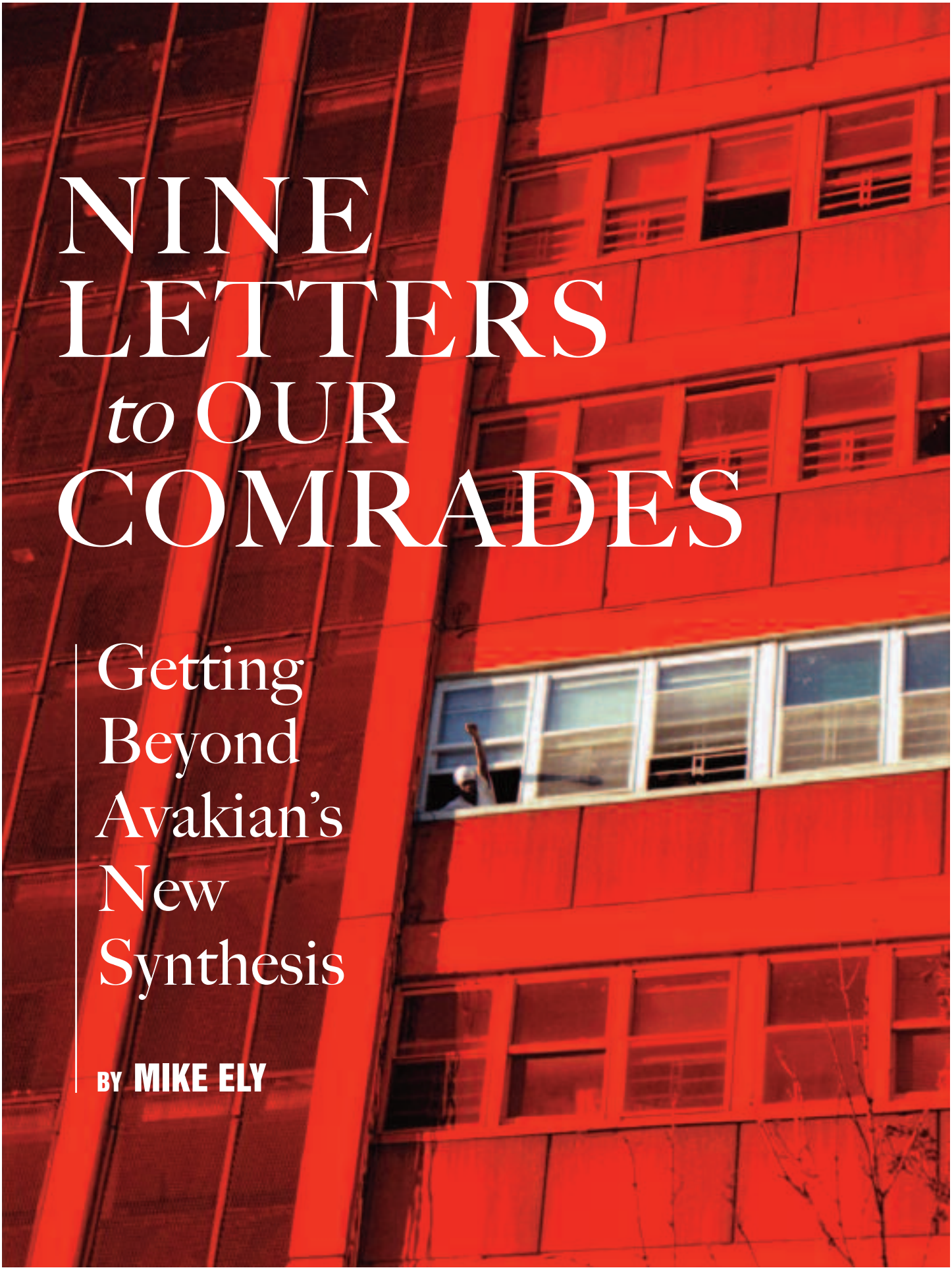

NINE LETTERS *to* OUR COMRADES

Getting Beyond Avakian's New Synthesis

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ABOUT: These letters emerge from a collective process.

Mike Ely has been a supporter of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP,USA) since its founding in 1975. Over the last 25 years, he worked as staff writer and then an editor of the party's press.

Many comrades, inside and outside circles of the RCP, sharpened the work. Among them: J.B. Connors, Rosa Harris, DMC, JB and JS shaped and deepened the letters at every stage, fighting to go from perception to underlying dynamics.

PRINCIPLED RESTRAINT: These letters attempt a critical excavation of political and ideological substance. However, they carefully avoid direct reference to internal events, documents, organizational structures and internal activities of specific personalities. This restraint means that potential documentation of some arguments remains submerged.

FOOTNOTES & QUOTES: I have used footnotes to fill in background information for readers not familiar with the history and terminology of the RCP. Quotations that are not directly cited are formulations used by the RCP.

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Standing at a lectern, young Omar looks into the camera.

The crisis in the communist movement, he says, "has given us the right to make a precise accounting of what we possess, to call by their correct names both our riches and our predicament, to think and argue out loud about our problems, and to engage in the rigors of real research."

This moment has, Omar continues, "allowed us to emerge from our theoretical provincialism, to recognize and engage with the existence of others outside ourselves. And on connecting with this outer world, to begin to see ourselves better. It has allowed us to develop an honest self-appraisal by laying bare where we stand in regard to the knowledge and ignorance of Marxism."

Omar scans his comrades scattered across the room and adds: "Any questions?" [1]

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1. *La Chinoise*, film by Jean Luc Godard,1967, our translation from French. The crisis Omar was discussing was the great struggle that followed Stalin's death and Khrushchev's "secret speech."

Seeking politics and philosophy.
Photo: J.B. Connors

I.

A Time to Speak Clearly

For more than ten years Charles Darwin said nothing publicly about (what he called) his "very presumptuous work." He wrote that talking about natural selection (even to friends) was "like confessing a murder."[2] There were reasons for Darwin's reluctance. He worried about possible errors in his analysis. He feared open debate might have unexpected consequences. But Darwin's delay had to end and did.[3]

Without overstating an analogy, revolutionary communists need to undertake a "very presumptuous work." It requires working through problems, not treating them as dark secrets. We too have reasons for caution. Our disputes take place within reach of a ruthless enemy. Yet, we need to deal with difficult truths about our movement, experiences and beliefs.

A very presumptuous work

Even the most revolutionary forces have been lagging seriously. In the thirty years since Mao's death, there has not been another communist revolution, and a whole generation has grown up without revolutionary societies. Communism is not contending within the deep channels of the world's politics, culture or thought. International efforts to regroup communist forces have not overcome long-standing fractures. As rapid changes rework this planet, there have rarely been parallel innovations in communist understanding and work.

The experience of the last century has convinced many that communist revolution has been a failed dream. And yet, rising from every corner of life, weighing on the brain like a living nightmare, there it is: the horrifying suffering of people and the mounting crimes of this system.

Faced with these challenges, revolutionary communism is dividing into two around us. Or to be more precise: Events are revealing how much this movement *already* exists as two, three, many Maoisms. Several distinct conceptions now contend

2. Charles Darwin's Letter to J. D. Hooker, January 11, 1844

3. Niles Eldredge, *Darwin – Discovering the Tree of Life*, W.W. Norton, 2005

among Maoists.[4] There is sharp struggle over how to make the breakthroughs we need in both communist theory and revolutionary practice.

Because these letters develop a critique of Bob Avakian's new synthesis, I'd like to start by acknowledging positive aspects of what he and the Revolutionary Communist Party,USA (RCP) have represented: For decades, the RCP as been an important pole around which revolutionary communist forces could rally. There has been a long, serious, stubborn, principled effort by the RCP and its leadership core to solve problems that far too many others simply believed were unsolvable. This party has been determined to find a way to actually bring down U.S. imperialism from within. And Bob Avakian, in particular, has churned over many key questions of communist revolution, keeping them before others, refusing to settle for anything less.

There have been periods over the last decades when it appeared the RCP's leadership might be on the road toward those leaps we need. Avakian has long argued that Marxism-Leninism-Maoism should be approached non-dogmatically — as a developing "synthesis." He later called for making communism a "wrangling" and "self-interrogating" movement. And more recently, he urges communists to fearlessly confront often-difficult truths. He says communists should refuse to be a "residue of the past," and should fight to become a "vanguard of the future."[5]

And yet... and yet... the RCP has proven to be one of the disappointments of this moment. After raising some of the right questions, this party prematurely rushed to embrace a synthesis that falls short. As a result, a stark set of contradictions now defines the RCP.

There has been a devastating contrast between Avakian's *talk* of critical scientific thinking and the crudely *un*-critical thinking that surrounds this party's escalating cult of personality.

Avakian made welcome criticisms of simplistic methodologies (including of the reductionism[6] and inevitabilism[7] of several of his party's more notorious errors.[8]) But then, the RCP put forward *yet another* over-reaching analysis. This time it is that there is a post-911 ruling class lurch toward theocratic fascism that is creating the outlines

4. There are, at this moment at least three "packages" making claims to some universal (i.e. global) applicability: Gonzalo Thought of the Communist Party of Peru (Shining Path), Prachanda Path of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and Avakian's New Synthesis. Other major Maoist parties, like the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and the Communist Party of the Philippines have their own distinctive analyses and approaches. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has taken new initiatives to regroup the international communist movement on a new basis. (Worker 11 p.35)

5. The public theoretical work of Bob Avakian, particularly his work since the mid 1990s can generally be found on two web pages: *revcom.us/avakian/* and *bobavakian.net* .

6. Reductionism is an analytical method that incorrectly boils down complex processes to just one or two determining factors. The RCP's self-criticism for previous reductionism appears in "Notes on Political Economy – Our analysis of the 1980s, Issues of Methodology, and the Current World Situation," RCP Publications, 2000, *revcom.us*

7. Inevitabilism refers to an assumption that end results in nature and society are inevitable given the nature of defining contradictions and processes. It is particularly associated with the oft-stated view within communist theory that communism is the inevitable outcome of the contradictions of class society. It is also refers to a tendency to overestimate the objective limits and inflexibility of capitalism, and therefore to overestimate the degree to which the existing system cannot offer "a way out." RCP criticism of inevitabilism appears in "Views on Socialism and Communism: A Radically New Kind Of State, A Radically Different And Far Greater Vision Of Freedom. revcom.us

8. One well-known example of reductionism was the RCP's insistence for many years that same sex orientation was a personal ideological decision. A prominent error of both reductionism and inevitabilism was the RCP's fervent insistence that a nuclear world war was inevitable in the 1980s unless there was revolution "in large and/or strategic parts of the world."

of a "coming civil war" and could become a "stage manager" for socialist revolution in the period ahead.[9]

Avakian criticized the method of manipulating people by fudging the truth, but his party is jacking people up using instrumentalist predictions.[10] Seeking (once again) to "keep the advanced elements tense," the party is insisting (once again) that the world is rushing rapidly toward a very specific, irreversible disaster and that only this Chairman and his supporters can save the day.

The flaws in the RCP's current work arise from Avakian's synthesis, not from somewhere else.

In words, Avakian talks about the masses in their millions being the makers of history, while the party seems to move further and further away from actually *organizing* people in struggle and extending living roots among the oppressed.

Meanwhile the militant and heart-felt internationalism so closely associated with the RCP is being deeply compromised. For the last year, the living revolution of Nepal has been treated with a long sour public silence by the RCP.[11]

Many people see this as a bewildering *disconnect* between Avakian "talking the talk" and his party somehow failing to "walk the walk." But that summation doesn't get past the superficial appearance of things. Whatever else can be said: Bob Avakian's theorizing *is* an internally coherent synthesis and it is in command. The flaws that now mark the RCP's work fundamentally arise from Avakian's synthesis itself, from the methods and thinking it unleashes, *not* from somewhere else.

The RCP does not have a correct appraisal of the objective situation. It does not apply the mass line correctly.[12] It has not developed the correct tactics and strategy for the revolutionary process in this country. These are profound shortcomings for any party. And they are tied to shortcomings in method and approach that are concentrated within Avakian's developing synthesis.

9. Bob Avakian, *The Coming Civil War*, 2005, revcom.us

10. "By 'instrumentalism' here I mean torturing reality in the attempt to make a distorted version of reality an instrument of certain aims." (Avakian, *Bringing Forward Another Way*, 2006, revcom.us) To the RCP, instrumentalism means slanting and crafting ideas to serve political purposes in a manipulative or self-deceptive way.

11. After initially supporting the Maoist revolution in Nepal, the RCP has stopped most references to that struggle and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). There has been virtually no public work building support for the revolution in Nepal against ongoing U.S. intervention. This is rooted in disputes over line and strategy – over the Nepali communists' view of Avakian, their views on democracy and their temporary decision to enter Nepal's government. Quite a few of Avakian's recent writings can be read as polemics against the CPN(M)'s Prachanda Path. Even if things were to change and that silence were to finally end, there is a method exposed here that needs a critical look: The assumption is that the RCP can judge the zigs-and-zags of a party confronting complex transitions to power, based essentially on general principles and textual analysis from afar. This reveals a debilitating dogmatism rooted in the denigration of practice that runs through Avakian's synthesis.

12. The definition from the RCP's Draft Programme:

> "The mass line is the method through which the party both learns from and leads the masses. To apply the mass line means to seek out and learn from the ideas of the masses and to apply the science of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to concentrate what is correct in these ideas, distilling and synthesizing them into a more all-sided and correct reflection of reality and what must be done to change it. The party then takes this back to the masses in the form of line and policies, works to win the people to take these up, and unites with the masses to carry them out — summing up the results and then repeating the process. The mass line is an ongoing process which links theory with practice and the vanguard with the masses in an ever-deepening way all in the service of the masses' fundamental revolutionary interests." (2001, revcom.us)

This program has not been publicly adopted by the RCP and it is unclear which draft formulations are still being upheld.

People often ask "What is this new synthesis?" They find it hard to pin down when confronted with Avakian's loosely-woven body of work.[13]

For the purposes of these letters, I will break this synthesis down into a number of main areas:

- The RCP asserts that the "emergence" of a "unique, special and irreplaceable leader" of a "special caliber" has implications for everything communists and the masses of people do in the world today. This theory of great leaders justifies a number of other major programmatic and strategic shifts — especially moving the "promotion and popularization" of Avakian to the heart of the party's work.
- There is a claim to seek and uphold truth in an entirely new way. This is called "Avakian's epistemological rupture"[14] with previous communist thinking.
- There is a new "envisioning" of the socialist transition to communism — with a special stress on holding firmly onto power while creating the conditions for mass debate over major challenges facing the continuing revolution. There is an assertion that this new re-conception of the communist road should take center stage in political discussions now — both among communists and broadly among the masses.
- This synthesis is viewed as a world-historic *re-conception* of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (MLM). Avakian and his work is specifically compared and equated to the contributions Lenin and Mao made to communist theory. It is said that the masses worldwide must pass through the doorway that Bob Avakian has opened for the way out. And this leap in Marxism is said to be arising from Avakian's summations of the whole previous history of communist revolution, not mainly from an *application* of MLM to the practice of making revolution in the U.S.

There are other components to Avakian's synthesis which will need excavation at another time, including Avakian's particular view of communist revolution as a world

13. Avakian recently gave a one-sentence capsule of his new synthesis. Here it is:

"This new synthesis involves a recasting and recombining of the positive aspects of the experience so far of the communist movement and of socialist society, while learning from the negative aspects of this experience, in the philosophical and ideological as well as the political dimensions, so as to have a more deeply and firmly rooted scientific orientation, method and approach with regard not only to making revolution and seizing power but then, yes, to meeting the material requirements of society and the needs of the masses of people, in an increasingly expanding way, in socialist society — overcoming the deep scars of the past and continuing the revolutionary transformation of society, while at the same time actively supporting the world revolutionary struggle and acting on the recognition that the world arena and the world struggle are most fundamental and important, in an overall sense — together with opening up qualitatively more space to give expression to the intellectual and cultural needs of the people, broadly understood, and enabling a more diverse and rich process of exploration and experimentation in the realms of science, art and culture, and intellectual life overall, with increasing scope for the contention of different ideas and schools of thought and for individual initiative and creativity and protection of individual rights, including space for individuals to interact in 'civil society' independently of the state — all within an overall cooperative and collective framework and at the same time as state power is maintained and further developed as a revolutionary state power serving the interests of the proletarian revolution, in the particular country and worldwide, with this state being the leading and central element in the economy and in the overall direction of society, while the state itself is being continually transformed into something radically different from all previous states, as a crucial part of the advance toward the eventual abolition of the state with the achievement of communism on a world scale."

Making Revolution And Emancipating Humanity, Part 1: Beyond The Narrow Horizon Of Bourgeois Right, 2007, revcom.us

14. Epistemology is the study of how human beings come to know reality – answering Mao's question "where do correct ideas come from?"

process, an idiosyncratic critique of democracy, and the RCP's spiral/conjunctural theory of capitalist crisis.[15]

In the letters that follow, I will make some initial critiques — sometimes in detail, sometimes by indicating a line of thought. Many problems I unravel have been noted over years by others coming from their own diverse politics.

These letters can't (and won't) offer a tidy counter-synthesis to Avakian's synthesis. That is because we are at the beginning, not the end, of our "very presumptuous work." However woven into these letters will be thoughts about a different path that I believe serious revolutionaries need to take.

I hope this critical exploration will help gather now-dispersed forces for all that we need to bring into being.

15. See *Notes on Political Economy – Our analysis of the 1980s, Issues of Methodology, and the Current World Situation*, revcom.us

Cabrini Green, Chicago.
Photo: J.B. Connors

2.

A Gaping Hole Instead of Partisan Bases

A painful place to start: The RCP has not developed, ever, a mass partisan political base for revolutionary communist politics anywhere, among any section of the people.

This political current has won recruits, in ones and twos, from people whose life and study gave them a inclination toward communism. But the language and banners of this movement have never connected. Revolutionary communists have never found the ways to fuse revolutionary politics with the aspirations of the masses. They have not created the thousands of "organized ties" or the "political base areas" that they worked for decades to build. The RCP never succeeded in transforming its racial or class composition — it has not trained or recruited significant numbers of new communists from the proletariat and oppressed nationalities despite all the efforts in that direction.

The RCP has no partisan base. Any synthesis that doesn't solve this has a gaping hole at its core.

The RCP tried to take up the responsibilities of a vanguard force. But it has never succeeded in becoming a "party" — in the sense of actually leading a section of people that consciously supports its cause.[16]

Any synthesis that does not solve or even acknowledge these basic problems has a gaping hole at its very core.

