abandoned by the capitalists and ran them, while setting out to empower the whole population in running society. Women played an incredibly important and heroic role in the uprising and brief development of the Commune.



The Paris Commune announced to the world that the oppressed and exploited were taking the historical stage to scale the heights of human emancipation. However, within two months, the old regime regrouped its military forces and launched a savage assault on the Commune, which was drowned in blood. Karl Marx, who first developed the theory of communism in 1848 along with Frederick Engels, supported the Commune and drew critical lessons from it, including that taking hold of the old state system that served the old order isn't enough; the old state must be dismantled and replaced with a radically new and different state power.

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: Well, 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 really overthrown the old exploiting order. 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 Communards had this idea that they could just take over the old political system...take over the *existing* structures, modify them, and put them to progressive use. And they thought 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.

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 one of its fatal weaknesses, and one of the key lessons for future revolutions, is that it is not enough *to just lay hold* of the old system's political machinery. Marx summed up 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. The lesson of the Commune was that the capitalist state power *has to be 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.

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 counterrevolution 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.

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 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! (Go [here](#) for more on the need for vanguard leadership.)

Part 2: 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.

Revolutionary Russian soldiers firing on Petrograd police headquarters during the early days of the February 1917 revolution that overthrew the Tsarist monarchy.

RL: 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 among the imperialist great powers—England, France, Germany, the U.S., and, of course, Russia! 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...20 million people died, and another 21 million were wounded.

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.

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 Czar 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 Czar was overthrown.

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 grass-roots 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

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. (Go [here](#) for more on the international impact of Bolshevik Revolution.)

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 counterrevolutionary assault against the new regime. 14 foreign powers, including the U.S., intervened with troops and military assistance to support the counterrevolution. 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 counterrevolutionary forces. Think about that.

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

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.



On International Women's Day in 1927 in the Soviet Union, the Communist Party launched a movement to overthrow deep 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, the revolutionary state backed Muslim women to cast off heavy head-to-toe coverings of horsehair and cotton that women and girls over the age of nine or 10 were forced to wear in the presence of unrelated men.

A major focus of socialist transformation in the Soviet Union was the liberation of women. Men were legally stripped of their authority over wives and girl children, women received equal pay, and maternity care was provided for free. The Soviet Union was the first country in modern Europe to make abortion legal. All of these changes were momentous in their own right, but they were part of a bigger vision and mission to build a "new world" free of all exploitation and oppression.

(Photo taken by Langston Hughes)

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. 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.³ 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 were the practices of arranged marriages that still persisted, 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 woman 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.

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 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. Eventually a union of republics and autonomous regions was established. That's why you have this Soviet Union...the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. 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. 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 alphabets. 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 in the U.S. right now? "English only"! 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.

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 been 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.

This spirit of combating national oppression 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.

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. 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 Dovzhenko⁴ ...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.



The revolutionary uprising in Russia was based at first among the workers in the country's major cities, and then swept into the countryside, uniting especially with the poorest and most oppressed among the peasantry. Here, peasants on a collective farm in the Soviet Union in 1930 read in the midst of a campaign to banish illiteracy among peasants. The Soviet government sent millions of books, newspapers, and magazines to villages across the country.

You know, I heard the curator of a recent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art dealing with early 20th century abstract artistic movement. 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.

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. 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.

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.

There were food shortages in the cities, especially with the urban population growing. Land had been redistributed to peasants after the seizure of power. 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. Social polarization between the kulaks and the poor peasantry was increasing.

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.

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, writing about this in the 1950s, while recognizing the tremendous and unprecedented character of the Soviet collectivization, at the same time 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, and this put unnecessary pressure on peasants and led to resentment.

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. Like 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—how to move forward and out of private agriculture at a time when the Soviet Union was facing international encirclement. But the approach was a bit mechanical—as I said, 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.⁵ 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, again 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 this to overcoming these contradictions, but it was seen as a secondary task in relation to creating a more modern industrial-agricultural foundation.

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 Rumania, 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), 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 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 you had concessions made 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 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 that to justify these errors in the least—I'm saying that 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 gulags and executions? When you say Stalin, this is probably the first thing people start talking about.⁶

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.⁷ 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 anticommunist 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. If you take the worst-case suppositions, and I'm not arguing for them, but even if you take the most exaggerated and even invented figures and instances...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. 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.

