

A MATERIALIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE STATE AND ITS RELATION TO THE UNDERLYING ECONOMIC BASE Part 2

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Bob Avakian

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Views on Socialism and Communism:

A Radically Different Kind of State, A Radically Different and Far Greater Vision of Freedom

by Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA

I want to talk a little more about the question of democracy and dictatorship in socialist society and about the socialist state, the dictatorship of the proletariat, as a radically different kind of state. Proletarian democracy—as given expression as democracy for the masses of people in socialist society—should contain some secondary and "external" features, if you will, in common with bourgeois democracy, including Constitutional provisions for the protection of the rights of masses of people, *and* of individuals; but *in essence it is a radically different kind of democracy*, fundamentally because it is an expression of a *radically different kind of class rule*—rule by the proletariat, led by its vanguard, openly exercising dictatorship over the overthrown bourgeoisie and other proven counter-revolutionary elements—*and* it has radically different objectives, above all the advance to communism, and the "withering away of the state"—*and* of *democracy*.

Here the following passages from Engels, once again from *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, are very relevant: He points out: [In early communal society] "there cannot yet be any talk of 'right' in the legal sense....Within the tribe there is as yet no difference between rights and duties."

That's worth pondering and wrangling with deeply: no difference between rights and duties. And we can go on to say that, in a fundamental sense, what was true in early communal society will again be true, but in a very different way—with a different material, and ideological, basis and in a different, worldwide context—in communist society: where there is no class antagonism, there is no separation, in a fundamental sense, between rights and duties. There is no separation between rights and duties characteristic of class society, is another way to say this. All rights and duties will be afforded and carried out consciously and voluntarily—and there will be no need for special institutions to enforce duties and to protect rights—no need for the state, *nor* for formal structures of democracy. This, of course, does not mean that there will no longer be a need for a *government* in communist society, for decision making and administration. That need will persist, and understanding this is a crucial part of understanding the difference between a **scientific** and on the other hand a **utopian** view of communism—and of the struggle to get to communism (I will have more to say on this, too, as we go along). But the *state* is not the same thing as, not identical with, government: the state, once again, is an organ, an instrument, of *class suppression* and dictatorship, and its existence is always and everywhere an expression of the existence of *class antagonisms*. Now, at the same time, the character of the proletarian state, and the way in which power is exercised under the dictatorship of the proletariat, must—in accordance with, and to advance toward, the fundamental objectives of the communist revolution—also be *radically different* from any previous kind of state.

In order to get into this, and as a foundation for it, I want to paraphrase and review three sentences on democracy which I have formulated as a concentration of some fundamental points. To paraphrase, the first of these sentences is: In a world marked by profound class divisions and social inequalities, to talk about democracy without talking about the class content of that democracy, and which class it serves, is meaningless or worse. And second: In such a situation, there cannot be any such thing as democracy for all or "pure democracy"—one class or another will rule and will institute the forms of rule and of democracy that serve its interests. And therefore the conclusion of this, if you will, the third sentence, is: The essential question and dividing line is whether this class rule and the corresponding forms of democracy serve to reinforce fundamental class divisions and social inequalities, fundamental relations of exploitation and oppression, or whether they serve the struggle to uproot and finally eliminate these relations of exploitation and oppression.

Now, I said before, in another context, that I could teach a whole college course on this, simply by reciting these three sentences and then saying, "discuss," for the rest of the semester. And I wasn't joking. One could easily do this. But here, let's take off from this to discuss some important related questions, with this as a foundation.

I want to discuss the *state*—once again, the armed forces and the other organs of dictatorship—in relation to the *broader institutions and functions of government* in socialist society, including decision-making bodies, a legislature of some kind more or less, as well

as centralized institutions that can effect the carrying out of decisions, or an executive of some kind. I also want to deal with the question of a Constitution and of the "rule of law" and of courts.

Recently, I told some people that one of the key things I have been grappling with is how to synthesize what's in the polemic against K. Venu (1) with a principle that is emphasized by John Stuart Mill. A pivotal and essential point in the polemic against K. Venu is that, having overthrown capitalism and abolished the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, the proletariat must establish and maintain its political rule in society, the dictatorship of the proletariat, while continuing the revolution to transform society toward the goal of communism and the abolition of class distinctions and oppressive social relations, and with that the abolition of the state, of any kind of dictatorship; and that, in order to make this possible, the proletariat must have the leadership of its vanguard communist party throughout this transition to communism. In continuing to grapple with these fundamental questions, I have become convinced that this principle articulated by Mill—that people should hear arguments presented not only as they are characterized by those who oppose them, but as they are put forward by ardent advocates of those positions—is something that needs to be incorporated and given expression in the exercise of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This is one element—not the entirety, but one element—of what I have been reaching for and wrangling with in terms of what we have formulated as a new synthesis. And in line with that, while the proletariat has to maintain firm control of the state—and, particularly in the early stages of socialism and for some time, this is expressed in terms of the leadership of the vanguard party of the proletariat—while the proletariat in that way has to maintain firm control of the state; and while the key organs and instruments of the state have to be responsible to the party (and I'll talk more about that and other aspects of this shortly); there is also a question of how can the masses be increasingly drawn, not only into the exercise of state power, but also into other forms, other aspects of the governing and administration of society, and the law-making of society; and how can the political process that goes on in socialist society, on the basis of the firm control by the proletariat over the state as exercised in a concentrated way through the leadership of its party—how on that basis can the political process lead to, or contribute to, the kind of ferment that I've been talking about as an essential element of what needs to go on in socialist society, including the emphasis on the importance of dissent?