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) criticizes a trend within the international communist movement (ICM):

> "What seems to be their regular routine is not to concentrate on how revolutionary struggle can be developed in one's country by developing correct strategy and tactics but to talk more of world revolution, enjoy classical debate, eulogize strategy and tactic of the past successful revolutions, teach other fraternal parties as if they know everything about the concrete situation in that country and stick to what Lenin and Mao had said before. This trend represents dogmatism."[17]

16. Lenin remarks in passing that a revolutionary party "will not deserve the name until it learns to bind the leaders with the class and the masses into one single indissoluble whole." *"Left-wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder,* marxists.org

17. *The Worker* #10, May 2006. "International Dimension Of Prachanda Path" by Basanta. I believe this comment is directed at Avakian's method and approach.

Dealing with Errors and Failure

Since we are talking bluntly here about failure, we need to talk about context. Reading an essay by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek recently, I stopped hard on this sentence:

> "The greatness of Lenin was that in this catastrophic situation, he wasn't afraid to succeed — in contrast to the negative pathos discernible in Rosa Luxemburg and Adorno, for whom the ultimate authentic act is the admission of the failure which brings the truth of the situation to light."[18]

Yes! There is far too much of this "negative pathos" around, as if we communists should chant, "We're not worthy," alongside Wayne and Garth. As if a shuffling, round-shouldered self-hatred would be the only possible proof that we communists "get" the lessons of our own past. That would be exactly wrong.

We need to excavate our shortcomings and listen to the criticism of others. But we will do so because the people of the world need a radically reconceived communist project. They need revolutionary internationalists in the U.S. to do our part well, here and now. We have something worthy to bring to this passage of history. And for that we must emulate Lenin's hunger to win and his focus on grabbing the chance within the maelstrom.

We excavate our shortcomings because the people *need* a radically reconceived communist project.

This is a matter of intention, but not just intention. New truth emerges from the currently inexplicable — after practice reveals fissures in previous conceptions. We are at such a moment, not just around our own specific political practice, but at several levels of the human adventure.

Up Against It

How much of this failure of the RCP comes from the difficult *objective* conditions in the U.S.? How much is rooted in flaws of the RCP's line and approach?

Clearly both are involved and intertwined.

These *have* been "awful decades" for communist work here. The plunder of a whole world has nurtured a corrupt political stability. The people are deeply affected by illusions, pulls of passivity and dreams of advancing *within* this system.

Here is one sign that these objective difficulties are very real: The RCP is hardly the only organized trend to have had trouble. No radical, left or revolutionary forces have gotten durable traction since the '70s — not revolutionary Black nationalists, not anarchists, not soft-socialist trade union organizers, not the Greens. Various left trends have also had their moments of influence, but all failed to develop ongoing support for their larger programs. Most have fared far worse than the RCP. Oppositional politics has flowed into loose social and cultural movements that are often organized around pressuring for reforms.

The objective conditions are the main reason why there has not been either a mass revolutionary movement or the basis for any actual revolutionary attempts. And these conditions have acted back on the subjective factor (the lines within the party itself)

18. Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*, Verso, 2002. The "catastrophic situation" he mentions is the disaster that enveloped Europe during World War 1 – including the collapse of widespread belief in linear progress, and the continent-wide failure of Social Democracy.

Communists have not yet charted the uncharted course.

exacerbating now one or another "pull" — sometimes toward non-revolutionary tailing of the mass movements, sometimes toward a sectified acceptance of "puny thinking," and now increasingly toward rampant wishful thinking.

These are errors made by sincere and dedicated revolutionaries operating under frustrating political conditions — but they are errors nonetheless. While the RCP tried to "wrench" all it could out of each moment — practice has fallen very far short of their hopes, and also — I believe — short of what could have been done with different methods and plans.

There have been long-standing problems of method and approach in the RCP's work — how it viewed itself, the masses and the revolutionary process — that have all contributed to the overall failure.

Communists have not successfully "charted the uncharted course" or mastered how to "do revolutionary work in a non-revolutionary situation."[19]

The RCP's failures in practice were *not* for lack of trying: This party fought from many sides to create a revolutionary movement around its politics. At one time or another over 35 years, the RCP tried to dig in among industrial workers, farm workers, Black proletarian youth, various immigrant communities, the homeless in major cities, the social movements of radical activists, punk street youth, progressive artists, outraged scientists and more. The party launched itself into militant trade unionism, then later into building proletarian bases around "mass combativity," and then building broad mass movements around police brutality, imperialist war and the rise of the Christian fascists.

The RCP's failures were *not* for lack of trying.

This work was carried out under an evolving strategic plan: In the 1970s, we told ourselves that "taking Marxism-Leninism to the workers is taking it home." But we discovered that this "home" (among the unionized workers of basic industry) was already well stocked with other ideologies. The workers were apparently quite attached to them. The RCP then concluded that the real home for Marxism was "lower and deeper" in the ranks of the "real proletariat" — who are less privileged and conservatized.[20]

By 1980, the RCP rejected a previous emphasis on trade union struggles and the workers in heavy industry. It adopted a new central task called "Create Public Opinion,

19. The new communist movement that emerged in the U.S. after the 1960s was often gripped by the notion of emulating the methods and strategies from a "good period" of the old Communist Party. By 1980, after external experience and internal struggle, the RCP summed up that the road to revolution in countries like the U.S. had not ever been developed by the previous communist movement. The task of "charting the uncharted course" remained an immediate theoretical challenge for communists. The Report of the RCP's 1980 Central Committee meeting said:

> "The general question here is one of rising to the tasks that are required of our party, rising to the unprecedented task of carrying out a revolution in an advanced imperialist country like this. To rise to this task means that we have to destroy still further remnants of economism, remnants of 40 years and more of revisionism in the international communist movement. But even that is not enough, because destroying all this is inseparably linked with making further advances in the revolutionary science and its application." (See *Charting the Uncharted Course – Proletarian Revolution in the U.S.*, pamphlet, 1981)

20. This was a central thesis of the 1980 Central Committee report (published as *Charting the Uncharted Course – Proletarian Revolution in the U.S.)*.

Seize Power" (CPOSP). This was intended to pursue doing "revolutionary work in a non-revolutionary situation" — in preparation for "the Time."

From the beginning there was tension (and real line struggle) within the framework CPOSP. How much was communist work rooted in agitation and propaganda (centered around the newspaper)? How much was it focused on leading the masses in struggle (along key social faultlines)? How much do we focus on exposing the outrages of this system, and how much on the need for a new system? How does a communist movement accumulate forces, train revolutionary organizers, develop mass organization under communist leadership, and raise consciousness of the need for a new society and change-through-revolution?

There were real controversies over how, and even whether, to use the party's press among the people. Formally the communist press was seen as the key way of connecting the people to an explicitly *communist* movement, and "diverting" their understandings. But at various times and places over the decades of the '80s and '90s, the What-Is-To-Be-Done-ist work around the newspaper took a distant second place behind efforts to lead people in political struggles.

After the late 1980s, and then especially after the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion, the party made a series of shifts toward developing base areas among the most oppressed sections of the population — focused on selected housing projects and sweatshop districts. Two things were asserted as part of those shifts: First, that it was important to "come from within." There had not been much success in acting as "revolutionary ambulance chasers" — showing up as unknowns, with leaflets and newspapers, whenever some atrocity or struggle went down.

And second there was an emphasis on building the organized "*mass* combativity" of people — taking the 1917 Viborg district or the Peruvian experiences of Raucana as rough models of how a mass radical oppositional movement could be built[21] — especially among oppressed youth. This took distance from an early trend toward "advanced actions" where the party and a few individuals combatively stepped out — to burn flags or obstruct the destruction of housing projects — in hopes of inspiring others to follow.

This was a plan to create partisan political base areas — where the party would lead combative mass political struggle, build wisely-constructed party organization around the communist press, and publicly set radical new terms for how people related to each other. And there remained a view of building a broader revolutionary united front — in many ways that would be energized and radicalized around an emerging proletarian core.[22]

There was much value to this orientation toward the youth, toward the oppressed, toward the protracted work of "coming from within" and toward polarizing society around an emerging revolutionary core.

21. Viborg was a working class neighborhood that had been an important early center of Menshevik organization, but developed into a key political base area of the Bolsheviks for launching the 1917 October Revolution in St. Petersburg. Raucana was a town that became a militant political base area of Maoists in Peru during the 1980s.

22. At the time, Avakian and the RCP spoke about what was needed in order to "really have a basis for making a Beginning":

> "These can be called the 'three needs' (or the 'three what-do-we-needs'). These are: (1) A revolutionary movement and a politicized, radicalized atmosphere among our social base, the proletarian masses; and in society generally; (2) A strong party organization and a solid organized base of support for the party, especially among the most bedrock solid social base, and (3) Leaps

These changes were an assertion of the importance in accumulating forces, leading struggle and "developing the muscles" of a real social force. And the importance of actually organizing people was incorporated in a new formulation of the central task (in the 2001 draft program): "Create Public Opinion, Seize Power — prepare minds and organize forces for revolution."

Going "lower and deeper" did not solve the problem.

The organizing projects associated with these "shifts" played an important role in training the next generation of communists. But the RCP never succeeded in creating the much-desired base areas for the party's politics. The U.S. has no Red Wedding District, Raucana, Kreuzberg or Putilov Works.[23] There were never multiplying circles of newspaper readers creating an ongoing basis for the party's influence and leadership.[24]

At the same time, this practical work was never characterized by simple isolation. At times, the RCP has been able to unite with significant numbers of people to wage struggle — from the 1970s coalfields, to antiwar resistance, to the 1990s marches in LA against police brutality. Those have been moments when the "crown lay in the gutter" and a bold political force could give shape to grievances. Still, the influence built around important short-term demands and the "felt needs of the masses" did not develop into a partisan base of support for the party itself or its program of proletarian revolution.

Like it or not, the RCP's experience reveals a real and continuing gap between communist politics and even the advanced among the masses.

There are significant numbers of people *curious* about revolutionary politics. We meet them whenever we walk out the door. But even the most advanced, discontented, restless, conscious sections of the people, even those who CRAVE a revolutionary change, are often not particularly inclined toward a revolutionary *communist* pole. It is a gap that is objective to us. It has deep roots — in how politics in the U.S. developed, in the international position of U.S. imperialism, in social mobility, in the privatization of American life, in the dynamics of racist oppression — and in the general verdict that alternative societies have sadly "failed."

Experience reveals a continuing gap between communist politics and the advanced.

This is a gap that a communist movement either *learns* how to bridge or doesn't. This needs to be much more *deeply* summed up

in forging the multinational unity of the proletariat and leaps in forging the solid core of the broader united front, under proletarian leadership." (Bob Avakian, "Some Thoughts," *Revolution* magazine, Summer/Fall 1988)

This issue of *Revolution* is a good place to get a sense of the RCP's political line at that point. It goes on to say that other strata in society need to "see a revolutionary movement with a conscious political expression — not an 'intellectualized' political expression, but a conscious, clear political revolutionary thrust — coming out of our basic social base." That is in sharp contrast to the current line.

23. The Wedding District was a famous, pro-communist, working class neighborhood in 1920s Berlin. Kreuzberg is a district in Berlin where radical immigrant workers and native-born German radicals created a revolutionary mix starting in the 1980s. The Putilov factory complex in early 1900 St. Petersburg that emerged as an important political fortress for the Bolshevik revolution.

24. These problems emerged early in the effort. By 1989, Avakian was mentioning arguments (arising from within the party) that "we're making no real progress among the basic masses so even if the situation should erupt we would be totally unprepared and it would be a disaster." This was discussed in "Making New Leaps in Preparing for Revolution" (Revolution Spring 1990). It was a rare public acknowledgement of the problems, shortly before the party would launch renewed efforts in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion.

in order to be transformed — in a process that the RCP has shied away from in regard to its own practice.

Real disappointment within the RCP over the protracted failures of base-building encouraged currents of orthodox dogmatism that seemed resigned to puny marginalization — content with political work in tired familiar circles, in ways that never lit the sky or dared to actually lead. It also fanned a tendency to tail whatever promised traction — content to become administrators of mass movements and willing to lower sights in a reformist way. *"Build the sea to swim in, bring in an independent role."* Or so it was said in the 1990s — but far too often the second half of that slogan evaporated. An unspoken verdict gained influence: *"We have seen all the revolution we are going to see."*

We either bridge that gap or we don't.

The wind of life gusting around the Mumia campaign, the national movement against police brutality, and the post-911 antiwar activities actually caused intensified stresses. These problems demanded line struggle and new theoretical work — grounded in a materialist accounting of all that previous work. That did not happen. In particular: There has been no summation of the last twenty years of work in building base areas in the "real proletariat" — at least no serious summation known to the membership, or those involved in this work, or that emerged to be discussed as part of the larger Draft Programme process. And silence still surrounds those important experiences. The spiral from theory to practice back to theory has been broken.

In the last few years, a new leading line in the RCP argues that the problem over decades has been that the party (as a whole) was gripped by a "revisionist package," in opposition to Avakian. The party itself "got in the way" of its own chairman's ability to reach and transform the masses. Such a simple-but-unlikely explanation makes summation of real work and real shortcomings less necessary.

No serious known summation of seeking political base areas over 20 years.

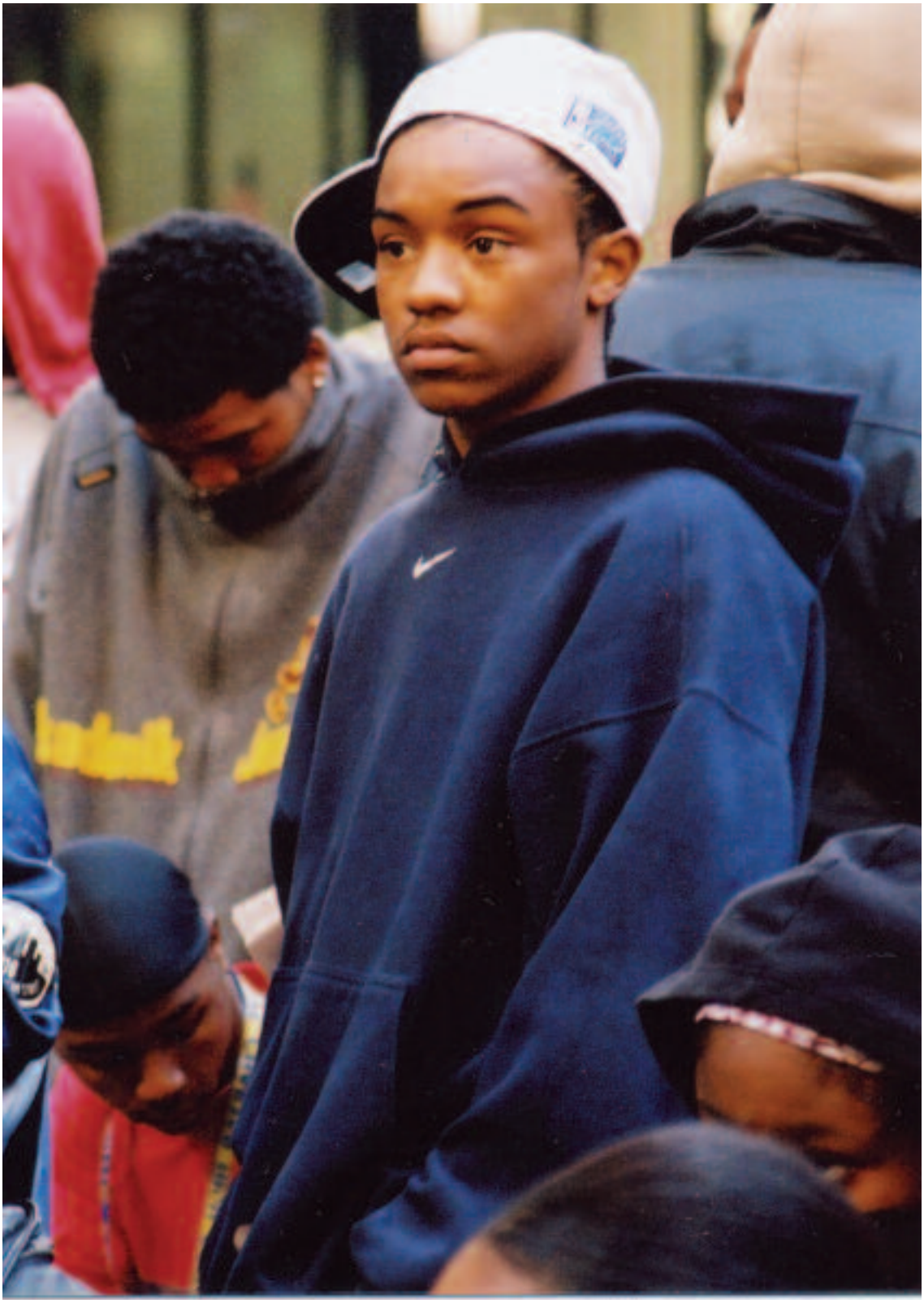
In theory and practice, this new line has pointed in a very different direction. The old tension between newspaper agitation and leading mass political struggle has been superseded: Both are now overshadowed (and redefined by) the work of promoting Avakian as the central leader of the revolution. Communist work must now be centered around the task of "appreciating, promoting and popularizing this rare, unique and special leader, his body of work, method and approach."

In the absence of materialist summation, a project of multiple fantasies can take hold. There is the fantasy of "re-polarizing" the society around one leader, linked to other fantasies of "vaulting" to mass influence in a crudely voluntarist way.[25]

Summing up decades of precious experience is crucial for the forging of new practice and a new communist synthesis. Whoever among us is willing, let's dig in.

25. Voluntarism is thinking you can overcome problems and obstacles based on will and subjective desire. It is an underestimation of the need to systematically transform material constraints and necessity — and (as part of that) carefully identify necessary stages, prerequisites and (of course) openings.

Opposing the Iraq War.
Photo: J.B. Connors



Opposing police brutality, Chicago.
Photo: J.B. Connors

3·

Forays, Wrong Turns and Blaming the People

In 2000, on the 25th anniversary of the RCP, the *Revolutionary Worker* wrote:

> "We have forged deeper ties with the masses, joining, learning and leading in their struggles: The battle against police brutality and murder; the vicious discrimination that infests this system; the repression and super-exploitation of immigrants; the fight for the liberation of women; the battles against the unjust wars waged by this system... and more."[26]

There was some truth to that, then. Can any one look at the party today and still say that?

Problems of dogmatism, self-isolation and political fantasy — that have always plagued the RCP and contended within its politics — are now in command to a new degree. The heart of this — both its theoretical core and most visible manifestation — is how the RCP's central leader, Bob Avakian, is seen and promoted.

The RCP now holds that "once a unique leader of this caliber emerges" the tasks and responsibilities of the party and its members change — in ways that directly impact revolutionary strategy. "If we don't do *anything* else," it is said, "we must do the promotion of this leader well." This concentrates a major change in line. While the RCP still seeks to lead struggle around major faultlines in society, such crucial work clearly takes a back seat to the promotion of this cult of personality.