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.*

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 counterrevolution 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 a profoundly different way in the Chinese Revolution of handling these contradictions, and the different kinds of struggle they give rise to. 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 BA 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 is 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.

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 into 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.

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.

The Soviets fought with incredible heroism. 26 million Soviets 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, Khrushchev 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. 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.

Part 3: 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?

RL: 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.

A Revolution Is Born

Question: So where does 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.



In 1940, Mao Zedong and the communists rallied and led the struggle against the Japanese occupation as part of the fight for national and social liberation. In 1945, the Japanese forces were defeated. Following that victory, civil war broke out between the Communist-led forces and those of the Guomindang government (who were equipped and financed by the U.S. imperialists). After four years of intense combat, the Chinese revolution triumphed in 1949.

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.

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. 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.

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 it that 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.

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-year 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.

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. 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. 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 to 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. 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.

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. 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 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.

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. 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.

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 joined the Communist Party basically for nationalist reasons. China had been humiliated by foreign powers; its 1911 revolution had failed to overcome the country's backwardness and dependency. They saw revolution as a vehicle to turn China into a modern, industrial power. They came to the opposite conclusion as Mao: for them, the political-social revolution essentially *ended* in 1949. The task now, as they saw it, was mainly economic modernization.

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. 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.

Mao 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 Mao saw the need for a more radical, dynamic, and participatory system of planning. 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, as Bob Avakian has put it, against *two legacies*. 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, and actually new understanding of what communism is. But at this time in the early 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.

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.

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.

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.

1958-1960. The Great Leap Forward was launched in socialist China. Communes were established in the countryside that brought together tens of millions of peasants. These communes combined economic, political, administrative, militia, and social activity. They were a leap in the masses' direct participation in all spheres of society. People's energy and creativity were mobilized and unleashed through these communes. They worked to reclaim land, plant trees, construct roads, and build irrigation and flood-works projects. Peasants began to master technology and scientific knowledge. In these



and other ways, gaps between the city and the countryside, peasants and workers, mental and manual labor, were reduced. Women's oppression was also 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.

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 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.

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 that could enable China to resist imperialist attack and 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.

A Sane and Rational Path of Development

Question: But if you read any of these anticommunist 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.

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. *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.

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 everything that I've been describing: 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.

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 parts for 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.

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 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 and systems of reporting. On the other hand, pressures from the central leadership to meet goals combined with the euphoric spirit of the times...this 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. And grain was rationed countrywide and emergency grain supplies sent to regions in distress. Grain was imported to help the cities and to make it possible for the communes to keep more grain, although because some of the Western imperialists had put a trade embargo on revolutionary China, it faced additional obstacles.

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

This famine had the causes that I'm describing. It was responded to in a way that was based on the needs of the people and the further advance of the revolution. During World War 2, by way of comparison, there was a famine in India that killed 1.5 to 3 million people. It was caused by the British government's procurement and pricing policies during the war. This was Churchill's doing and he persisted in this policy long after he knew the suffering that it was wreaking.

And there have been—and still are horrific—famines in Africa, the legacy of imperialist domination and distortion of these economies, of the civil wars that have been fueled and taken advantage of by imperialism. In these cases, the "relief" often ends up further undercutting sustainable, subsistence peasant agriculture.

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 all this 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. And 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."

The whole enterprise of inflating death counts serves the attack on the Great Leap Forward and the Maoist revolution. And it's important to know that census numbers on deaths used by Western scholars...these were initially released by Deng Xiaoping. Deng had opposed Mao and led the counter-revolutionary coup of 1976. And 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.

Often, the anticommunist 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 thisiscommunism.org site, 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.

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 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 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. 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, and North Vietnam borders on China. And some of these revisionist-conservative forces argued to cool out the ideological struggle with the Soviets and were positioning to adopt the Soviet model, as it then existed, for China.

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 counterrevolution, 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.

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?"

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.

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 launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

You know, the anticommunist 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?

The Cultural Revolution inspired tens of millions but also shocked and disturbed tens of millions. It was full of invention and innovation and became very wild: street rallies, protests, strikes, and demonstrations. "Big character posters" went up all over, with people posting comments and critiques on policies and leaders. Public facilities were made available for meetings and debates. Small newspapers flourished. In Beijing alone, there were more than 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.