So here "the John Stuart Mill principle" comes in, in a certain way—within the framework of proletarian rule and not raised as some kind of absolute, outside of and above the relation of classes and the class character of the state. I don't have time to go into a whole discussion of Mill, but in the "Democracy" book (*Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?*) I made the point that in fact Mill did not insist on and apply a principle of unrestricted liberty in some universal and absolute sense—he didn't think it applied to workers on strike; he didn't think it applied to people in "backward countries" who, as he saw it, were not yet ready to govern themselves, and he implemented that by being an official in the East India Company, a major instrumentality of colonial depredation and ravaging in Asia and other places. But nonetheless, leaving those contradictions aside

here, there is a point that Mill is raising, about how people should be able to hear arguments from their ardent advocates. And I think one of the ways in which this should find expression in the governing of socialist society is that—within the framework where, first of all, the state is firmly controlled by the proletariat, and second, there is consultation between the party and the masses and the implementation of forms, such as those that were developed through the Cultural Revolution in China, forms that combine basic masses with people from administrative posts or technical or educational professionals, or people in the arts who are professionals, etc., in decision-making and administrative tasks on all the different levels and in all the different spheres of society—while that should go on as a foundation, there should be a certain element of contested elections within the framework of whatever the Constitution of the socialist society is at the time. And one of the reasons why this should happen is that it will contribute to implementing what is positive about this John Stuart Mill point—that people need to hear positions not just as they are characterized by those who oppose them but as they are put forward by ardent advocates of those positions—what is positive about this in relation to **our** strategic objectives, of continuing the socialist revolution toward the goal of communism, the ways in which the implementation of this principle will contribute to political and overall intellectual ferment in socialist society and to the flowering of critical and creative thinking and, yes, of dissent, within socialist society—which will make that society more vibrant and will overall strengthen not only the willingness but the conscious determination of the masses of the people, including among the intellectuals, to not only preserve and defend that society but to continue revolutionizing society toward the goal of communism, together with the revolutionary struggle throughout the world.

One of the things that should be really understood about what we have characterized as the new synthesis, is that it envisions a much more wild society than has heretofore existed, politically speaking. I mean, things got very wild in the Cultural Revolution in China. But I am envisioning this in a different sense, on a more ongoing basis—one in which there is a solid core, and elasticity is giving rise to all kinds of contention on the basis of the solid core and within the framework in which the proletariat is (a) firmly in control of the state, and (b) is leading, and in that sense, in control of the overall political apparatus, even those parts that are not strictly speaking the state in the literal sense of being organs of political dictatorship and suppression, such as the armed forces, where the leadership of the party, and with that the rule of the proletariat, has to be very clear and firm.

The reason that I'm wrangling with this idea of having contested elections to, in part, select people to legislatures—in other words to have *part* of the selection, not the whole, but part of the selection of people to legislative bodies on local areas, and even on the national level, open to contestation—has to do with the Mill principle. It has to do with the principle (which I've articulated before) about how even reactionaries should be able to publish some books in socialist society—all of which, of course, is highly unorthodox [*laughs*] and, to say the least, controversial, especially in the international communist movement. But I do believe that the masses themselves—if they're actually going to rule

and transform society and understand to an increasingly deepening level what is involved in transforming the world—will be better served by some contention in this kind of way, and that it has to find some expression other than just people being able to be guaranteed certain "first amendment" rights (freedom of speech and of assembly, of the right to dissent and protest, and so on), which they should have, within the framework of the proletarian dictatorship. So that's one element that I'm wrestling with.