One graphic comparison reveals a great deal about the change:

26. "Celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the RCP,USA," *Revolutionary Worker* 1076, October 29, 2000, revcom.us

On the left is the RCP's poster from May Day 1980. On the right is the cover on Revolution newspaper's 2007 "Special Issue on Bob Avakian." The cover on the right is clearly a retread of the poster on the left. That similarity creates a chance to "compare and contrast the lines":

In 1980, the RCP was putting out a challenge to advanced workers, who are portrayed in a doorway, possibly on the verge of stepping out, alone if necessary, with their eyes set on dreams of red flags and revolution. It is a poster that is marked in some ways by a lingering workerism — complete with hard hat, factory setting and a presumably male figure. However (setting all that aside) the political essence of the poster was posing a choice to the workers themselves about daring to act and transform the political stage in a revolutionary direction.

By contrast, the 2007 cover shows the uplifted profile of a party supporter with eyes fixed intently on the word "leadership." It is an act of adoration. The challenge now is not "Take history into our hands!" It is now "Engage with Bob Avakian," to become a "follower."

Previously the party's work was seen as rooted in "What-Is-To-Be-Done-ism." It involved being a "tribune of the people" using lively and compelling communist exposure, agitation and propaganda that "put before all our communist convictions." It envisioned a paper as an organizational "scaffolding" and "collective organizer" for a diverse and growing revolutionary movement. It aspired to being a newspaper that could "cast a line" far beyond the organized ranks of communists.

The RCP now holds that there are "two mainstays" of communist work — one "mainstay" is the work of "AP&P" (developing the appreciation, promotion and popularization of Avakian). The other "mainstay" is the work of the newspaper. And the newspaper has also been reconceived to give greater weight to Avakian's theoretical articles and to promoting his "re-envisioning of communism," while the concepts of agitation and exposure have undergone a related transformation. This new conceptual package is called "*Enriched* What-Is-To-Be-Done-ism." That enrichment is a *negation* of Lenin's What Is To Be Done. It represents a different (and idealist) view of how the activity and consciousness of people can be diverted in a communist direction.

Promotion of Avakian is at the center of work.

The "two mainstays" formulation marks a major departure from the Party's previous strategic views. One way or another, the Party's 2001 *New Draft Programme*[27] has been superseded — though replacement formulations are not public yet.

The net effect is that the promotion of Avakian — as a person, leader and theorist — is much more fully at the center of the Party's work, including its new conception of the communist press.

In this synthesis, the organized collectivity of the party has been demoted to an "instrumentality" of the great leader. Several promising projects of mass struggle have been allowed to wither, or been transformed into "vehicles" for get-rich-quick fantasies.

For example, on October 5, 2006, the RCP had plans to conjure a government-shaking movement into being. They were spectacularly unsuccessful. Avakian later said:

27. *New Draft Programme of the RCPUSA*, 2001, revcom.us

> "All this — and the whole experience that is captured with the metaphor of living in the house of Tony Soprano — does come back around to the question of complicity. Now, in this connection I want to say a few things about the mobilization on October 5 (2006) that was called by World Can't Wait, and the fact that, frankly, in terms of numbers and accordingly in terms of impact, this fell far short of what was needed. Now, as Maoists, we're not supposed to blame the masses when things don't go well. But goddamnit — I want to blame the masses a little bit! Not strategically. Ultimately it is our responsibility — it is the responsibility of those who do understand the urgent need for massive opposition and political resistance to this whole course that the Bush regime is driving things on. But in line with, and as a part of, that responsibility, terms have to be presented sharply to people. Someone made the point that we should say to those people who knew about October 5, and who said they agreed with its basic stance and aims but did not come out that day: 'Shame on you if you sat on your ass on October 5! If you knew about it or had a basis to know about it and you did not make use of this vehicle and help make this vehicle as powerful as possible — shame on you!'"

"I want to blame the masses..."

> "I want to say, just for the record, that at times I myself have been acutely disappointed by — and, yes, have cursed in graphic terms — the people in this society who are sitting by and doing nothing in the face of atrocities and horrors committed by their government and in their name..."[28]

Let's unpack this: The "vehicle" has been built and the masses have (yet again!) not responded according to plan. And who gets the blame?

Not the current party leadership. Not the plan. Who is left (logically) to blame but the masses (and the lower level of cadre)?

It is as if the RCP's leadership feels their pearls have been cast before swine.[29] Is every utterance of leadership a gem? Does skeptical withholding of "appreciation" by comrades *and the masses* mean they are part of the problem? Impending failure of many kinds drives forward a farrago of scapegoating.

There is complicity and corruption within an imperialist superpower. But blaming, shaming and literally cursing the masses is wrong — both in principle *and* in this particular case. (And it is wrong with or without a caveat like "Ultimately it is our responsibility.")

On the Mass Line

Here leaders dream up grand schemes out of whole cloth — without forming alliances, constituencies or trained networks over time. They don't have their own base to bring to the process. They "plan" to reach millions *without actually organizing thousands* — as if the masses will be jolted by public appeals in newspaper ads and made to flow, like water, through a quickly engineered canal.

A plan to reach millions without organizing thousands.

We should be suspicious of such contrivances and "get rich quick" schemes. They flow from a sectarian view of what "proletarian leadership of the united front" means, of how a revolutionary movement is built and led.

A party without a correct mass line — without a correct approach

28. "Bringing Forward Another Way," revcom.us

29. A metaphor from the Bible, Matthew 7:6

toward leading and learning from the people — cannot hope to lead a great revolution or a new society. This is a problem that urgently needs theory, struggle and solution.

The RCP has understood that communists can't merely hold a mirror up to the masses to reflect (and politically tail) whatever people *already* know and think. This party has understood that communist work needs to bring revolutionary, scientific understandings from *without* — from outside the experiences, struggles and understandings that the people themselves spontaneously generate.

However these crucial insights have been applied in a sterile and sectarian way. The RCP has not correctly appreciated the importance of actually *organizing* the advanced to win over the intermediate *in their masses*. There is little practical sense of alliance, coalition or protracted engagement with other political forces or with important sections of the people. There is little sense of how people, in their masses, learn through struggle (even as communist political work and leadership "diverts" that process to influence how radical it gets.).

Summation will have to be made of how much specific "mass initiatives" gave rise to real organization, breadth, ferment and struggle – certainly efforts around Mumia Abu-Jamal, police brutality, and early antiwar work had a real breath of life. These efforts often represented a desire to take initiative and respond to burning issues in society. However overall, and especially more recently, the RCP's "mass initiatives" have taken on a more and more skeletal and self-isolating nature.

Becoming a Living Vanguard: Protracted Fusion or Last-Minute Telescoping

The belief that huge movements will congeal around prefabricated vehicles is no minor or recent problem: The RCP itself has been conceived as such a "vehicle."

The RCP originally emerged from a political upsurge where revolutionary forces had real, if primitive roots among the people. But those roots shriveled as that upsurge died. In the 1980s, the party correctly stressed its need to have tens of thousands of "organized ties" in each city and established political base areas in order to be able to make an approach to power.

However as those goals were not accomplished, the party seems to have fallen back, more and more, on a mythology– where at some future point the masses of people will come to "the rescue of a few scores" of revolutionaries. Lenin's poetic phrase is often taken too literally, as if a small stubborn agitation-based organization can have its correctness and leadership suddenly discovered by awakening millions and can then catapult to power "in a telescoped way."

As if zero-to-60 is possible -- if all the gears are clicking, if the moment's right, and if full appreciation of the "Main Man" is in command.

This is an illusion.

This conception of forging a vanguard has never produced either a revolution or a real vanguard party with deep living roots among the people. It rests on an instrumentalist distortion of the Bolshevik history.[30]

30. This is a distortion that grew over the 1920s, and reduced the living experience of the Bolshevik party to a dogmatic set of universal formulas, structures and forms.

Fusion of socialism with the struggles of the people according to conditions of time and place.

No substantive revolutionary party ever came to have social weight through some magical "telescoping" from a few "scores" of rootless communists — not Mao's Communist party and Red Army (who emerged from the earlier Nationalist upsurge), or the German KPD (who emerged with major forces out of the previous Social Democratic movement), not the Naxalites of India nor the Maoists of Nepal.

And it was never true of the Bolsheviks either. Early in Lenin's work he put it this way:

> "Only the fusion of socialism with the working-class movement has in all countries created a durable basis for both. But in every country this combination of socialism and the working-class movement was evolved historically, in unique ways, in accordance with the prevailing conditions of time and place. In Russia, the necessity for combining socialism and the working-class movement was in theory long ago proclaimed, but it is only now being carried into practice. It is a very difficult process and there is, therefore, nothing surprising in the fact that it is accompanied by vacillations and doubts."[31]

The Bolsheviks were occasionally decimated by repression. The links were often broken between their leaders in exile and their activists on the ground. But this was nonetheless a party that emerged with deep connections to social movements against the maddening backwardness of Tsarist Russia and the brutal oppression of working people.[32]

The Bolshevik Party was not just a few circles of Lenin's followers who suddenly sprouted political wings "in a telescoped way." They were a real party carved into the political life of that empire, with lively internal political life and raucous differences, real roots within a real social base (especially from 1905 onward), and an organizational capacity to influence and lead. They grew in both size and influence under that "awful" decade before 1917.[33]

All communist parties that have been able to seriously contend emerged organically, pulling their forces out of larger radical movements and broad anti-system intellectual currents by a living process of fusion and differentiation. To take power, especially if you intend to dismantle the old state — you need more than a line, or a "special" leader, or even a shadow cabinet — you need the organizational wellsprings of a shadow state emerging within the framework of the old order. You need to win over

31. V.I. Lenin, *The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement*, 1900, marxists.org

32. You can get a sense of the breadth of the anti-government resistance by the numbers of political prisoners held by the Tsarist government: 86,000 political prisoners in 1905 growing to 170,000 in 1909. (Simon Sebag Montefioer, *Young Stalin*, 2007)

33. A few illustrations of the social weight of the Bolshevik party: The party entered the 1905 revolution with several hundred members in St. Petersburg. In early 1907, the Bolsheviks had a membership of over 2,000 in that city (LCW, vol.12, p.400). That year, their national membership is estimated at 46,000. The Bolsheviks often operated within the larger Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) which had a combined membership of 150,000. Around 1910 Bolshevik apparatus was hit hard by repression, but by 1912, the Bolshevik party was strong enough to launch the newspaper, Pravda, in St. Petersburg. They had the organizational structure to fund, produce and circulate an average of 25,000 copies daily. After the 1912 elections, six Bolsheviks were elected to the 4th Duma (parliament) representing districts with over a million industrial workers. In St. Petersburg, the party led a citywide movement of radicalized workers who, by July 1914 on the eve of war, organized a general strike of 150,000 workers over both political and economic demands. Through the political crisis of 1917, Bolshevik ranks grew explosively. Party membership in the Viborg district had grown from 500 in March 1917, to 7,000 in October. In Petrograd as a whole, it went from 2,000 to 36,000. (Figures are largely from original Soviet sources, in Tony Cliff, *Lenin 1*, marxists.org)

and train thousands of creative and hardened cadre capable of becoming the framework for the new state — a force capable of seizing power, directing the economy and its transformation, creating a new media, and so on.

And imagine how much more true this is now — given the mind-boggling complexity of modern society — than it was in agrarian China or semi-agrarian Russia.

Yes, in periods of intense crisis, many new forces can be attracted to existing revolutionary movements. Some things will have to be "telescoped," but they can't *all* be. As Avakian once knew, a political movement can "come from behind" but it can't "come from nowhere." To actually seize and hold power in a major social crisis, a revolutionary party needs to *arrive* at that crisis with flesh and bone.

So, how is a revolutionary vanguard forged under our conditions?

Seriously attempting this will require something quite different from what we now have. We need a revolutionary current that grows and emerges within the living tissue of today's wrenching contradictions – as thousands of radical people go through a series of political processes together, under conditions where creative communist politics can seriously contend and transform. There is a necessary process with stages and leaps that you learn more about as they ripen – all as the revolutionary pole works to accumulate and transform organized forces. There are turning points where you either have critical mass and correct methods, or you are not in the game.

The RCP's current path and methods will not work.

For all this, communists need a culture of *organizing* people to wage sharp struggle over the major questions of society. And we need a deeply creative new sense of how to *bring revolutionary understandings* to those who want to change the world.

To launch this process we need to criticize incorrect understandings entrenched in Avakian's new synthesis. But that is only the start. This is a process that will deepen only as we will learn more by doing more.

In sum: The RCP's current path and methods have not worked and will not work.

Its recent strategic turn is indifferent to the lessons of its own practice. It is a voluntarist attempt to magically leap over real obstacles and necessary stages in communist work. The assumption that things can come together, suddenly and massively, under communist leadership makes an idealist overestimation of spontaneity. If unchallenged, it will squander the remaining revolutionary communist forces within the U.S.

The Masses: Always "Out There," Separate and Distant

Looking back, I have been struck by the damage done by the constant suggestion that a revolutionary crisis might be just over the horizon. It is as if the RCP has been operating through a series of two-year, or three-year plans — hurling itself into this, then pulling out to hurl itself into that. In fact, developing deep ties among the people requires perseverance, maturity, careful choices and real commitment to those choices — not a rootlessness that constantly shifts plans based on short-term speculations and expectations of quick growth.

It was a promising thing in the late 1980s, when the RCP raised to itself the importance of "coming from within." And yet the party's *overall* method repeatedly thwarted that process. The party's work has remained a series of "forays" — constantly re-approaching people "from without," as if they are some unexplored territory. Over

and over, the party would pull back without real roots or networks, only to sally out again in some new direction with new hopes and schemes.

In a very typical statement, the party said (summing up disappointments in 2005):

> "[T]he truth is this: the people that can make this into a movement of millions are out there. We have to get them."[34]

In some important ways, the masses of people have always remained "out there" for this party — as something separate, distant, unresponsive, and very disappointing. Objective conditions played their role in this — but a bitter view of the people has taken root subjectively.

A revolutionary organization has to be integrated into struggles of the people — directly in its own name while connecting with (or initiating) a variety of other organizations. And it has to draw the thinking and activity of people toward creatively-conceived communist solutions to this awful capitalist present – a task which can only be accomplished with methods that are bold yet sophisticated (not hackneyed or infantile).

A revolutionary organization has to be integrated into living struggles while drawing everything toward communist solutions.

The issue here is, again, the mass line — which rests on an understanding that people need to emancipate themselves, and that it can't be done "for" them. In a fundamental way, people (in their masses) are the makers of human progress and emancipation. This materialist insight has a series of necessary consequences for communist work and socialist society.

In words, the RCP affirms that revolution is an act of "the masses in their millions." However, its methods of "mass work" have moved farther and farther away from organizing or learning from (or even appreciating) those people who are not interested in becoming "followers of Bob Avakian." There is an overestimation of how much the communists already know, and an underestimation of the importance of knowing the people well, so that revolutionary communications can truly connect with our key audiences.

In place of the mass line, there is a one-sided stress on *telling* — in patronizing ways reminiscent of Christian evangelizing. As if communist analysis in convoluted detail will sprout a revolutionary movement with real social weight. Here the fetish of the word morphs into the fetish of the leader. It tries to "vault over" the complicated processes by which people really decide what to think and how to act.

Re-reading documents from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, I noticed again how Mao believes people develop consciousness and sophistication *in the course of political struggle*. One key document announces: "Let the masses educate themselves in the movement."[35] People learn to appreciate and apply the ideology of revolution and communism in the course of political struggle.

This is in contrast to Avakian's linear view of *first* theory and ideology, and *then* mass organization:

34. "November 2: The Real Beginning And The Challenge We Face," *Revolution* 23, Nov. 20, 2005

35. "Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," adopted August 8, 1966, Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, rrojasdatabank.org

> "It is important to grasp this point that the need for radical change in society gets called forth in the superstructure — in the thinking of people, and then in the political organization of people. People form groups, they form parties with programs and objectives which reflect — reflect not in a reductionist, linear and one-to-one sense, but reflect ultimately — what's going on in the basic relations in society, in terms, most fundamentally, of the contradiction between the forces and relations of production. This gets reflected more or less consciously in people's thinking and then in their political organization."[36]

This linear view is embodied in the RCP's current linear tactics: First study Avakian, then go tell people about it, then expect them to congeal as organization on that basis.

However, the ripening of a revolutionary people is in many ways an *objective* process. For example: The civil rights generation of African American activists were quite organized, while deeply wedded to bourgeois-democratic illusions about integration and voting. They *became* revolutionized by their practical experiences and by events that formed the larger context for that work.

Such moments of mass political experience cry out for revolutionary communist activity, so that strands of oppositional and revolutionary sentiments actually go over to communist consciousness and serious preparation.

I believe we may be entering such a radicalization period among immigrant workers in the U.S. — who come here as refugees of the larger "planet of slums."[37] I hope we see such a period emerge among Black youth in the wake of Katrina and the Jena events.

We need to be very sensitive to such potential radicalization, and poised to respond with energy and strategic appreciation. We need to reclaim the understanding that we are responsible for organizing a specific political revolution for socialism in a specific country (as part of a world process). We need to build a base deep among the oppressed and proletarian. We need to persevere in bringing forward young advanced proletarians as communist political cadre and leaders of society generally. We need an inspiringly multinational movement that has a deep thinking on the *current* conditions facing oppressed nationality communities and lives-and-breathes the struggle against racism and white supremacy. We need to create a visible, attractive, accessible revolutionary communist pole at every step of this process — whose solution of socialist revolution makes sense in a living way to growing numbers of people. We need a militant movement that dares light the sky in combative ways that stir the heart — not a risk-adverse trend that nervously jumps at shadows. And we have to do our work, wisely and well, in ways that protect the party's links to the masses of people, not merely its crucial inner core.

And each part of that last paragraph stands in sharp contrast to the road the RCP has now taken.

Let's grapple together again over how to actually build a base for revolutionary politics deep among the oppressed, learning from the positive and negative experiences of the past.

36. "Bob Avakian, "Making Revolution And Emancipating Humanity," 2007, revcom.us

37. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2006

notes:

May First.
Photo: J.B. Connors

4. Truth, Practice and a Confession of Poverty

> "From the time of Conquer the World [CTW],[38] I have been bringing forward an epistemological rupture with a lot of the history of the ICM [International Communist Movement], including China and the GPCR [Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution], which had this thing arguing that there is such a thing as proletarian truth and bourgeois truth — this was in a major circular put out by the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. In some polemics we wrote around the coup in China, we uncritically echoed this. Later on, we criticized ourselves for that. This rupture actually began with CTW. CTW was an epistemological break — we have to go for the truth, rather than hiding things, etc. — a whole approach of interrogating our whole history. That's why it was taken as a breath of fresh air by some, while other people hated it, saying it reduced the history of the international communist movement and our banner of communism to a 'tattered flag' — which was not the point at all."
>
> Bob Avakian, 2004[39]

> "The dialectical-materialist theory of knowledge places practice in the primary position, holding that human knowledge can in no way be separated from practice and repudiating all the erroneous theories which deny the importance of practice or separate knowledge from practice. Thus Lenin said, 'Practice is higher than (theoretical) knowledge, for it has not only the dignity of universality, but also of immediate actuality.'"
>
> Mao Tsetung, 1937[40]

There are major philosophical questions of truth and reality that communists urgently need to take up. Avakian sniffs at some of them and papers over others.