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. Sometimes these were work stoppages, sometimes struggles not to stop work; sometimes they were massive demonstrations, other times all-night mass debates, often involving students and young revolutionaries in the Red Guards.

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. 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 questions were getting posed 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.

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 if you're not promoting a spirit of working for the common good and a cooperative spirit?" 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... 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.

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 for 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." 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.

In regard to the violence that did happen...first off, it's important to understand some of the violence that did occur during the Cultural Revolution—and as I said this 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 that 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.

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.

Question: Maybe you could give us some examples.

RL: Okay, well, one big emphasis of the Cultural Revolution was how do you overcome the historic division between people who work with ideas and those who work with their backs. 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 kind of a 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.

And there really was a whole different approach...struggle against the bourgeois-elitist idea that knowledge is a tool to gain competitive advantage over others, a ladder to individual success, a source of private gain and prestige. It was knowledge 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.

And instead, 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.

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.

Education was radically transformed during the Cultural Revolution. Rote teaching methods were challenged and a critical spirit was fostered. Study was combined with productive activity. Children of peasants and workers were brought into the universities. Scientists learned about peasants' lives and from their questions and insights, while the peasants learned about the scientific method. The "barefoot

doctor movement" consisted of more than 1 million young urban people and young educated peasants who were trained to provide basic preventive medicine and meet the basic health needs of the people.

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.

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.

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. Large-scale collective sculptural works, like the **Rent Collection Courtyard figures**, reached a very high level of artistic expression and revolutionary content.

The Cultural Revolution also produced what were called "model revolutionary works." They were pacesetters which the 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 forging of these model operas. So this is what was going on. Different Peking Opera companies would tour in the countryside, helping local culture groups to develop and learning from local performances.



As part of the Cultural Revolution, launched in 1966, revolutionary model operas and model ballets put masses front and center on stage, with women as strong central characters. Popularized throughout the country, the works conveyed people's lives and their role in society and history.

Young women in their millions participated in revolutionary youth organizations, the Red Guards, a spark throughout society that challenged counter-revolutionaries. Women and men were 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.

You know, the Cultural Revolution actually had a very big social and cultural impact in China's countryside. There had been big changes in the 17 years prior to the Cultural Revolution. What had happened during the Great Leap Forward...I talked about that, 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, not the same bustle and intensity and diversity of the city, this had a conservatizing effect. And the Cultural Revolution began to shake this up.

I remember reading an account from someone who grew up in a village during the Cultural Revolution. He talked about how villagers learned to read and write by getting into the texts of plays and operas and then incorporating local language and music. He talked about how the cultural 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.

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 countryside was a form of persecution. But having workers and peasants come into the universities and having professionals go to the countryside 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 an 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 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 that of rulers, and the contradiction between mental and manual labor is an antagonistic one. But even people who are not ruling but are 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 individuals. 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, 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. And resources were 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...because, 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 in the Soviet Union. It wasn't just "promote the workers."

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 is 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, and who as a young woman 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 this society.

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 a society 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.

In revolutionary China, artists, doctors, technical and scientific workers, and all kinds of 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 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. And by the early 1970s, at any given time, about one-third of urban medical personnel were in the countryside, in mobile teams. This was a tremendous thing.

But great as these breakthroughs were...still, there were problems in how this contradiction between mental and manual labor...in how Mao and the revolutionary leadership were approaching the overcoming of 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, 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. They 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 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. But somehow, he went out 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. 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 of the Cultural Revolution...through memoir literature.

It's important to keep this point of methodology in mind. And then there's the further point that there's only a certain kind of memoir, those that are the complaints of those who saw their privileges under attack in the Cultural Revolution, that are 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.

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, as I said earlier—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 this 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 En-lai were 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...that the living standards of the basic working people would rise and China's economy would be strengthened and 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...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," as they were called, 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 arguing

just to defend what had been gained through the Cultural Revolution...but 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, it affected the mood among sections of the masses. Some 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 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.

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*, 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.