Along with that, as there has been in previous socialist societies, there needs to be a Constitution. A Constitution, however, should always be understood, as should the law, as a *moving, dynamic thing*. At any given time it has relative identity. You can't say it's completely relative, or that it's essentially relative at any given time, or it would have no meaning then—it would be whatever anybody wanted it to be, and that's not a Constitution. A Constitution is something that sets down what are the rules of the game so that everybody can, on the one hand, in one important aspect, feel at ease, and, at the same time, can contribute fully to the struggle to transform society, while knowing, in effect, what the rules are. But it's a *moving* thing in the sense that a Constitution will change as the advance is carried forward toward communism. A Constitution is a reflection in the superstructure of where you are in the overall transformation of society, including in the economic base—just as the law, as Marx pointed out, is essentially a reflection of the property relations of society (and the production relations at the foundation of those property relations) at any given time. And there will be a need, as there was in China, for example, for different Constitutions at different stages in that process. You will need to, in effect, tear up the old Constitution and rewrite it, as you advance, particularly by leaps, from one stage to another. But, at any given time, a Constitution plays an important role, I believe—or should play an important role—in socialist society. For example, I firmly believe that the army, and also in a fundamental sense the courts, especially courts that have a more societal-wide impact, and the essential administrative bodies, should be particularly responsible to the vanguard party in socialist society. But, here's where the contradiction comes in. I also believe they should be *responsible to the Constitution*. That is, to get right down on the ground, the army should not be able to be mobilized to go against the Constitution, even while it's being led by the party. And here you can see a potentially roaring tension. But if the party can lead the armed forces to go outside of and above and beyond the Constitution, then the Constitution is meaningless. And then, in effect, you do have an arbitrary rule whereby it's merely the party and whatever the party is deciding at a given time—those are the rules, and that's how they'll be enforced.

Now, this gets really tricky if you think about Cultural Revolutions in socialist society. What happens then? Well [*laughs*] revolutions are revolutions—a lot of things get suspended, but they have to be reconstituted. And there has to be some sort of leading core and rules even within that. That was the point of the Circulars that were put out by the party leadership in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, for example. But on a more ongoing basis, you can't simply run society in such a way that whoever gets control of the party at a given time sets and enforces the rules according to whatever they think the rules should be at a given time. Or else the masses will not feel

at ease and, in fact, you will open the gates much more widely to the restoration of capitalism and a bourgeois dictatorship, a dictatorship of exploiters and oppressors of the masses. So there's real tension, and you can concentrate it in that formulation—that the army, for example, should be responsible to the party and led by the party, but it should also be responsible and accountable to the Constitution, and if people rally against the party, for example, in mass dissent, it should not be that the party can mobilize the army to carry out bloody suppression of those masses, or to suppress their right to raise that dissent against the party. So this has a lot of acute tension, or potentially acute tension, built into it. But again I am firmly convinced that, in order for the masses to really increasingly become masters of society, these kind of principles, and the institutionalization of these principles, are necessary in socialist society.

This, then, raises the question that I call the "Islamic Republic of Iran question." People will say: "Well, okay, that sounds good—Constitutional rights, even the army can't violate the Constitution, yes, have some contested elections—but how are you going to be different than Iran where they have the Supreme Islamic Council and it has final veto power over what happens. You're not really going to be different than that, are you?" Well, we *aren't* and we *are*. We aren't in the sense that we don't intend to have the fundamental question of state power put up for whoever can grab it. In fact, *a Constitution has to embody what the character of the state power is*—not only what the role of the army is in relation to the party, for example, but what is the character of the production relations, in addition to having a whole dimension of the rights of the people and, yes, of individuals.

Why do you need a Constitution? Because as Mao pointed out—this was an important thing that he brought forward—in socialist society there remains a contradiction between the people and the government, or the people and the state. This was not well understood before Mao. He pointed this out, if I remember correctly, in "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People." And the need for a Constitution and for constitutional provisions, protections and rights is an expression of the recognition of that reality—that even where the state is in the hands of the proletariat, and is a positive state, is a good state, is a state that's maintaining the rule of the proletariat and putting its weight behind the further revolutionization of society and support of the world revolution—even there, there has to be protection against simply trampling on individuals or sections of society in the name of, or even in the legitimate pursuit of, the larger social and worldwide good.

So this is an important contradiction, and this is why you need a Constitution. And in my opinion, it is why you also do need a "rule of law." This has to do with the criticism that I raised in "Two Great Humps" (a talk I gave in the latter half of the 1990s) (2) of Lenin's formulation that dictatorship is rule, unrestricted rule, and specifically rule unrestricted by law. Now, to be fair to Lenin, he was saying this in the very, very early stages of the new Soviet republic, when not that much experience had been accumulated about the nature of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and under very urgent and desperate circumstances. And he was not putting this forward as a general conclusion about what

the character of the governance should be throughout the transition to communism. He didn't even fully understand what that transition would look like yet. But, reflecting on it with historical perspective, that is not a correct statement of what a dictatorship is or should be. There do need to be laws. And there does need to be a "rule of law," or else there are no laws. I mean this in the sense that the law does have to be applied according to the actual character of the society and what is provided for in the Constitution and the laws themselves—it has to be applied in the same way to everybody and everything. Now, part of the law, an essential part of the law, must be and will be an expression of dictatorship over the bourgeoisie, and suppression of counter-revolutionaries. But then you do not simply declare somebody a counter-revolutionary and deprive them of rights without any process of law, or else you're again opening the gates to arbitrary rule and the restoration of bourgeois dictatorship. So that's another intense contradiction.