This is not the place to give these larger questions the depth and freshness they deserve. And I am not the writer to draw those threads together. That must be one of our collective projects-to-come. The best I can offer are the following tentative thoughts on Avakian's philosophical claims.

38. Bob Avakian, *Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will*, 1981, revcom.us

39. "Bob Avakian in a Discussion with Comrades on Epistemology - On Knowing and Changing the World," *Revolutionary Worker* 1262, December 19, 2004, revcom.us

40. Mao Tsetung, *On Practice*. Lenin's quote is from "Conspectus of Hegel's The Science of Logic," marxists.org

A Thought Experiment

Step into a room full of geologists or working philosophers, and announce "Our leader Bob Avakian has made a major epistemological break. He says we have to go for the truth, rather than hiding things."

Would anyone be impressed?

The need for an honest pursuit of truth is pretty old news to most thinking people. So is Avakian's other argument that we should engage the arguments of opponents and independent thinkers in depth — with an intention of learning from them in the course of our own work.[41]

When Louis Althusser first analyzed Marx's epistemological break, he compared this leap in historical understanding to the breaks made by Galileo in physics, Lavoisier in chemistry, Darwin and Mendel in biology and so on.[42] Each of these breaks with medieval idealism split society's thinking into before-and-after — and that philosophical and scientific process, of pioneering a materialist struggle for truth, is now hundreds of years old.

Avakian's epistemological rupture is far more limited. It is conceived only as a "rupture with a lot of the history of the whole ICM." And in that narrow framework, it has value. We should be fans of *Conquer the World*. It opened doors toward a materialist examination of the history of communism by communists.

But this attempted rupture *within* MLM is hardly a breath-taking innovation for how *larger society* thinks. It is really a very late plea for Maoism to race to catch up with a basic scientific approach to truth that is casually assumed in many spheres of investigation.

Revolutionary communists have often cut themselves off from the new facts and creative thinking of our time.

Avakian's break is actually banal wherever serious research and debate goes on — i.e., wherever thinking is not dominated by religious dogma, the lying of politicians, or the bully habits of paid hacks. The fact that his defense of truth may be shocking and disquieting *among Maoists* is not proof of its profundity. It is (unfortunately) a confession of the poverty within that Maoist movement.

There is real glory and continuing value to Maoism, as a body of thought and as a movement for liberation. As a distinct international trend, it was born during the 1960s in raging opposition to both the global rampages of the U.S. and the suffocating gray norms of the Soviet Union. Maoism proclaimed "It is right to rebel against reactionaries," and gave new life to the revolutionary dream. It said "Serve the People," and promised that no one (not even the communist vanguard) would be above the interrogations of the people. A loose global current congealed from many eclectic streams, and it included many of the world's most serious revolutionaries. There have been important and heroic attempts at power — in Turkey, Iran, India, the Philippines, Peru, Nepal and more. There were important revolutionary movements of 1968 that included Maoists in France, Germany, Italy and more. There was real ferment around

41. "Grasp Revolution, Promote Production - Questions of Outlook and Method, Some Points on the New Situation" and "The Struggle in the Realm of Ideas," revcom.us

42. Louis Althusser, "Lenin and Philosophy," 1968, in the collection *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 1971, marxists.org

the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and then at times around the RCP in the U.S.

But since Mao died in 1976, this Maoist movement has not been a fertile nursery of daring analyses and concepts. A mud streak has run through it. Even its best forces often cling to legitimizing orthodoxies, icons, and formulations. The popularization of largely-correct verdicts often replaces the high road of scientific theory — allowing Marxism itself to appear pat, simple and complete. Dogmatic thinking nurtures both self-delusion and triumphalism. In the name of taking established truths to the people, revolutionary communists have often cut themselves off from the new facts and creative thinking of our times.

We need to break with that fiercely, and seek out the others who agree.

In a cloistered universe, Avakian's ruptures in inherited ideologies can appear as a radical break. But measured by our tasks, it hasn't gone nearly far enough.

The issue facing our movement is not so much "are we for truth?" The issue is much more "what is true and what isn't?" It involves the problem of bridging the limited and prejudiced vantage point of each observer, and collectively getting into what is real. It is the measure of theories, established verdicts and relative truths against objective truth.

A Denigration of Practice

In Avakian's hands, theory is teased far away from practice.[43] And the result of this methodological denigration of practice is (ultimately) new strains of subjective idealism.[44]

Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* starts by making exactly this point:

> "The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism — that of Feuerbach included — is that the object, actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively."

A persistent example of this denigration of practice is the marked dilettantism of Avakian's analysis. Avakian is an innovative and provocative thinker, but his expositions are often brainstorms masquerading as science. They often involve his commentary on a bookshelf of popular commentators and typically use a revealing quote or sometimes a close *textual read* of those commentators as a *substitute* for real research. This is fine for agitation and public argumentation. It is fine for running out preliminary ideas and tentative hypotheses. However it is not sufficient for creation and confirmation of the underlying analysis itself. The necessary research (and general

43. We are not just talking about someone's direct personal practice, or just the political practice of one organization. Practice (in this sense) is the broader social practice of changing the world – through productive work, political struggle and scientific experiment. Practice includes the broader historic experience of the revolutionary communist movement generally in taking the socialist road.

44. Idealism (in communist discussion) means a philosophical outlook that sees ideas as primary over matter, so that material reality emerges from spirit or thought, rather than the other way around. Idealism includes "objective idealism" like God-based religious thinking ("In the beginning was the Word..."), and "subjective idealism" like "You can't comprehend my reality" or the idea that you can overcome obstacles with hype and will. This Marxist definition of idealism is very different from the definition often assumed in popular discussion (where "he is idealist" commonly means someone is inspired by ideas and principles.)

summation of practice) does not need to be visible. It can be done by others testing preliminary theses. But it does *need to exist* and it does need to be done in a *critical* (and even skeptical) spirit.[45]

Avakian argues for "doing the work" of serious research and engagement with others. He denounces complacency and "the moronization" of his own followers. Here, as in so many places, his own break is incomplete. The model he demonstrates continues the old problems in new idiosyncratic forms.

Brainstorms masquerading as science.

Take, for example, the RCP's conclusion that there is a concerted rush toward fascist theocracy that is threatening a deep social schism (even perhaps literally "civil war") between thinking people and theocrats within the U.S. Go look at the limited and fragmentary work which underlies that claim — not just underlying the *public argumentation*, but the analysis itself.

Another example: Everyone knows that understanding capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union is important. But how can a movement claim to have a real analysis of those events without working up a credible materialist history of the Soviet Union in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s? How is it possible to assess the Stalin years (with all their complexity, heroism and horror) without having any real analysis of the struggles of the 1930s, including the events called "the purges"[46] in the late thirties? And how can a party claim to "Set the Record Straight" if it makes no effort to learn from the new scholarship and argumentation based on the *mountains* of information contained in the now-opened Soviet archives? How can we more deeply sum up either the revolution or the counter-revolution in China without a credible materialist history of major events like the Great Leap Forward or the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution?

Research doesn't need to be visible. But it does need to exist.

45. For example, Mao's statements are famously pithy. But Mao was a ferocious advocate of real investigation and his verdicts were based on deep research. One illustration: Mao's work *Report from Xunwu* (which only became available in the 1980s) lays bare in great detail how Mao investigated peasant life, as part of his work of agrarian revolution. (Stanford, 1990)

46. The purges refers to events of the late thirties: the trials of previous party leaders, the imprisonment and execution of large parts of the Red Army officer corps, and the mass arrests and convulsions of the Yezhovshchina.

The RCP explores the Soviet experience in a number of places including *Mao's Immortal Contributions*, *Conquer the World*, and in a pocket summation called "The Question of Stalin and 'Stalinism'" (*Revolution*, Fall 1990, p. 13-17). One neglected work was "Advancing the World Revolutionary Movement: Questions of Strategic Orientation," that raised important questions about previous approaches toward building an "international united front" against a single "main enemy."

However, what stands out in these discussions of the Soviet experience itself is that schematic evaluations of Stalin's methods and ideology often remains separated from an in-depth analysis of the actual events and trends within the Soviet society itself. There is a methodological focus on a textual reading (and critique) of writings by Stalin and others. There is much less focus on a dialectical materialist uncovering of how this society developed and changed (including those dynamics which are obscured, not revealed, by official texts and contemporary summations). For example, there is a repeated discussion of Stalin's tendency to mix up different types of contradictions in the use of methods of repression and dictatorship, but little actual analysis of how those social contradictions erupted, what actually happened in the late '30s and what impact it actually had on society and the socialist revolution. As a result, quite a bit of inherited "political truth" remains unchallenged and quite a few of the more difficult historical questions are functionally avoided. It is, in short, still far from "going for the truth rather than hiding things."

When Avakian suggests taking a new look at the GPCR, he means retooling past summations *in light of his new theoretical conclusions.* There has been very little serious revisiting the actual events and problems in light of new debates and new information.[47]

Avakian exhibits a great *precision* of formulation but a real *lack of rigor* in research compared to most serious intellectual work conducted *outside* his movement.[48]

Hyping the objectivity of relative truths

Dogmatism among communists willfully ignores objective reality and its complexity. That is a problem Avakian calls out. Dogmatism among communists also exaggerates the objective nature of relative truth. That is a problem Avakian aggressively perpetuates (in the name of fighting relativism[49]).

There is objective truth meaning truth that objectively exists — i.e., that corresponds to reality independent of the thoughts of humans. For example it is objectively true that the earth revolves around the sun, and this was objectively true for billions of years before any humans subjectively realized it was true. It was even objectively true before there were humans.

But our ideas emerge from "individual human beings with their extremely limited thought."[50] The truth is not just "out there" like a ripened fruit waiting to be plucked and delivered whole. What we have available to us are *relative* truths, which only approximate absolute truth through protracted collective work, where humans develop theories, test and refine them.

In a recent piece, Avakian quotes Mao's *On Practice:*

> "Marxists recognize that in the absolute and general process of the development of the universe, the development of each particular process is relative, and that hence, in the endless flow of absolute truth, man's knowledge of a particular process at any given stage of development is only relative truth."

47. After the "Set the Record Straight" (STRS) project was initiated, people proposing fresh examination of the history and new scholarship were criticized as having "the wrong method." It was formally said "STRS is not a research project." In other words: STRS is conceived as a project that would popularize Avakian's new envisioning of socialism, and retrofit past summations in light of those new theories. This is particularly unfortunate because communists need to set the record straight in a social discussion that has largely passed us by. For the work of STRS see thisiscommunism.org

48. This problem does not uniformly characterize the work associated with the RCP. The analysis of U.S. imperialism in *America in Decline* (by Raymond Lotta with Frank Shannon) displays a different approach to rigor and research (even given the acknowledged errors of conceptual framework). Also see Larry Everest's work on *Oil, Power and Empire: Iraq and the U.S. Global Agenda* (larryeverest.com)

49. Relativism refers to the deeply anti-scientific view that it is (in the final analysis) very difficult or even impossible to know what is true about reality or what is progressive in society. It is a view that assumes our subjectivity is overpowering and even blinding and so assumes an unbridgeable gulf between our theories and reality. As a result, relativism incorrectly assumes that debates over truth are irresolvable duels of "competing narratives." Identity politics and some strains of cultural anthropology, for example, are often heavily influenced by the assumptions of relativism.

50. Fredrick Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, quoted in Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, "Absolute and Relative Truth, or the Eclecticism of Engels as Discovered by A. Bogdanov." marxists.org

Right after quoting this, Avakian adds: "It is relative truth, but it is truth."[51]

Avakian acknowledges the existence of relative truth, but his addition here pooh-poohs Mao's point. And it deliberately downplays all the ways *relative* truth divides into two — into both truth *and falsehood*. The relationships between our relative truths and reality are dynamic, contradictory and often painfully tenuous.

Relativism incorrectly asserts that humans are unable to distinguish between true and false, progressive and reactionary. Materialist dialectics, however, insists that we can, through work and struggle, determine true things about reality; but that the truths we uncover remain inherently partial and relative compared to the full and absolute truth about objective reality. If we really grasp that, we see the importance of constantly identifying errors and contradictions in our current thinking.

Passionate defense of objective truth becomes the front-end for overstating the correctness of flawed theories.

The inherent contradictions of relative truth are the reason communists need to place great importance on critical thinking, collective vetting, public self-interrogation and the application of the mass line. It takes a great deal of collective struggle and practice to advance human knowledge through the necessary spirals from lower to higher, from somewhat correct to more correct.

The RCP advocates returning complexity to communist analysis, but then, all too often leaches complexity from its own discussion. Here, the real, nagging, structural problems and controversies surrounding the development of correct understandings are minimized. With Avakian's method and approach, relative truth, objective truth, and absolute truth are pancaked flat, producing a simplified set of ideological assertions.

Put another way: The actual thing, the perception of that thing, the latest conception arising from perceptions, and the latest presentation of that concept are effectively muddled. [52]

It creates a situation where the RCP can give lip service to critical thinking and yet promote a logic of close-minded zealotry.

At the end, a passionate-sounding defense of objective truth becomes the front-end for overstating the correctness of Avakian's own *current, partial and often flawed set of working assumptions.* Supporters of the RCP typically end up promoting a reductionist package: (1) There is the truth, (2) it corresponds to objective reality and (3) "Avakian knows the way out."

About the Class Struggle Over Truth

Avakian describes how he views truth entering the class struggle:

> "...so long as society is divided into classes, anything that is learned will become part of the class struggle in many different ways... The truth doesn't have a social content in that sense. It just ob-

51. Bob Avakian, *Making Revolution And Emancipating Humanity, Part 1: Beyond The Narrow Horizon Of Bourgeois Right, 2007, revcom.us*

52. One handy example: look at Avakian's definition of instrumentalism in footnote 10 – where he casually refers to "reality" when he is really referring to an ideological presentation of reality.

> jectively exists. But knowing the truth (or approximating the truth) is important in the same way beauty is important (even while people's differing class viewpoints will lead them to have different conceptions, or notions, about what beauty is and what is and is not beautiful). And there is this process, as I was speaking to earlier — how truths enter into the class struggle in a very non-reductionist way."[53]

Let's deal with how this describes the way truths "enter into the class struggle."

This view underestimates the ways class struggle is involved in *how* relative truth is learned. Truth doesn't suddenly "enter" the class struggle — because we discover truth through a social process, our knowledge of truth never exists in a realm unmarked by class struggle. Avakian's comments display a lack of appreciation (actually a denial) of the problem of observer (and of human observers' inherent limitations and subjectivities).

The real existing *social* process of uncovering and refining relative truths does not start with a classless inventory of data or a classless connecting of dots to make concepts. There is not a moment when we all watch those new truths cruise into the choppy waters of social controversy.

Complex truths (and in particular complex *social* truths) are marked by struggle at *each point* in their existence: including in their whole process of conception and elaboration, in their struggle for acceptance, in the ways they are popularized, in the way their social implications are portrayed, and in the struggle over their eventual replacement by newer and more correct concepts. And such struggle — which takes philosophical, ideological and political forms — is inherently entwined with the larger *class* struggle raging over the direction and nature of society itself.

I can think of three ways Avakian's error manifests itself:

First, there is the marked lack of appreciation by Avakian of his own subjective limitations and of the *relative* nature of *his* attempts at truth.

Second, there is a one-sided overestimation by the RCP of the degree to which scientific work in bourgeois society spontaneously approximates materialist dialectics.[54] The RCP has downplayed the differences that separate materialist dialectics from the

53. Here is the full quote so the reader can see these points in context:

> "Truth is good for the proletariat. I don't mean that in a narrow way. Truth is good for the political struggle, yes — the more that is understood about reality, the more favorable it will be strategically for the proletariat and its revolutionary objectives. But there is a whole thing being missed if truth is approached in a narrow and utilitarian way. If somebody discovers something about the big bang, that will be interesting and exciting. Truths are important just for what they are, because that's the kind of world we want to get to. For what they are. Human beings do need to be amazed. You don't need religion to realize or appreciate that. In the motion of the material world and the interaction of human beings with the rest of reality, mysteries get resolved and new mysteries emerge. Why wouldn't someone with broadness of mind be interested in questions of cosmology in their own right? (Cosmology refers to the science and philosophy of the origins and development of the universe.) On the other hand, in another dimension, so long as society is divided into classes, anything that is learned will become part of the class struggle in many different ways, including in the dimension of the proletariat knowing the world more profoundly to change it more profoundly.... The truth is important to the proletariat in two senses — or should be. One, it is important in the same way that beauty is important, or should be important. Yes, as opposed to the truth, different people do have different social viewpoints on what is beautiful. The truth doesn't have a social content in that sense. It just objectively exists. But knowing the truth (or approximating the truth) is important in the same way beauty is important (even while people's differing class viewpoints will lead them to have different conceptions, or notions, about what beauty is and what is and is not beautiful). And there is this process, as I was speaking to earlier — how truths enter into the class struggle in a very non-reductionist way." ("Intoxicated with the Truth," *Revolution* 9, July 24, 2005)

many shades of positivism and empiricism in modern science. This overestimation of spontaneous materialist dialectics has both political and philosophical implications for the RCP — especially given the new strategic prominence the RCP now gives those strata who "work with ideas."[55]

A third manifestation is Avakian's rejection of "class truth." Some of this is hard to unravel since Avakian's sketchy polemics treat the concepts of "class truth," "political truth" and "truth as an organizing principle"– as virtually equivalent, and implies that they all imply a denial (or deceitful ignoring) of objective reality. Avakian makes no critical references to Lenin's *Materialism and Empiro-Criticism* or Mao's *On Practice* or Engels' *Anti-Duhring* — so we are left without any clear sense of what, precisely, his break is.

However, in fact, the communist notion of class truth is not "whatever we believe is true, whatever the bourgeoisie believes is not." Nor is it "we create our reality by declaring our truths, while the bourgeoisie creates its reality through its truths." Nor is it "whatever serves our cause is true, whatever doesn't serve our cause should be treated as untrue."