During the Cultural Revolution, there was an explosion of artistic activity among workers and peasants—poetry, painting, music, short stories, even film. Mass art projects and new forms 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 to work with the peasants to create and perform plays and concerts. Artists moved to the countryside, lived and worked with – and learned from – the peasants, and in turn taught art to peasants during their lunch breaks. Peasants formed art collectives that produced vibrant paintings depicting life, work, and revolutionary struggle in the countryside with incredible vitality and color and skillful technique. 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 broken down.

Part 4: 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?

RL: 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 forces that had staged the coup. Others sank into bewilderment and demoralization. Still others wallowed in agnosticism, "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.⁸

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 was beginning 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 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.

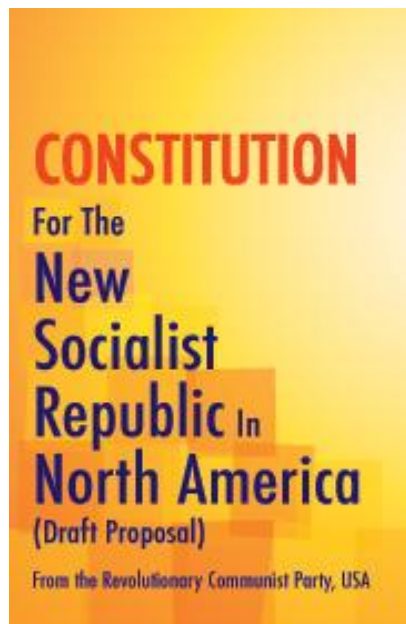
Bob Avakian Brings Forward a New Synthesis of Communism



Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party

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.⁹

He's 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.¹⁰ But given the topic of this interview, I want to focus on a few key points that mainly pertain to the exercise of power in 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 is just able to 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 American (Draft Proposal)*. 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 more 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.

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 they 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.

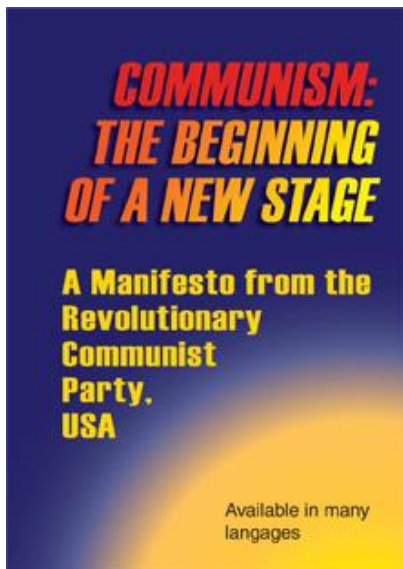
Avakian identifies the great challenge, in an interview from 2012 entitled *What Humanity Needs: Revolution, and the New Synthesis of Communism*, where he poses a critical question that arises out of the first stage of communist revolution...and that the new synthesis has broken through on:

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 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, 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 BA 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 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.

1. V.I. Lenin was born on April 22, 1870 and died January 21, 1925. 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.

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 (see Part 4). Mao made vital contributions to the science of communism in philosophy, political economy, and other spheres. But his greatest contribution is the theory of continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

[[back](#)]

2. Karl Marx was born on May 5, 1818 and died March 14, 1883. Marx brought forward the comprehensive historical understanding of the development of human society. He identified the basic contradiction of capitalism and its motion toward the final elimination of capitalism and of class society generally—brought about through proletarian revolution. 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. [[back](#)]
3. The 2004 film *Iron Jawed Angels*, focuses on the suffragette movement of the 1910s and tells the true story of the arrest of a group women protesters and how they were force-fed when they went on hunger strike. [[back](#)]
4. 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. [[back](#)]
5. 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,'" online at thisiscommunism.org/ThisIsCommunism/ResearchNotes.html [[back](#)]
6. "Gulag" is shorthand in Russian for "Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Labor Settlements," a system of prison and labor camps. [[back](#)]
7. 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 BA's summation of the achievements but also the shortcomings of the previous socialist societies, go to revcom.us/socialistconstitution. [[back](#)]
8. See *Revolution and Counter-Revolution: The Revisionist Coup in China and the Struggle in the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA* for Avakian's analysis and the key documents of this struggle. [[back](#)]
9. 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), *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](#)." [[back](#)]
10. 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. [[back](#)]