Avakian criticizes the May 16th circular, which was an opening shot of the GPCR. It says:

> "Just when we began the counter-offensive against the wild attacks of the bourgeoisie, the authors of the Report raised the slogan: 'Everyone is equal before the truth.' This is a bourgeois slogan. Completely negating the class nature of truth, they use this slogan to protect the bourgeoisie and oppose the proletariat, oppose Marxism-Leninism and oppose Mao Tsetung Thought." [56]

54. Ardea Skybreak's recent book on evolution and creationism presents the RCP's current thinking on science. In one significant footnote she wrote:

> "In fact, the method of dialectical and historical materialism is just as applicable to the natural sciences as to the social sciences. While most working scientists today would not acknowledge this, either because of a lack of familiarity with some of the terms involved (dialectics in particular) and/or prejudice against dialectical and historical materialism's Marxist-communist connotations, it is objectively the case that what most groundbreaking scientists actually *do* — the way they pose questions, structure research projects and analyze data — especially in the *historical sciences* (such as evolutionary biology, paleontology, anthropology, astronomy, etc.), reflects, of necessity, important aspects of dialectical and historical materialism, even though most scientists today apply this somewhat unconsciously, and not consistently and systematically, and in general think of what they are doing as simply applying 'the modern scientific method.'" (*The Science of Evolution and the Myth of Creationism – Knowing What's Real and Why It Matters*, Chapter 8, footnote 13, 2006, insight-press.com.)

Scientists are clearly dealing with material reality in their work, and generally apply forms of materialism (at least in their narrow areas of expertise). But this highly qualified statement by Skybreak avoids the fact that there is sharp class struggle over philosophy and ideology raging around all scientific processes of discovery – and there always has been. Many "ground breaking" scientists (the names Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr and Stephen Jay Gould come to mind) have real and important differences with materialist dialectics. It is wrong (and more than a little condescending) to chalk this up to "lack of familiarity" or "prejudice" (including for the three I just mentioned, who were quite acquainted with communist thinking). In fact there are real controversies and differences here, including philosophical insights uncovered by non-communist scientists that communists should learn from. Gould's work, for example, raises important challenges to entrenched linear assumptions about progress in nature and society.

55. If there is anything we can learn from what Stephen Jay Gould exposes in his historical writings, like *The Mismeasure of Man*, it is the degree to which ideological blinders and struggle mark the methods, theories and discoveries of scientists – just like they do for everyone else (including communist leaders).

56. This document is believed to have been written by Mao directly or collectively under his close supervision. *Circular of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party*, May 16, 1966. included in the collection *Important Documents on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China*, Foreign Language Press, Peking 1970, marxists.org

An article from *Peking Review*'s revolutionary days writes,

> "Truth has a class character. There have never been truths commonly regarded as 'indisputable' by all classes in the field of social science."[57]

Why is that wrong?

Is Lenin so wrong when he writes,

> "It is one of our basic tasks to contrapose our own truth to bourgeois 'truth,' and win its recognition."[58]

Or Alain Badiou, when he writes,

> "Ultimately, we should affirm that the same abstract description of facts by no means leads to the same mode of thinking, when it operates under different political axioms."[59]

On the Re-envisioning of Socialist Transition

All of these philosophical problems bubble up in Avakian's re-envisioning of socialism and communism — the underestimation of practice, the overestimation of the objective character of tentative theories, a dilettantism of historical summation, and the underestimation of class struggle in the fight for truth. There is a lot of assertion about the future with little appreciation of the ways that unanticipated particularities in the future will necessarily shape possibilities and policy. And again, much of this is hard to pin down because of the sketchiness of Avakian's presentation and the incomplete articulation of his break with Mao. All this will need a more extensive exploration in its own right.

However, for now: the struggle to advance to communism is presented (by Avakian) as a highly ideological process, where intellectual contestations over truth and the allowing of debate (important though those two things are) one-sidedly overshadow the need for waves of mass struggle against old ways, old ideas and capitalist roaders in high places. And once again, Avakian does not correctly understand how the needed transformations of world outlook (among the masses generally) are connected to that class struggle.

Avakian raises the importance of holding onto revolutionary power firmly, while risking a lot to allow space for ferment, criticism and debate.[60] His is a model of a state with key power levers (army, top courts, foreign policy) firmly in the hands of a single vanguard party that simultaneously encourages "vibrant debate and dissent." Avakian

57. Shanghai Revolutionary Mass Criticism Writing Group, "Who Transforms Whom? A comment on Kairov's 'Pedagogy'," *Peking Review*, March 6, 1970, p. 11

58. V. I. Lenin, Speech Delivered At An All-Russia Conference Of Political Education Workers Of Gubernia and Uyezd Education Departments, November 3, 1920; marxists.org

59. Alain Badiou, "The Cultural Revolution: the Last Revolution," *positions* 13:3, Winter 2005, page 485

60. Avakian poses it this way:

> "What is the new synthesis?... there is a point of basic orientation that is worth quoting from a paper written by a leading comrade of our Party: 'If we try to embrace, encompass and explore non-communist people, ideas and perspectives ever more widely and flexibly (which we should do) but do so on the basis of something other than a truly solid core and strategic grounding in OUR project and objectives, we will at one and the same time fail to harvest as much as we could from these wider explorations and initiatives AND, most unconscionably, we will LOSE THE WHOLE THING!' Now, this has particular application with regard to the orientation and approach of our Party; but, in the broader framework of the larger world we need to be transforming, this also has more general application. And what's being said here is an important aspect of the principle of solid core with a lot of elasticity, which is itself a kind of encapsulation, or concentrated expression, of what is involved in the new synthesis I am referring to." ("The Basis, The Goals, And The Methods Of The Communist Revolution," revcom.us)

raises a whole subsidiary set of issues regarding the rule of law under socialism, contested elections and the ruling party's approach to criticisms. He starts a needed polemic against the way that the communist movement has often viewed intellectuals (and really anyone who thinks) as "problem people." He questions the naive notion that the problems of previous socialism can be solved by institutionalizing more democracy of various kinds.[61] And Avakian explores the historic problem of enabling the masses of people to become (more and more) a decisive part of the "we" that rules during the socialist transition period.

To all of this one can say: So far so good. Virtually everyone recognizes that a major dilemma of earlier socialism was that there was a waning of political liveliness and popular support, and a difficulty rallying mass revolutionary activity for new advances toward communism.

But if we are going to deal with all this, let's get real as well as "visionary."

Once again, important questions are raised, and interesting tentative conclusions are put forward — that deserve more critical examination than are allowed around his party.

Avakian's denigration of practice appears here in at least three ways:

First, there is an overestimation of how fully the *theoretical* problems of transition can be solved isolated from new practice in seizing, holding and wielding state power. It defies the insights of materialist dialectics (and of communist epistemology) to think anyone can make an overarching new "re-envisioning" solely by mulling over the bones of past revolutions, or that the nagging world historic problems of socialist transition can be pre-solved in some definitive and decisive way.

Mao started developing a critique of Stalin's socialism quite early in his revolution. He fought to forge a new path (starting with the "Yenan Way" before victory, and then increasingly after coming to power in 1949). But his transition from critique to a new developed-and-developing synthesis *required* the practical experiences of actually building socialism (including both victories *and* failures): land reform, implementation of the Soviet industrialization model, the Great Leap Forward, Socialist Education campaigns, and then the GPCR.

Think of the living process, methodology and epistemology concentrated in Mao's famous remark:

> "In the past we waged struggles in rural areas, in factories, in the cultural field, and we carried out the socialist education movement. But all this failed to solve the problem because we did not find a form, a method, to arouse the broad masses to expose our dark aspect openly, in an all-round way and from below." [62]

Mao's theoretical understanding of socialism and his alternative road developed *in the course of those storms of class struggle* — in the *practice* of China taking the socialist road and the Soviet Union taking the capitalist road. Mao's breakthroughs could *only* have been developed that way. History has given us many critiques of Stalin's socialism —

61. Among the works I think deserves more critical engagement than it has gotten is Avakian's polemic with Indian Maoist K. Venu which probes problems with hoping to adopt Paris Commune models of radical mass democracy. Bob Avakian, *Democracy: More Than Ever We Can and Must Do Better Than That*.

62. *Peking Review*, No.15, April 10, 1970, p.29

but Mao's is unique in its profundity and materialism in part because it is rooted in (and extracted from) the vast *practice* of our second great revolution.

New theoretical solutions require a deep summation of the past — but *also* the living practice of actually going through the transition anew (with all the real testing, new errors, and new innovations that this makes possible).

The RCP has always leaned too far in its assumptions of what can be known apart from practice. Two cautionary examples are its past declarations that homosexuality would be "eliminated" under socialism, and its current declarations that it can know (from afar) which transitions to power are possible in Nepal and which are not. The whole elaborate structure of future society that Avakian has constructed in his mind is a creation and culmination of that mistaken methodology.

Second, there is an overestimation of how much the nagging *practical* problems of socialist transition can be solved now, ahead of time. It is as if adopting Avakian's approaches like "solid core with a lot of elasticity" now is crucial (for all communists worldwide) to avoid the previous dynamics that plagued socialism in China and the USSR. In fact many stubborn problems of the *actual* transition to communism and the *material* basis for solving them emerge from the actual class struggle (from the *practice!*) of the *particular* socialist transition, and can't simply be solved ahead of time.

Certainly the future revolutionary movement must adopt far better methods of learning from and working with people than communists (including the RCP) have historically employed. And yes, improvements *now* in the grasp of mass line can greatly improve the capacity and nature of that movement which ultimately seizes power.

But revolutions are always (by their nature) on the brink of being "drawn and quartered." This is not (as Avakian suggests) something brought on by the decisions and choices of revolutionaries. It is not the opening of doors that brings the revolution to an abyss, but the abyss that has historically made it so hard to open the doors.[63] And those problems can be *anticipated but not solved* apart from the concrete dilemmas of the actual process.

Third, Avakian injects an idealist element into the RCP's politics when he claims that his "re-envisioning" is at the center of his synthesis. This "enriched What is to be Done-ism" funnels massive energy into questions of the future ultimate transition to communism (like the controversies over "crossing the narrow horizon of bourgeois right"[64]). This method denies the specificity of politics at each necessary stage of revolutionary practice.

It is extremely important to grapple, theoretically and practically, with the problems of socialism and capitalist restoration. It is extremely important to correctly sum up the experiences of the 20th century and make those insights known broadly among the people. But there is an idealist air of classic utopian socialism about Avakian's work on this: as if we can show people how to act now by fleshing out fully (from our current imaginings) details the future society must adopt.

63. "Drawn and quartered" was a medieval execution that pulled the prisoner apart using four horses. Avakian's views on reasons for deliberately risking having the party and the revolution "drawn and quartered" appear in the "Discussion with Comrades on Epistemology - On Knowing and Changing the World."

64. See *Making Revolution And Emancipating Humanity, Part 1: Beyond The Narrow Horizon Of Bourgeois Right*

On one hand, this involves a wrong understanding of class struggle under socialism. And on the other hand, this approach directs the attention of the party and the masses *now* aggressively toward issues of "re-envisioned" communism, leaving many questions of *this moment's* struggle for socialism unexamined and undiscussed.

Take the theoretical speculation made on the future transition to communism, and compare it to the glaring *poverty* of theoretical work that has been devoted to many other core problems of the *specific* revolution we need to take responsibility for: on the struggle to create a revolutionary base, on deindustrialization and the situation of African American people, on the entwining of the revolutionary processes across North America, and a dozen other ignored questions. Why does a movement that emerged from the 1960s have such a muffled voice when it comes to society's raging controversies over ecology and sexuality?

Where are the poets, novelists, comics, songs, films, jazz riffs inspired by a communist outlook?

Let's go a step further using a specific example: Where are the theories of culture, the literary criticism or even discussion of television that any real revolutionary movement would need? Where is our *Yenan Forum*[65] for this generation's multimedia world? Where are the works (or even serious commentary) on film, philosophy, geology, geography, linguistics, physics, and more? Where is any analysis or visionary exploitation of the Internet and all the dizzying opportunity in the new media?

This lack of theory and commentary connects with real shortcomings in practice. As we wonder why there are no Kreuzbergs in the U.S., we also have to ask: Where are the poets, the novelists, the beloved songs, the shocking films, the cartoons, the jazz riffs inspired by a revolutionary communist outlook? Where are the video game designers? How has the RCP trained, squandered or dissuaded the artists who came to it or who emerged within its ranks or who are just "out there" working in society?

There, undeniably, are a few people, projects and theoretical works that could be listed in answer to all this, but what does it say that there are so painfully few?

Reality is a Tough Judge

Meanwhile, there is that glaring disconnect between all this talk of "wild and wooly" debate in a "re-envisioned" future society and this party's current grim press for ideological singularity.

Who could emerge from this party's training prepared (or inclined) to creatively lead in the riptides of mass debate that will accompany any real revolutionary process or future socialist society?

In the end, the RCP's promises of fresh materialist analysis are not realized. The past remains heavily mythologized, the present is crudely simplified and hyped, and the newly "re-envisioned" future serves as justification for idealist methods.

The fetish of the leader is rooted in the fetish of the word. The fetish of the word

65. Mao gave a highly influential series of lectures called *Talks at the Yenan Forum On Literature and Art*, in May 1942. marxists.org

is the platform for the promotion of the speaking man. These problems really *are* epistemological.

This body of work displays a clear streak of subjective idealism — a celebration of will, a distance from practice, and a marriage between the self and the idea. The compulsive self-referencing of Avakian's work (that everyone finds so odd) is the result of seeking to painstakingly situate his every new theoretical remark *within the grid of his OWN previous body of work* — not mainly within frameworks of his audiences or the rich explorations others make around us.

You can hide problems using info diets. But the truth will out.

Reality is a tough judge: You can run on vapors. You can hide problems using denial and info diets. But in the end, the truth will come out. That was true for Lysenko.[66] It was true for the RCP's faulty 1980s predictions of "world war or revolution." It is true when the preachers around us swear "we live in the end times."

Let's critically re-visit *On Practice* together. Let's critically consider what comrades in the international communist movement are saying philosophically. Then let's open it up and re-find our path.

66. Trofim Lysenko (1898-1976), the prominent Soviet biologist-agronomist who argued that acquired traits could be inherited and that there was no special genetic material involved in reproduction. He claimed he could create new strains of food grain by subjecting kernels to adverse conditions. His theories and methods had a devastating impact on Soviet science, in part because scientific adversaries were silenced and sometimes punished. The discovery of DNA conclusively proved him wrong.

Immigrant workers rally for legal rights with a Catholic mass in county fairgrounds, North Carolina.

Photo: Mike Ely

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Particularities of Christians and Fascists

The RCP has given prominence to Avakian's atheist polemics against religion. These are important topics. There *needs* to be a lively militant atheist-materialist pole raised among the people and in the fight against political reaction. This is after all a highly religious country, and this is a political moment when fascist forces of the Religious Right have been seizing positions of power.

However, Avakian's analyses of religion have a distant, schematic, and reductionist quality. These works show little interest in the specific *social* and *historic* roots of people's religious faith — and why particular religions have such power among particular communities. There is little appreciation of the complexity, sophistication and diversity of what people actually believe. And quite frankly there is little respect for the people and little real understanding of *why* many believe — or why some don't.[67]

The problem is methodology: As Avakian dissects Christian fundamentalism and the "Christian Fascist" political movements, you can't shake the feeling that it is done without really *knowing* the people or their beliefs. I don't mean just *personally* knowing — but the deeper scientific sense of knowing. There is a necessary substratum of research, investigation and the summation of political practice that is largely missing here.

Little respect for the people. Little appreciation of what they believe and why they believe it.

For one thing, you can't actually understand people and religious movements (not even "fundamentalists") by *relying so heavily* on a close textual read of their holy scriptures. And a *communist* understanding of political fundamentalism can't be developed by just reworking lots of secular-liberal exposés of theocratic political trends. You can't speculate that a Christian theocratic political order is coming without studying the real historically-specific political obstacles to both centralized fascist

67. As we publish these "Nine Letters," there are announcements of a new book on religion coming from Bob Avakian (*Away with all Gods*, Insight Press, scheduled for publication in March 2008). That book will touch on issues discussed here.

power and the establishment of state religion.

I spent most of the 1970s among West Virginia coalminers who (as most people know) include many born-again Christians.[68] This is personal experience, admittedly from quite a few years ago. But it *was* experience and it has left me with a sense of the living contradictions surrounding religion and the cultural wars.

Here is Avakian on the causes of religion:

> "...religious notions don't appear out of, or arise out of, the mist or out of nowhere, but of course have their roots, historically, in the ignorance, the lack of knowledge, of human beings in early society; but they have been carried forward, codified and institutionalized by ruling classes throughout the ages as part of enforcing their rule."[69]

This view attributes religion to a mix of ancient ignorance plus the later ruling class manipulations. It profoundly underestimates how deeply religious faith is rooted in the *needs and desperations* of people's existence. Faith and religious community are rooted in the search for consolation and meaning.

Those religious impulses are then shaped by very specific historical experiences and simultaneously by the ideological operatives of *various* classes in society (including, *but certainly not limited to*, the ideologues of the ruling classes).

To take one example: The adoption of Christianity by enslaved African people in America was not *just* the result of enforced ignorance or the forced indoctrination by Christian slave-owners (though both were involved). The mass conversion of slaves to Christianity happened as part of larger religious movements that swept across the U.S., sometimes in the face of resistance from their immediate owners. In the Second Great Awakening of the early 1800s, African slaves and freemen flocked to camp meetings held by traveling white Baptist and Methodist preachers, some of whom were convinced of the humanity of the slaves (a then-radical idea) and of the slaves' subsequent need for salvation.. As they embraced Christianity and as they established churches, Black people shaped and reshaped Christian worship — in both form and content — marking it with their dreams and accomodations and, in some moments, creating a gospel of escape or emancipation.

The defining elements of Christianity were certainly codified over centuries by ruling class ideologues. Many core messages Black people received via Christianity reinforced and justified oppression. The Christ of the Bible preaches "turn the other cheek" to the oppressed. Slaves were told that that African people were "the descendants of Ham," condemned to be "servant of servants."[70]

But at the same time, the "spirit-filled" worship and music of plantation churches

68. In that primitive communist organizing among coalminers, our atheism was often more shocking and fascinating than our communism. No serious discussions of the future or world affairs got very far without colliding head-on into dispensationalist interpretations of events, based on the Book of Revelations. And that collision with fundamentalism was hardly just ideological: In 1974, preachers in central West Virginia organized "Textbook Protests" — wildcat strikes against the teaching of sex education, drug education and Black literature in the high schools. RCP supporters organized a coalition of miners and Black Vietnam veterans to politically oppose these strikes and stop their spread out of West Virginia's central Kanawha valley. It was an early battle of the cultural wars – straight up against the then-emerging Religious Right.

69. Bob Avakian, "Making Revolution And Emancipating Humanity," 2007, revcom.us

70. King James Bible, Genesis 9:25

was carried over from West African cultures and they developed through the creative work of once-African people. The Christian fervor by many African American people over the last two hundred years is rooted not mainly in the imposition of "false consciousness" from without, but in a deep need for ecstatic relief and mutual consolation in a horrific world.

Avakian often points out (correctly) that science can satisfy the human need for "awe and wonder." But religion is not *just* born from that outward-looking desire for context and amazement — but often in the painful inner despair of loss and powerlessness.

Marx understood this and his assessment is a sharp contrast to Avakian's:

> "The basis of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion,* religion does not make man. Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realization* of the human essence because the *human essence* has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual *aroma*. *Religious* distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people."[71]

I think back on many intense discussions with fundamentalist believers — where I would dig into the absurdity of a loving God allowing innocents to suffer, or into the scientific absurdities of Genesis. While I was thinking I had "really pinned them down," my friends often turned to me in exasperation to say, "Look, this is really not the issue. I *feel* Jesus as a living, healing, guiding presence in my heart."

In fact the attraction of born-again Christianity includes an ecstatic "personal relationship" — not *just* the certitude of absolute biblical truth and attraction of reactionary morality in a world of "turbocapitalism."[72] And getting at *that* personal attachment requires upholding Marx's dialectical materialism over Avakian's superficial rationalism.

You can undermine brittle dogmatic religions by using their inconsistencies. You can pry some individuals over toward communistic atheism that way. But you really can't touch the potency of religion if you don't appreciate the source of its influence.

You can't challenge Christian morality by crudely equating it with venality — with Old Testament "horrors" or the ugliest "traditional values." You also have to deal (in truly dialectical ways) with Jesus' admonitions to "love your brother" and "turn the other cheek." You have to deal with grace, redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation, charity and hope for blessings — in other words, you have to all-sidedly deal (criti-

71. In the early nineteenth century, opium was a newly arrived painkiller. Marx's famous remark is not simply "drugs as illusion and escape" but a metaphor of self-dosed relief from agony. Karl Marx, *Abstract from The Introduction to Contribution to The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1844, marxists.org.

72. Since his work "Great Objectives & Grand Strategy," Avakian has repeated his analysis of where the rise of fundamentalism and the religious impulse comes from. Avakian does acknowledge the role of "restlessness, anxiety, insecurity, and longings" rooted in the latest workings of "turbo capitalism" – but those points are made firmly within the context of the overall reductionism I am criticizing here.

cally!) with what actually *attracts* people to Christian teachings.

Further: Religions are not just scientifically "wrong" world outlooks — but are also the rituals, traditions and cultures through which people identify themselves with historically constituted communities. Look at the stubborn Catholicism of many Irish people or the tenacious Judaism among dispersed Jewish people — who are often not particularly drawn to the supernatural.

No gods hear our muffled cries. But religion is not simply self-deception.

There are no gods who hear our muffled cries. No one should expect divine blessings or miracles. The meek will not inherit the earth. But that doesn't mean religion is *simply* self-deception or that communities of people don't reap real benefits by organizing themselves into congregations.

To return to my previous example: Can anyone hope to deal with the gap separating communism from the radical sections of Black people without appreciating the reasons *why* many African American people are so deeply attached to their churches and faiths?

Surely we have to understand the historic *institutional* role of Black churches, as economic support, as a political voice for a voiceless community, and even as the wellspring of world-changing music. Yes, those churches have been a force for accommodation and even reactionary purposes. But how can we evaluate all this if we don't understand that religion (including the Black church) has had progressive and even revolutionary currents *all* through history. Let's understand well the armed preacher Thomas Münzer,[73] the slaves' prophet Nat Turner,[74] the last Puritan John Brown, and the still-beloved Sheik Bedreddin.[75]

The RCP has recently promoted the observation that "The Bible Belt is the lynching belt" — to suggest that violent racism is one of fundamentalist Christianity's bedrock "traditional values." But this approach lacks a sense of both history and dialectics: Christianity of the southern Bible Belt is not *just* the religion of the lynch mob — but *also* of the lynched. This is because the Bible Belt *and* the lynching belt is centered on the Black Belt — the former plantation areas of the deep South (what Black people called "the soil of our suffering"), a place where *two* distinct nations and national cultures cohabited in gruesome ways. Christianity there *includes* the African American churches.

Quite a few Black churches uphold some reactionary social values (including most recently in the controversies over abortion and same sex marriage). However, the gospel of the African American churches is obviously *not* marked by the "traditional

73. Radical preacher Thomas Münzer (approx. 1489-1525) led a great peasant rebellion against the feudal church and princes in late medieval Germany – claiming he was called by the Holy Spirit to establish theocratic order marked by common ownership of the means of life. See: Fredrick Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 1850, marxists.org

74. Nat Turner (1800–1831), preaching that he had seen a great sign from God, led the greatest slave rebellion recorded in U.S. history in Virginia's Southampton County. See: Mike Ely, "The Slave Rebellion of General Nat Turner," mikeely.wordpress.com

75. The revolutionary Muslim preacher Bedreddin (1359-1420) led a rebellion against the Ottoman Empire in 1416. His early communist motto was: "Share everything you have, except the lips of your lover." He inspired Nazim Hikmet's masterful poem, The Epic of Sheik Bedreddin (Persea Books, 1977)

76. If you don't know what I'm talking about, listen to African-American theologian James Cone on "Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree," Oct. 2006, www.hds.harvard.edu/news/events_online/ingersoll_2006.html

value" of white supremacy. They have often interpreted the story of Jesus to explain, validate and inspire their own struggle for survival (including against the horrible threat and impact of lynching).[76]

Taking Claims of Fundamentalists Literally

Part of the problem with the RCP's current approach is the fetish of the word — here taking the form of overestimating the value of textual readings. When fundamentalists say that they take the bible literally, a dialectical materialist can't take that statement literally. [77]

Sometimes secular people read the barbaric punishments advocated by the Old Testament and assume that fundamentalists "must" uphold this or else disavow the Bible. This is exactly what Avakian teaches.[78]

But in fact, many fundamentalists explain that (in their *actual* theology) there were different "covenants" with God — including a Mosaic Covenant (in the Old Testament) that was then *replaced* by a New Covenant brought by Jesus (in the New Testament). They often uphold some passages and insights of the Old Testament (like the Ten Commandments), but basically are not "bound" by its details or general moral tone.

In other words, conservative Christians have, long ago, cobbled together various *theological* ways of dealing with the contradictions and barbarism of the Old Testament. There is a long-standing conflict between that Christian fringe which *literally* believes in stoning people to death, and the broader ranks of fundamentalists who think those folks are nuts (even while they often condemn sex outside marriage in their own ways).

77. The RCP has also painted political Islam generally, with a single big brush. Avakian says (in a quote published by itself):

> "What we see in contention here with Jihad on the one hand and McWorld/McCrusade on the other hand, are historically outmoded strata among colonized and oppressed humanity up against historically outmoded ruling strata of the imperialist system. These two reactionary poles reinforce each other, even while opposing each other. If you side with either of these 'outmodeds,' you end up strengthening both."

Is there really only one "Jihad" that we "see in contention" with the U.S.? Is it all really so monochromatic? Though Islamic forces haven't created political programs that can liberate people from imperialism, are there really only "historically outmoded" strata involved (presumably meaning: the entrenched comprador, bureaucrat capitalist and feudal elements)? Aren't there places where political Islam has gained influence among other strata, or where its politics may reflect other programs? What would a serious and dialectical class analysis of the different Iraqi movements show? Shouldn't the inter-imperialist contradiction also be seen as a considerable part of the U.S. "war on terror" and its consolidation of its hegemonic status, so that "what we see in contention here" is something more complex and many sided than colliding "universalisms." These issues are beyond the scope of these letters, but obviously demand further engagement.

78. Just one example of many, Avakian writes:

> "...the point that I've been hammering at has to do with a key contradiction I have spoken to a number of times—the contradiction that these Christian Fascists are objectively caught up in—the contradiction between an insistence on a literalist interpretation of the Bible, the insistence that the Bible is, in every word and detail, the true word of God that must be believed and followed to the letter, with all that the Bible *actually calls for* —all that in contradiction to what most people in this society would consider just, decent, and even sane." (from: "Religion, Morality... Polarization, Repolarization, Two Solid Cores in Fundamental Opposition," September 25, 2005, revcom.us

79. Bible, KJV, John 8:1-11

Their world is NOT rocked when the RCP naively points out that the Old Testament calls for stoning sinners. "After all," people would explain to me, "Jesus stopped the stoning of the adulterous woman and said 'let those without sin cast the first stone.'"79

With a few exceptions, the RCP ignores such distinctions — and at the street level, RCP activists (following *Revolution* newspaper[80]) imply that executing gay people or disobedient women *must be* the program of the Religious Right today (and even of fundamentalists generally) because (after all) "that's what the Bible says." But it is wrong to functionally ignore the complex shades and divisions of faith.[81] You can't act like fundamentalists (or even the politically active ones) are inherently or generally inclined toward literal theocracy[82] or (at the same time) imply that fundamentalists are essentially the only *real* Christians because of their literalism.

To understand the Religious Right, you have to do more than a close read of their Bible and a few public statements.

To *actually* understand the political programs (and shades of program) among the Religious Right forces (or anyone else), you have to do some real work of investigation. And you can't just analyze the *text* of their programs — you have to analyze their actual living political movement, and what its driving contradictions are (which in real politics often lead in directions quite different from *stated* intentions.)

Related example: Over many years of writing about elections for *Revolution* and the *Revolutionary Worker*, I was often amazed by how *literally* some within the RCP assumed that the *stated* program of bourgeois politicians represented what they *actually intended* to do. I sometimes thought, "This party is the only place in society where the statements of lying politicians are actually believed." Again: the fetish of the word leads to overestimating the analytic value of close textual reading.

It is certainly true that some powerful ruling class circles have deliberately trained, financed, promoted and empowered extremely reactionary Christian fundamentalist forces. In many ways that process has reshaped these forces and even reworked their theology. It is true that the Religious Right has a common program: they *generally* want to "bring religion back into the public square," erase the separation of church and state, funnel tax money into their ministries, replace state social programs with

80. One notorious example of this among many is the Revolution series "God the Original Fascist" by A. Brooks (revcom.us/godoriginalfascist) which focuses on the five Mosaic books of the Bible and claims they are representative of "the fundamental essence" of the Bible. The whole argument rests on ignorance about what Christians (including fundamentalist Protestants) actually believe about the relationship of Old and New Testament. They are after all Christians – it is the teachings of Jesus (not Moses) that they consider "the fundamental essence" of their faith.

81. Just one small example: The contentious theological and political differences among Christian conservatives don't really come up. What separates dispensationalist Christians from their opponents – and what does that mean for "end times" predictions of the Book of Revelations, the Rapture and religious beliefs about Israel in particular? Does it matter which deep political and theological differences have historically divided Southern white and African American Baptists? Yes, it does. If we communists don't understand such things, how deep is our analysis of "what fundamentalists believe"? Do we want to talk to actual believers about their actual beliefs and about actual political currents arising from the Bible Belt and "Red States"?

82. Theocracy is a form of class rule where the state and legal system are dominated by religious principles and figures, ruling in the name of their God.

83. Bob Avakian, "The Pyramid of Power And the Struggle to Turn This Whole Thing Upside Down," *Revolutionary Worker* #1231, March 7, 2004

church programs, and promote vicious reactionary values in opposition to the '60s values, science and progressive thinking. It is true that one piece of that movement literally wants a fascist Christian theocracy. All of that is true, dangerous and quite alarming.

But it is a huge leap to claim that a Christian theocracy is literally in the works, or that no other organized force has comparable political initiative within the ruling "pyramid":[83]

> "Straight up — Bush and his people aren't just ordinary Republicans. And they're not ordinary Christians either. They are Christian Fascists — dangerous fanatics who aim to make the U.S. a religious dictatorship and to force this upon the world. If they get their way — and they are very far along the road to getting it — society will be plunged into a high-tech Dark Ages."[84]

> "...there will in fact be no 'pendulum swing,' back to 'the center' of bourgeois politics and bourgeois rule... Where do you see the forces who are going to do even *that* — are you looking to the 'liberals' among the powers-that-be, the 'liberal' imperialists? Sorry, but let's be real!"[85]

Here is one of those places where a necessary substratum of research, investigation and the summation of political practice is missing.

You want to put forward an analysis of trends toward fascism in the U.S.? You need to analyze their *actual* movements (inside and outside the ruling class), their history, sharp internal contradictions, and what they would *actually* have to knock down (not *just ideologically*, but institutionally, legally, structurally and politically). We would also have to hear and debate, in its own right, the underlying theory of fascism.[86]

In some ways, the RCP's analyses lack a living sense of history — in ways too typical of American political thought generally. Yes, we should be outraged that evolution has been under attack in some target school districts and that it is being widely deemphasized in biology textbooks — but to understand this (to contextualize it) we need a *historical* perspective to this long struggle over evolution. Yes, we should be outraged that a chunk of the Republican Party thinks the Democrats should be criminalized as traitors — but don't we need a historical understanding of how and how much that

84. "The Battle For The Future Will Be Fought From Here Forward!" Dec. 2004 revcom.us/future

85. "More on 'The Coming Civil War,'" Revolution #29, Jan. 8, 2006, revcom.us. Avakian's arguments are rarely without nuances and caveats in the fine print, and this is no exception. In his essay "The Coming Civil War" he writes: "Now, it's not impossible that a different section of the ruling class could come forward and cohere and get more backbone, but 'the odds favor' — and the way things are going now, they are pointing to — a one-sided conflict within the ruling class, and the continuation of the present dynamic."

And then almost immediately afterwards, he returns to the kind of argumentation we are criticizing: "The reality is — and it is crucial for people to grasp this — that even if we don't provoke them, they are going to the extreme with this program. What more evidence do you need? Read the mainstream press, watch the mainstream media, day after day. To cite here just one crucial dimension of this, they are trying to redefine the definition of science — to include religion right within the definition of science — on a societal level. You think that's just going to stay in a little small, confined sphere, in terms of its influence?"

86. Avakian has not articulated the new definition of fascism embedded in his recent work. For Avakian, fascism seems to be a definitive new leap in the norms of operation of both the bourgeois state and civil society– a combination of state repression, ideological climate and new official consensus that conspire to effectively suppress of a range of oppositional options. This is a new break from the flawed and long exhausted 1935 Comintern formulation of fascism as "the open terroristic dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic, and most imperialist elements of finance capital," which focused narrowly on open state terrorism.

has *previously* been true — from Joe McCarthy's demands for purges in the State Department, to Oliver North's comments about "the Communists in Congress"? How can we really specify how much the pace is quickening and how much *new* force the fascists are gathering without a living sense of where all this comes from?

Another example of particularity: German and Italian fascism in the 1920s arose from deep political currents that were infatuated with a powerful central state. But American fascism (in most of its many popular forms) has always had a powerful anti-centralist streak. This is rooted in the whole history of slavery and frontier — and in the resultant politics of "states rights" and lynchmob localism. The fascist right in the U.S. (from the David Duke South to Oliver North-type officers, to James Dobson's "pro-family" movement, to the thugs of "Free Republic" and more) have significant unity around militarism, draconian punishments, opposing immigration and a vicious vision of "traditional values." But there remain some deep structural fractures (among them, and between them and more mainstream conservative forces), when it comes to specific, centralized codification of culture, religion, and government tracking of people.

Is a theocratic form of fascism coming? Are things really so either/or?

The religious diversity of this country (and of the Religious Right itself) makes it hard to institute a single *national* theocracy. This is not Franco's mono-Catholic Spain. The separation of church and state was never conceived as a protection of *secularism*, but as a federal accommodation to religious diversity. Theocracy is imaginable in some areas where one religion predominates, like the southern Bible belt or Utah. But wherever you have real religious diversity (including Judaism), that diversity re-creates the (very American) structural pull to institute policies (including future abortion bans) in a leopard-spot localist way within the existing federal framework.

Is the current arc going towards a specifically theocratic form of fascism? Are the possibilities *really* so either/or? Aren't many stages and outcomes possible? Have we no respect for the role of political accident and the real-world mediations of necessity? The current fascization[87] of society may accelerate and there may well be sudden leaps if there is another 9/11 event. But the Christian fascists were always a minority wing of the Bush ruling coalition, subordinated to forces like Cheney and Rumsfeld. And clearly the Christian fascists' top level influence has been in flux with new inroads in the federal judiciary and setbacks in other areas, all as elections and change of regime

87. Fascization is the growth of fascist trends within the existing bounds of bourgeois democracy. An example: there was a dangerous growth of executive power and reactionary judiciary within Weimar Germany (under leaders like von Papen) before the rise of Adolf Hitler to power and the leap to a new fascist form of rule. Here too, things need not be so "either/or." It is quite possible for very dangerous, reactionary norms to emerge within the U.S. without that process producing an inevitable or necessary leap to a qualitatively new form of bourgeois rule (i.e. for a full leap to fascism with the complete negation of former "norms" of law and politics).

88. A powerful and cautionary novel about a future theocratic and rigidly male supremacist America, Margaret Atwood, *A Handmaid's Tale*, 1985

89. *Revolution* newspaper published a series of posters called "Scenes from a Faith-Based Future" set a few years into the future, where for example a kid can be legally stoned to death for wearing a witch costume on Halloween. Numerous people have commented to me how out-of-touch and crudely reductionist this kind of agitation is. revcom.us/i/090/bible-horror-pt3-m-en.pdf

approaches. Even if something close to fascism comes (and it might!), the process, outcome and contradictions will likely be quite different from the cartoonish *Handmaid's Tale*[88] the RCP keeps projecting.[89]

It is right to sound an alarm in the U.S. If, for example, new acts of warfare erupt on U.S. soil, we can expect some dangerous tightening of many legal, political and even cultural restrictions — and even a growth of popular support for such tightenings. There could well be reversals in long-standing legal norms. Such changes could well make revolutionary politics even harder to pursue. And there could well be a vicious reversal of abortion rights ahead. It is quite reasonable to discuss all this in terms of a fascist danger, and a process of fascization.

Not enough people are facing the danger. The theocrats are a real threat– as part of an even larger spectrum of fascist threats. But the RCP's specific analysis and predictions betray a real inability to dig deep into the actual history and particular dynamics of this country. And that reflects badly on their larger project and method.

Cite Soley, Haiti.
Photo: TMG

6.

The Theory Surrounding "A Leader of This Caliber"

It would be one thing if Avakian's many ideas were presented as hypotheses for exploration. But the RCP has articulated specific verdicts concerning leadership and synthesis:

1) That human history — and specifically the world's transition to communism — is shaped by the emergence of special leaders who transform the times in which they live.

2) That Avakian can now be recognized as a leader "of the caliber" of "a Lenin or a Mao" — i.e., that he is a "rare, unique, and irreplaceable leader" who makes world-historic leaps in both theory and practice possible.[90]

3) That the new synthesis for communism already exists now in the "body of work, method and approach" of Bob Avakian — a synthesis that is seen as still developing, but that is already fundamentally "there for the taking."

4) That this "appreciation" of Avakian and his synthesis is now formally a "cardinal question" for communists in the U.S., and a decisive question facing the world movement.[91]

5)That it is theoretically possible for other leaders to emerge as communist leaders of historically special "caliber" (after all Marx had his Engels) — but that this is only possible on the basis of a real appreciation of Avakian's synthesis. The basic

90. Sometimes a tactically softer "our Lenin" is used. The RCP does not use the formulation "Avakianism." "A Lenin or a Mao" means a communist leader who is revamping all of communist theory in a world-historic leap. And the operative summation the RCP uses is that Avakian is "on the level of a Mao or a Lenin" with all the implications that holds for MLM around the world.

91. A cardinal question is an issue that is a dividing line between revolutionary communism and counterrevolutionary revisionism. The RCP now holds that the appreciation of Bob Avakian and his synthesis is such a question – literally on the level of whether to uphold the dictatorship of the proletariat or the need for a vanguard party. Here is how it was popularly put in Revolution's "Special Issue on Bob Avakian":

> "At a time when the 'science of revolution' demands a leap in its understanding in a number of crucial realms, he has stepped forward to fill that great need. The contributions that we have outlined here are *essential* to the further and future advance of the revolutionary cause and communist project; they are a treasure for humanity." (emphasis in original).

method of communists, in the U.S. explicitly, must be to "race to catch up" with Avakian and "steep themselves" in his synthesis — not to vet each of his many still-unfolding theories critically and test them against reality.

6) That once the emergence of this rare leader is grasped correctly there follows a whole sequence of strategic implications for the work of communists and the functioning of vanguard organization.

7) And that communism (and by extension the future of humanity) "hangs by a thread." In not-fully-formulated ways, that "thread" is Avakian and whether he is correctly appreciated (in the larger sense of that word) among communists and the people of the world.

These theses are newly articulated and newly adopted.[92] They reveal that the extreme forms and claims of the Party's current cult of personality is not just a passing phase — but are foundational to Avakian's newly articulated synthesis and worldview. These theories are now literally defining the party's methods at the most fundamental level. They need to be brought fully into view and subjected to sharp criticism.

There is no law of history or biology that creates a special notch or "caliber" within humanity called "a Lenin" or "a Mao"

Revolution requires farsighted leadership. But there is no law of history or biology that creates a special notch or "caliber" within humanity called "a Lenin" or "a Mao" — as if some of us arrive stamped as .50 caliber shells and *the rest* show up as .22s or blanks. There is far more continuity and variation in the spectrum of human potential than that.

Julius Caesar was a history-making military dictator of Rome — but in the hands of his successor Augustus, "Caesar" went from being a man's name to being a title. It was a bid for borrowed legitimacy. Should we really agree to turn the names of our leaders like Lenin and Mao into categories of stature?

Should we accept proposals from living revolutionary leaders that their "packages" of ideas and method be accepted whole, as comprehensive new overhauls of Marxism — for Gonzalo[93] to style himself as the "fourth sword of Marxism," or for Avakian to view himself and his work as a "cardinal question"? Are these really the only (or the most likely) choices?

Isn't it quite possible to be influential or creative in human events and *not* represent a correct new communist synthesis (as shown by Ho Chi Minh or Che Guevara)? Isn't it possible to be a prominent and creative revolutionary leader and yet *not* be

92. It is said, at times that these theories have been the party's line since 1979. But that is not true. They are recent, and negate previous understandings about collectivity and mass line.

93. Chairman Gonzalo (Abimael Guzman) is the leader of the Communist Party of Peru, also known as the Shining Path.

94. Charu Mazumdar (1918–1972) was leader of the 1967 "Spring thunder" uprising of peasants starting in Naxalbari that gave rise to the Maoist movement in India. İbrahim Kaypakkaya (1949-1973) was the founder of the Maoist movement in Turkey and leader of an early attempt to launch protracted peoples war. Zhang Chunqiao (1917-2005) was a leader of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, and first-rank figure in the Maoist circle called the "Gang of Four" by their enemies.

bringing Marxism to a new level (as shown by Charu Mazumdar, Ibrahim Kaypakkaya or Zhang Chunqiao)?[94] Isn't it possible to have a positive impact in one period, and fall seriously short in another (as might be said about Joseph Stalin)? Isn't it possible to probe important questions without solving some of the key problems or reaching a new synthesis of Marxism? And isn't it possible to make contributions in one realm of theory or practice, while falling far short in another?

Avakian is alive and engaged. We can expect new amendments and developments for his synthesis to be announced regularly, for years to come — and new initiatives into practice as well. Some things criticized here, in these letters, may yet be modified with new layers of caveat and nuance. And some of his insights may be proven correct by future practice.

But it is wrong to declare that a coherent new leap in Marxism is taking shape (or that the core of it is already "there for the taking.") And it is especially wrong when there are major flaws and gaps running deep in the synthesis now being put forward.

In addition: Our verdict need not be "either/or" — is our only choice that Avakian is "a new Mao" or a new Kautsky?[95] No. A later assessment might well reveal that Avakian is comparable to the 19th century's Daniel DeLeon, who established an early Marxist pole in the U.S. but whose schematic ideas condemned his party to relative marginalization. Or that Avakian may one day appear to us as the abolitionist John Brown, whose passionate belief in the emancipation of slaves drove him toward revolution, but whose sectarian grandiosity left him with only a handful of followers (while *millions* of people around him were on the verge of waging a revolutionary war).

Throughout history, leaders (of many classes) left unique marks on their times.[96] There are moments in history when movements will fall apart and fail if key leaders are "neutralized" (which obviously means that they are functionally irreplaceable).

But leaders can claim to be "special" in ways they are not. And the importance of key leaders can be exaggerated in ways that promotes a false theory of history that (among other things) denies the role of the masses.

For example, Avakian's synthesis misstates how exceptional leaders are forged, and denigrates the role of revolutionary practice in the development of both theory and leadership.

95. Karl Kautsky was a top leader of German socialists and the Second International who was promoted as the successor to Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, but proved himself to be a scholastic pedant who clutched at old formulation and an enemy of the first socialist revolution in Russia.

96. If Lenin had died in 1914, a communist revolution would not have taken place in 1917 Russia. Had Attila or Napoleon died young, world history would have taken some different turns.

97. The RCP now talks of "repolarizing society" specifically around Avakian, as a person and a leader. It expresses this thought publicly like this:

> "Two futures confront each other. Will imperialism force a future of darkness and suffocation onto the people? Will tens of millions more needlessly suffer and die? OR, will the critical spirit be unleashed in a way that does a great GOOD for humanity? Will society move forward in a revolutionary direction and set about removing the great suffering and misery cast down on the people by capitalism? To put it another way, which vision will prevail: that of George W. Bush? Or of Bob Avakian?" (from "The Battle For The Future," op. cit.)

Revolutionary communist leaders are fundamentally a product of the struggle of the broad masses of people, especially (but not solely) of movements they actually lead. It is not the "emergence" of "rare and special" people that "repolarizes" the political alignments of society in ways that make revolutionary change possible. The objective emergence of deep social fissures and the collective struggles of the people to make fundamental change have more to do with the "emergence" of great leaders than the other way around.[97]

One comrade wrote:

> "Lenin and Mao became *Lenin* and *Mao* through the process of gaining and giving leadership in the world-historic Russian and Chinese revolutions. Not: that's how they attained the stature in the eyes of the world that they would have (should have) had anyway by right, but rather, it's only in this way that their theories were forged. Bob Avakian's contributions are exploratory and unfinished. He is often not able to fully or correctly answer the important questions in revolutionary theory he raises. This is not a criticism, and in fact I don't think these questions, which are crucial questions of revolutionary theory, are resolvable by one person reflecting and struggling with them, or one person with the resources of this party (certainly not as it stands)."[98]

The RCP argues correctly that you cannot judge the value of a leader by simply measuring the size of their forces. Marx was more correct than the leaders of the Paris Commune. Lenin was more correct than Kautsky (despite his legions of supporters in Germany). It is wrong to dismiss Avakian's theories *simply* because he is not yet leading a significant revolutionary movement. But, it *is* possible to connect some of the real weaknesses and failures of this "party of Bob Avakian" to real weaknesses in *his* method and approach.

The adoption of a new synthesis *requires* critical scientific evaluation, including real testing and modification in practice. It can't be done on faith or decree. It can't be done sight-unseen. In other words, it can't be done the way Avakian demands, as we will now discuss.

98. From an unpublished paper shared with Mike E.

Photo: J.B. Connors

Ahmedebad, India.
Photo: TMG

7.

Whateverism in Evaluating Avakian

In April 2007, the "Special Issue" of *Revolution* dedicated to Avakian announced, "There has never been a leader like Bob Avakian in this country."[99]

This may well be true. Avakian is a visible tree on a parched political scrubland. He has put his stamp on this generation of communists in the U.S. But that does not necessarily make him "a Lenin."

And no matter how highly we esteem and value a leader, the communist movement this person leads has the obligation to deeply, collectively and critically evaluate the theories, analyses and plans put forward, no matter who the author of those ideas is.

However, *before* the core theses of Avakian's synthesis were ever debated, understood or even elaborated (including before any real discussion of "epistemological break" or "solid core with a lot of elasticity") — it was formally asserted to the RCP that the "appreciation" of Avakian's work has become a "cardinal question" for communists and that the outlines of communism's new synthesis "is there for the taking."[100]

This was argued on the basis of a specific discussion of the "relationship between simple and complex." It was said: It is possible to understand all theoretical matters at different levels — on a simple basic level for beginners, and on a deeper and com-

99. "The Crossroads We Face, the Leadership We Need" *Revolution* #84

100. This whole process is in rather stark contrast to the methods explicitly promoted as part of the new synthesis. For example, Ardea Skybreak wrote:

> "The fact that it can take quite some time for new syntheses or theories to be tested and verified (and the fact that many will be ultimately discarded as dead-ends or significantly re-worked) typically does not disturb intellectuals, for they accept this state of relative uncertainty over protracted periods of time as a necessary and unavoidable part of the process of expanding human knowledge and understanding. Newly emerging and developing syntheses should not be grown in a hothouse and they should also not be held close to the chest in miserly fashion: they need to be sent out in the world. Reasonable efforts should be made to avoid excessive sloppiness, the regurgitation of that which has already been shown to be false, or dismissive discounting of the efforts of others (of whatever perspectives) who have been working on similar questions. Efforts should also be made to properly distinguish (and label accordingly) that which is known from that which is not yet known, and indicate clearly what may simply be informed speculation."

Very true, but in sharp disconnect with the party's approach to its own process of synthesis. (Ardea Skybreak, "Working with Ideas and Searching for Truth: A Reflection on Revolutionary Leadership and the Intellectual Process," 2002, revcom.us)

plex level later on. And, it was argued, communists had to acknowledge that many of them accepted important doctrines of communism (like the need for the dictatorship of the proletariat) on a quite simple basis, at least at the beginning, often without having yet looked deeply into the details, controversies and history surrounding the concept. This was then used to argue that communists can and should embrace (on a "simple" basis if necessary) the theory that Avakian's leadership has become "the cardinal question" within the movement.

This is what country people call "buying a pig in a poke" — meaning: embracing something without close scrutiny.

Advocating that *a whole movement* accept a new ideology (in this case, a *still-unelaborated* synthesis of Marxism) on such a basis imposes an *unscientific* method upon that party *over precisely the most defining questions imaginable,* and over matters that should precisely be vetted in the most full way possible. In short, this argument around "simple and complex" was used as a call for *acceptance* on faith.

It is further asserted with great energy that communists need to "Have the humility to be led." There is (of course) nothing wrong with humility. But in context, *this* campaign has been an assault on critical thinking and the RCP's righteous old slogan, "Communists are Rebels!"

A scientific method demands that we evaluate all ideas (including Avakian's) *against reality* — that we not assume the correctness of whatever Avakian says (or of whatever he *will* say). Revolutionary leaders have to "prove it all night."[101] And all communists have the responsibility to evaluate the concepts, methods and plans of their leadership and party.

Honestly, this kind of supervision has never been a feature of the RCP. Obviously there is a range of practices within any organization and generalizations don't apply to all experiences and places. But there is something about the party's specific *overall* conception of democratic centralism — with its militarized view of organizational discipline — that routinely squeezes out wrangling or collective research on major matters. Democracy in this party is conceived as little more than "a chain of knowledge" passing opinions upwards for consideration in the deciding centers. Security is routinely misused as an instrument of control and information diet.

Open and Shut Discussion

Some burning political questions are "opened" briefly in a highly limited way, others are never opened at all. It is worth looking at the RCP's views on homosexuality as an example of this.

From 1970 until 2001, the RU/RCP[102] held that homosexuality was incompatible with revolutionary communist goals and ideology. Gay men and lesbians could not be members. Formal programmatic statements held that homosexuality would be abol-

101. "Prove it all night" is the title of a Bruce Springsteen song. For the RCP, it means that communist veterans and leaders cannot rest on reputations or past laurels.

102. The Revolutionary Union (RU) was the pre-party communist formation established nationally in 1970 that gave rise to the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA (founded in 1975).

ished under socialism through ideological struggle or "re-education." The party's wrong and backward views became rather notorious through the 1980s, as the AIDS crisis exploded and the Republican Right sought to exploit anti-homosexual bigotry.

What is less well known is *how* such views were maintained. In the early 1970s it was said that gay people couldn't be communists because they were a security risk of blackmail.[103] Then after the party's founding in 1975 the stress was on ways homosexuality was linked to "bourgeois degeneracy." Then after 1988, the argument was that homosexuality had to be rejected because male homosexuality was (supposedly) inherently hostile to women, and lesbianism was (supposedly) inherently a manifestation of lifestyle reformism.[104]

In other words, over the first thirty-plus years of the RU/RCP, the end verdict (the incompatibility of homosexuality with communism) remained the same, while the public *justifications* for that position morphed with time. And there were essentially no open discussions of these views allowed within the party's ranks, though controversy and debate increasingly raged around the party's youth brigade (RCYB).

By the late 1990s, these anti-homosexual politics were so controversial (inside and outside the party) that it would have been impossible to create a new program without major changes. The question was opened briefly but then shut down when the discussion proved highly volatile.

The method used for cutting off this debate is revealing: The new party analysis acknowledged that homosexuality is not inherently counterrevolutionary,[105] but insisted that the Party's long-standing condemnation of gay people had *not come* from any influence of anti-gay bigotry. The error, it was said, came from *general* problems of method and reductionism, not from anti-gay prejudices within the Party.[106]

It was officially argued that the question of homosexuality itself *had never been* a cardinal question, but the method used to criticize the party's previous position *had to be considered* a cardinal question. Translated: The party would still not consider the previous anti-gay errors a huge deal, but it would consider any discussion of possible homophobia among leaders to be completely intolerable. Also considered hostile to the party: Any discussion of why the change in line had taken so long, any appraisal of the huge political cost to the revolution because of this error and any discussion of "the closet" within the party (i.e., ways that secretly gay or bisexual members may have been forced to deny their sexual orientations).

103. This was the position first explained to me and others around the early Revolutionary Union – a view lifted from the policies of the Communist Party USA.

104. "On the Question of Homosexuality and the Emancipation of Women," *Revolution* magazine, 1988

105. It was a position that more or less adopted the work of a special writing group, "On the Position on Homosexuality in the New Draft Programme" revcom.us/margorp/homosexuality.htm

106. Avakian used his conversations with Bill Martin to broach the nagging question of how the RCP could have been so stubbornly wrong for so long on its analysis of gay people. He asserts that the problem was reductionist and mechanical thinking inherited from the previous communist movement, and mainly manifested in analysis made on other topics (i.e., not just in matters of sexuality). Bill Martin describes anti-homosexual arguments made to him by party supporters, and probes whether there should be exploration of a "puritanical mindset" towards sexuality generally. This is an important question ruled out of order by the party's approach.

In short: The party had adopted a new (and truly better approach) to homosexuality, but slammed the door hard on *any* real exploration of anti-gay bigotry among communists and its real-world consequences.

What emerges from such methods is a party where discussions are maddeningly confined and ritualized. They generally take place only after positions (or even a whole new synthesis) have been formally adopted. Questions are "opened" so a new orthodoxy can replace an old one, and then discussions are slammed shut again. Throughout that process ready agreement is expected. Real dissent is assumed to be backward (or worse).

Without a healthy climate of ongoing struggle, a party's life cannot be an engine of new ideas, mutual supervision, and new levels of party unity. The actual process in this party codifies a deep distrust of debate (except as a means of indoctrination in official positions).

Such training sharply undercuts this party's ability to even *hear* other voices.

Whatever else we now do together, let's not repeat any of this.[107]

The RCP correctly (if too quietly) criticized the notion of "jefatura" that emerged from the Communist Party of Peru. It was seen as wrong that Peruvian party members should swear their loyalty or subordination to the person of their chairman, who is seen as being above the collectivity of the party and portrayed as a living guarantee of victory. It was correctly argued by the RCP (in connection with Peruvian line controversies in the 1990s) that new lines and sharp departures needed critical evaluation, and the key issue should be "line not author."

The new formulations of the RCP are not identical to the PCP's. But I cannot, for the life of me, see any difference between the PCP's disastrous dogma of "jefatura" and the RCP's new refrains that "this is the new party of Bob Avakian" and "appreciation of the Chair is the cardinal question." Can anyone point out any real difference?

The assertion of "Avakian as the cardinal question" is whateverism.[108] It is a blank check signed in advance by the collectivity of party leadership. It is inherently slavish and metaphysical. It denigrates the test of practice and violates any scientific approach to ideas. And it inevitably unleashes a party culture of sycophancy and cynicism.

107. These *Nine Letters* do not excavate the internal operations and structures of the RCP. For that reason necessary criticisms of organizational line can only be touched on in this very general way. However, it has to be said that a very different approach to communist organization needs to be developed and fought for. We need real discussion of burning political controversies, active supervision of leadership, and appreciation for the views, experience and disagreements of cadre at all levels and of all generations. "If you know what I'm talking about, you know what I mean."

108. Whateverism is the uncritical acceptance of "whatever" comes down from above within a communist party.

8.

On the Cult of Personality: Revisiting Chen Boda's Ghost

"Such is my aversion to all cult of personality that when I was plagued by repeated attempts to honor me publicly, coming from different countries at the time of the International, I never allowed any of them to break into the public sphere — nor did I ever reply to any of them, except with a snub here and there. When Engels and I first joined the underground Communist League, we demanded the removal of everything in the organization's statutes that could have encouraged any superstitious awe of authority."

Karl Marx, 1877[109]

"Authority and prestige can be established only naturally through struggle and practice. They cannot be established artificially. Prestige established artificially will inevitably collapse."

Mao Tsetung, 1967[110]

"I remember, for example, being challenged by someone interviewing me — I believe this was on a college radio station in Madison, Wisconsin — who asked insistently: 'Is there a "cult of personality" developing around Bob Avakian?' And I replied: 'I certainly hope so — we've been working very hard to create one.'"

Bob Avakian, 2005[111]

Let's talk about the cult of personality in its own right. Bob Avakian wrote in 1984:

"[T]here is also a dialectical relation — unity as well as opposition — between cult(s) of the individual around leading people and on the other hand ease of mind and liveliness, initiative, and creative, critical thinking among party members and the masses following the party. In the future communist society, this need for firmly established revolutionary authority as an 'anchor' will no longer exist and would run counter to developing the critical spirit and critical thinking; it too will have to be abolished

109. Letter to Wilhelm Blos, Nov. 1877 as Marx was working to finish his historic work, Capital. Our translation from German.

110. David Milton and Nancy Dall Milton, *The Wind Will Not Subside – Years in Revolutionary China – 1964-1969,* Pantheon Asia Library, 1976

111. Avakian describing an exchange from his 1979 speaking tour. *From Ike to Mao and Beyond: My Journey from Mainstream America to Revolutionary Communist*, p. 393, Insight Press, 2005

Mao Tsetung, in Yenan base area during the revolution.

> as an important part of the advance to communism. But to demand its abolition now runs counter to that advance, and to unleashing and developing that critical spirit and critical thinking." [112]

A decade later, he agrees with himself:

> "This statement (from *A Horrible End, or an End to the Horror*) puts it right: there is unity and opposition here — between, on the one hand, authority invested or embodied in certain individuals and, on the other hand, ease of mind and liveliness, individual initiative and creativity and critical thinking among party members and the masses broadly."[113]

This only gets it half-right. Meaning: he gets it wrong.

You can promote revolutionary leadership and authority *in ways* that do *not* unleash critical thinking and initiative. You can promote awe and slavishness. You can unleash a cascade of elitism and disrespect that showers down through your own organization with far-reaching consequences.

What Avakian downplays is that there has been sharp struggle among communists over what *kind* of authority to give leaders, and over *which* world outlook should imbue the way leaders are viewed. The style and content of Avakian's promotion, its formal assertion of specialness, is connected to the reasons his party as a whole does not hear other people and disrespects its own rank-and-file. It is rooted in errors of line.

This question can't be explored here in the needed depth. But I want to contribute to the larger discussion by raising Mao's little-known struggle against "the genius theory" — because of ways Mao's approach contrasts with Avakian's.

In the late '50s, new leaders of the USSR were knocking down the authority of the revolutionary past. They focused their attacks on Stalin. Mao responded in 1958:

> "There are two kinds of cult of the individual. One is correct, such as that of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and the correct side of Stalin. These we ought to revere and continue to revere forever. It would not do not to revere them. As they held truth in their hands, why should we not revere them? We believe in truth; truth is the reflection of objective existence. A squad should revere its squad leader, it would be quite wrong not to. Then there is the incorrect kind of cult of the individual in which there is no analysis, simply blind obedience. This is not right. Opposition to the cult of the individual may also have one of two aims: one is opposition to an incorrect cult, and the other is opposition to reverence for others and a desire for reverence for oneself. The question at issue is not whether or not there should be a cult of the individual, but rather whether or not the individual concerned represents the truth. If he does, then he should be revered. If truth is not present, even collective leadership will be no good. Throughout its history, our Party has stressed the combination of the role of the individual with collective leadership."[114]

Mao and his followers started to talk about "Mao Tsetung Thought" in the 1940s. It is a historical fact that this assertion of a new synthesis came after Mao had *actually* started to lead millions on a new road toward liberation, after he was actually leading both an army and expanding liberated zones in the midst of revolutionary war. Mao's

112. Bob Avakian, *A Horrible End, or an End to the Horror*, RCP Publications, 1984, p. 212

113. *Getting Over the Two Great Humps: Further Thoughts on Conquering the World*, Later published as "On Proletarian Democracy and Proletarian Dictatorship: A Radically Different View of Leading Society: Part 9: Individual Leaders and the Larger Interests of Society and the People," Revolutionary Worker #1222, December 14, 2003

114. Mao Tsetung, "Talks At The Chengtu Conference," March 1958, marxists.org

theoretical innovations were worked out and tested in that living practice of making a revolution. They *were* the dividing line within that movement between revolution and several wrong lines (including Stalin's).

Mao did not declare his own words "historic." He actually *made* history.

Then in the mid-sixties, Mao consciously used his *existing* prestige and authority to promote a new and less-well-understood program for the next stage of the revolution. When millions of people rallied to his banner in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), it was politically significant that they already *loved* and *trusted* him as tested, visionary emancipator. There was nothing artificial or crudely self-declared about it.

At the same time, fierce struggle erupted over *how* Mao would be presented and how his line should be promoted. And in that struggle, Mao fought the so-called "genius theory." The RCP, which has written much on Mao's last battles, has only mentioned *this* Maoist campaign in passing references.[115] Let's rectify that.

Mao Against the Genius Theory

While Mao was unleashing millions to "storm heaven" during the Cultural Revolution, powerful forces within his party were straining to channel everything into conservative directions. Already in 1966, Lin Biao[116] was using a "genius theory" to promote awe of the state and its leaders.

Lin claimed that:

> "Chairman Mao's sayings, works, and revolutionary practice have shown that he is a great proletarian genius.... He is unparalleled in the present world. Marx and Engels were geniuses of the nineteenth century; Lenin and Comrade Mao Zedong are the geniuses of the twentieth century."

Later Lin raised Mao even further:

> "A genius like Chairman Mao emerges only once in several hundred years in the world and in several thousand years in China."

In essentially religious ways, it was argued that Mao's work was a supreme "pinnacle" or "acme" of communist thinking. Lin said,

> "Every sentence of Chairman Mao's works is a truth, one single sentence of his surpasses ten thousand of ours."[117]

The writings of other communist leaders (past and present) disappeared from the study lists after Lin declared:

> "In the classical works of Marxism-Leninism, ninety-nine per cent of our studies must be from Chairman Mao's works."

Even statements that are true (literally speaking) helped emphasize obedience *over* conscious understanding. For example, Lin Biao said:

> "We must carry out not only those instructions we understand, but also those we fail to understand

115. There are mentions of Mao's opposition to the "genius theory" in Raymond Lotta's essay in And Mao Makes 5 – Mao Tsetung's Last Great Battle (1978) and Bob Avakian's The Loss in China and the Revolutionary Legacy of Mao Tsetung (1978).

116. Lin Biao was the head of revolutionary China's military and a leading figure within the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. He was also, after the mid-60s, briefly seen as Mao's most likely successor.

117. Lin Biao, "Informal Address," cited in Lowell Dittmer, *China's Continuous Revolution — The Post-Liberation Epoch 1949-1981*, University of California Press, 1989.

118. New China News Agency, 23 January 1968.

> for the moment, and must try to understand them in the course of carrying them out." [118]

This contributed to a trend of rote memorization (in contrast to scientific study, application and deepening understanding).

Communism's anthem, the *Internationale*, has a famous phrase that rejects the idea of supreme saviors. At one point in China, the song was rewritten to cut that phrase out.[119]

Starting in 1966 Mao was called Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Supreme Commander and Great Helmsman. And soon those "four greats" were formally required in official statements. Respect for a communist leader was being twisted into enforced public rituals of praise and deference.

The struggle over these ideological matters came to a head with a political offensive by Chen Boda, Lin Biao's ally. Chen came to a major party meeting (the Second Plenum of the Ninth Central Committee in August 1970), and demanded that the agenda be thrown out. He insisted that the party leadership should adopt this notion of genius as a cardinal question. In a related organizational move, he insisted that a new emperor-like post of "state chairman" be created for Mao. This amounted to the first step of a coup d'etat, in which an arrogant military-fascist cult of obedience would be imposed on once-revolutionary China and an institutional framework for military dictatorship would be put in place.

Mao fought back by sharply repudiating this genius theory.[120] After days of struggle, Chen was beaten back. In April 1971, Mao started popularizing his rejection of the genius theory — as an opening shot of his struggle with the Lin forces generally. Mao told regional leaders:

> "The question of genius is a theoretical question. Their theory was idealist apriorism. Someone has said that to oppose genius is to oppose me. But I am no genius. I read Confucian books for six years and capitalist books for seven. I did not read Marxist-Leninist books until 1918, so how can I be a genius?... I wrote 'Some Opinions.' which specially criticizes the genius theory, only after looking up some people to talk with them, and after some investigations and research. It is not that I do not want to talk about genius. To be a genius is to be a bit more intelligent. But genius does not depend on one person or a few people. It depends on a party, the party which is the vanguard of the proletariat. Genius is dependent on the mass line, on collective wisdom... I spoke to Comrade Lin Biao and some of the things he said were not very accurate. For example he said that a genius only appears in the world once in a few centuries and in China once in a few millennia. This just doesn't fit the facts. Marx and Engels were contemporaries, and not one century had elapsed before we had Lenin and Stalin, so how could you say that a genius only appears once in a few centuries? In China there were Ch'en Sheng and Wu Kuang, Hung Hsiu-ch'üan and Sun Yat-sen, so how could you say that a genius only appears once in a few millennia? And then there is all this business about pinnacles and 'one sentence being worth ten thousand'. Don't you think this is going too far? One sentence is, after all, just one sentence, how can it be worth ten thousand sentences? We should not appoint a state chairman. I don't want to be state chairman. I have said this six times already. If each time I said it I used one sentence, that is now the equivalent of sixty thousand sentences. But they never listen, so each of my sentences is not even worth half a sentence. In fact its value is zero."

119. Jean Daubier, *A History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*

120. Unfortunately the 700-word essay Mao wrote and circulated at that meeting has been lost. The writer Han Suyin said she had access to this work (called "Some Opinions") when researching her *Wind in the Tower* biography of Mao. Mao himself characterizes the essay's arguments in the talks with regional leaders that I quote here.

> "You should study the article written by Lenin on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Eugene Pottier. Learn to sing 'The Internationale' and 'The Three Great Rules of Discipline and the Eight Points for Attention'. Let them not only be sung but also explained and acted upon. 'The Internationale' and Lenin's article express throughout a Marxist standpoint and outlook. What they say is that slaves should arise and struggle for truth. There never has been any supreme saviour, nor can we rely on gods or emperors. We rely entirely on ourselves for our salvation. Who has created the world of human beings? We the laboring masses. During the Lushan Conference I wrote a 700-word article which raised the question of who created history, the heroes or the slaves."[121]

There are obvious parallels between what Chen Boda and Lin Biao argued and what the RCP promotes around Avakian. But I am leery of using analogies crudely. So let me note some differences instead:

- Mao had a lot of truth in his hands. Mao Tsetung Thought emerged from critical examinations of the Soviet experience, deepened by the lessons from decades of revolution, war, and state power. By contrast, I think Avakian's synthesis has significantly less truth, and is methodologically distanced from practice.

- Mao did not deny that there were outstanding leaders or even geniuses among humans. But he opposed an incorrect method of describing and promoting his leadership: the particular "genius theory," the ritual "4 Greats" and the stress on blind obedience. In the U.S. unfortunately, it is Avakian himself who formulates the theory concerning "caliber" and enforces those ritual words about a "unique, rare, special, and irreplaceable" person.

- Chen Boda and Lin Biao's theories were raised and then repudiated in the throes of a great revolution. Now we encounter their ghosts under very different circumstances, and the repudiation is just getting started.

The best revolutionary leaders need to be known, valued, and followed. Their correct methods should be emulated. There are times when leading directives need to command great authority and quick action. There are periods when key leaders are objectively irreplaceable. And clearly, great efforts should be made to anticipate and defeat "decapitation strategies."

In *that* sense I agree with Mao's point about "revering" leaders.

At the same time we should not adopt any theories of a tiered humanity — with a formal insistence on the specialness of some people. We should not embrace the phrase "cult of personality" the way Bob Avakian does in his memoir. The word "cult" means organized worship, and worship is opposed to our social values and materialist outlook.

Leaders and the defense of leaders are necessary for real material reasons. But there is no material necessity to make cults around communist leaders. There are important reasons *not* to do so.

121. Mao Zedong, *Talks With Responsible Comrades At Various Places During Provincial Tour*, From the middle of August to September 12, 1971 Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: Vol. IX, marxists.org

Mao makes the methodological point that he learned from others before acting, and describes the value of reading other communist leaders. He fights for a communist understanding of the mass line – in opposition to the reactionary view that history rests on the arrival of great saviors.

The Internationale anthem of communists contains the relevant refrain "*Il n'est pas de sauveurs suprêmes, Ni dieu, ni César, ni tribun*" – in English, "There are no supreme saviors, not god, emperor nor tribune."

9. Traveling Light, Coming From Within

> "...if, owing to objective and subjective conditions, this party exists and carries on for 40 or 50 years like the CPUSA before it and never leads a revolution, what's so great about that? Really why would it be so terrible if somebody got together and formed another party and tried to learn from the positive and negative and went ahead and tried to make revolution?"
>
> Bob Avakian, 1982[122]

> "We are the ones we've been waiting for."
>
> From a song[123]

No overarching historical mechanism guarantees a revolutionary outcome. New things will ceaselessly and inevitably emerge — and either something radically liberating takes roots in society or it doesn't. The implications for humanity are profound.

Mao said there is no need to inoculate ourselves from ideas. We must dare to go through things and come out the other side.[124] Maoists, following Mao in this, have to leave the comfort of reassuring illusions and misplaced authority. We have to confront that here in the U.S. we have neither a vanguard organization nor the theoretical breakthroughs we need.

The Maoist project centered on the RU/RCP never really "took off." It never took root as a leading representative of the oppressed (other than in the most abstracted, self-defined sense). After grappling with this contradiction from many sides, this party's leadership has now consolidated itself around a course that is a particularly sterile response to long-standing problems. This is concentrated in the adoption of "Avakian as the cardinal question."

Throughout these letters I have been forced to repeat the words "real," "actual," and "living" — over and over — because so much of the communist project here in the U.S. has been fantasy draped in fine words.

122. "A Party is Not a Holy Thing – It's Got to be A Vanguard," published as a chapter in *If There is to be Revolution, There Must be a Revolutionary Party*, RCP Publications, June 1982

123. During the Pittston coal strike in 1989, I came upon a small circle of religious radicals singing these stirring words in the middle of a tense scene.

124. Conversations With Wang Hai-jung, December 21, 1970, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: Vol. IX*, marxists.org. Mao is talking to his niece about how to approach classic works of China's feudal past.

Tikapur, Nepal.
Photo: TMG

Even if a turn of events pumped new life into old "vehicles" (including the RCP itself), the heart of the problem would remain untouched. Specific, voluntarist verdicts are fully consolidated at the heights of the RCP. When they say "the train has left the station" — they truly mean that the debate over those verdicts *within that party* is over. So be it.

"The train has left the station"? So be it.

Forging a way forward requires moving beyond all this, even as this party's leadership presses ahead, white-knuckled, on the course it has set.

Meanwhile, five minutes out that door is a beautiful blue planet crammed with contradiction and life. The rush into the future does not hang by any single thread — but it does demand something of us. One way or another, something different has to raise its head. It is now left for revolutionary communists, both inside and outside the RCP, to re-conceive as we re-group.

This is not the place to actually make a positive accounting of "what we possess." But we must start that soon. We need a process, a going, where we sort things through, think afresh and start to act, together.

When Mao's Red Army abandoned their early base area, they carried with them all the hard-won apparatus of rebel state power: they brought archives, printing presses, factory equipment, rolls of telephone wire, furniture and more. That baggage cost them dearly in lives, when the heavily burdened column faced its first tests of fire. They then simply left off the boxes and machinery of their old apparatus. What they kept was that material that made sense when integrated into their new mode of existence. They were traveling light. They were ready to improvise, live off the land, and fight.

The analogy to our theoretical moment: We need to discard ruthlessly, but cunningly, in order to fight under difficult conditions. We will be traveling light, without baggage and clutter from earlier modes of existence. We need to preserve precisely those implements that serve the advance, against fierce opposition, toward our end goal. We need to integrate them into a vibrant new communist coherency — as we thrive on the run.

Not a remake of the RCP.

It is a great creative challenge. We don't need a *remake of the RCP, but better*. The theoretical knife must cut deeper than that. There needs to be negation, affirmation, and then a real leap beyond what has gone before. We need a movement of all-the-way revolutionaries that lives in this 21st century. Not some reshuffling of old cadre, but the beginning reshuffling of a whole society.

We need to take up a great new project of practice — while applying and developing our theory.

I can identify two or three key places to take up new practical work together. And I see at least four major problems for theoretical engagement:

First, we need to chart the uncharted course, sum up past practice and move to actually fuse revolutionary communism with the deep currents of discontent among the oppressed.

Second, communist theory needs to deeply comprehend our world today — the new connectedness of production and communications, the global shifts of industry, the

mass migrations of people, the changes in class structures, the dynamics of modern warfare, the capitalist transformation of remaining feudal relations, the new interpenetrations and conflicts of imperialist powers, the basis and limitations shaping the unprecedented attempt to establish a global U.S. hegemony, the development of political Islam, and the stark historically-new ways the emancipation of women is posed. These changes (and more) are driving a world process quite different from the one explored in earlier communist analysis. There are related analyses of the U.S. itself that are needed, including deepening understanding of the impact of "de-industrialization" of the working class, and changes in the structures of national oppression (i.e., racist oppression of minority people in the U.S.).

We are at a fresh start.

Third, communist theory needs to comprehend the twentieth century — especially what that century reveals about the socialist transition to communism and the wellsprings of capitalist restoration. When encountering communists, people all over the world demand to know what we have learned from this exhilarating and painful process and what we would now do differently. Our answer must come in deep historical analysis and theoretical proposals — but also in our style, our methods, our program and our larger practice.

Fourth, communist theory needs to clean its Augean stables[125] — uprooting this legacy of dogmatism, deepening its struggle against various forms of capitulation, and tackling long-standing philosophical and strategic problems that stand as real obstacles to communist revolution.

Discussing their history, the Maoists of Nepal touched on outlook. They made their mental leap toward the seizure of power, "by protecting revolution from the revolutionary phrases that we used to memorize in the early period." And they say that then, later, they dared "to abandon the course once selected and have the courage to climb the unexplored mountain."[126]

Something important is being said if our movement in the U.S. can (at long last) develop an ability to even *hear* the voices of others. We have to learn to look past the text, the glib phrase, the comforting myth — and look deeply into the living thing and our living practice of engagement. We have to actually know this shimmering, dancing world in course of actually fighting to end its many horrors.

We are in many ways at a fresh start. Let's re-teach ourselves to think with a critical spirit. Let's struggle and debate creatively, as comrades. Let's chart that uncharted course. Let's actually "prepare minds and organize forces for revolution." Let's bring down the beast and move toward the final emancipation of humanity.

125. One of the "impossible" tasks that Hercules accomplished in Greek mythology was cleaning the vast Augean stables in a single day by diverting rivers to wash away long-accumulated muck.

126. We don't need to have verdicts on their particular "unexplored mountain" in order to appreciate their larger methodological point. *Maoist Information Bulletin* 17, July 2007, cpnm.org