What about independent judiciary? In my opinion, the judiciary, as to whether it should be independent—it should and it shouldn't. In one real sense, it should be independent—in the sense that it shouldn't be, in any proximate, immediate sense simply following the dictates of the party. There should be law, and things should operate according to the law. On the other hand, and in an overall sense, and especially the more we are talking about a court whose decisions influence things on a large scale, and especially courts whose decisions affect all of society, this, too, has to be under the leadership of the party at the same time as it is beholden not only to the party but to the Constitution. Once again, intense contradiction.

So these are some things I'm wrestling with, and here the "Islamic Republic of Iran question" does arise, once again. Now there are some fundamental differences between us and what I'm envisioning in speaking of the Islamic Republic of Iran (as the embodiment of a certain kind of rule). First of all, we're not theocratic fundamentalists! That is not merely a statement without content, but makes a profound difference—our world outlook, our political objectives, are profoundly different. But as true and as important as that is, that's still not enough, there is still more to be wrestled with in the sense of: the party cannot, simply and arbitrarily and by going "outside of the rules," overturn what may be happening in society, according to the "rules" of society at any given time—mobilizing the army, once again, or other organs of the state, to do that. If revolutionaries in the party, or the party collectively, feel that the society is going in the direction back to capitalism, and there's no way to prevent this other than through the kind of thing that Mao unleashed in the Cultural Revolution, then that's what the Party will have to unleash—and then everything is up for grabs, "all bets are off," so to speak. But, in my opinion, if you allow the party to simply and arbitrarily decide what the rules are, what the law is, how the judiciary should operate, whether or not constitutional provisions should be extended or whether rights should be taken away, without any due process of law; if you allow that, you are increasing the potential and strengthening the basis for the rise of a bourgeois clique to power and for the restoration of capitalism.

So these are all things that need to be further wrangled with. But the contradictions that are being touched on here have to do with the character of socialism as a transition to communism, and not yet communist society itself, and with the need to draw the masses into—first of all, the need to draw the masses more fully into the running of and the transforming of society; and second of all, it has to do with the whole new synthesis and, in particular, the epistemological dimension of that and how that interpenetrates with the political dimension. In other words, to put it in concentrated terms, how are the masses going to come to know the world as fully as possible, in order to actually transform it; how are they going to more fully understand the complexity of things and what is right and wrong, what is true and not true, in order to be able to become more fully the masters of society and to transform it toward the goal of communism? The things that I'm wrestling with have to do with and are being taken up in *that* kind of framework. But we can't get away from the fact that *there is one thing that CANNOT be done*, and that is: the proletariat *cannot, in a fundamental sense, share power* with other classes—that is, the state in socialist society cannot be a state that serves different class interests—because, even while the proletariat must maintain and apply the strategic orientation of building a united front under its leadership, all the way to the achievement of communism, it remains a profound truth that only the proletariat, as a class, has a fundamental interest in abolishing all class distinctions and everything bound up with class divisions, in both the economic base and the political and ideological superstructure of society. What exists and is concretized in law, in a Constitution, in the nature of the state, has to reflect not only the rule of the proletariat but also the objectives of the proletariat in advancing toward the abolition of class distinctions and the "4 Alls" and thereby the need for the state. And this has to take concrete forms, which will get embodied in *successive* Constitutions. But, as important as that is, on another level that is only the outward, superstructural expression of what needs to be going on in terms of transforming those "4 Alls"—continuing to transform the economic base, to revolutionize the world outlook of the people, within the party as well as in society overall, and to transform the political institutions to draw more and more masses into them, and to move to continually narrow and eventually eliminate the difference between the party and the broader masses in the running of the state and in the determination of the direction of society.

This is the way in which the proletarian state has to be firmly in the hands of the proletariat; but, at the same time, in accordance with the interests of the proletariat, it has to be different than every other kind of state: it has to be not only *reinforcing* the existing economic base and superstructure, but actually *transforming* the economic base and the superstructure, together with the advance of the world revolution, toward the goal of communism. This has to be reflected in all these institutions I'm talking about—of the state and of government, of law and Constitution. And all this, once again, involves very acute contradictions. As I have pointed out many times, it is very easy to promulgate, to theoretically conceive of and popularize, the idea of all elasticity—which is another way of saying bourgeois democracy, because that is what it will devolve into, that is what it will become. And we've also learned from experience that it is easy to veer in the direction of all solid core and a linear view of how you advance toward

communism, how you carry forward the socialist transition: linear in the sense that everything is extended out as a line from the party—it's the party leading the masses to do this, the party leading the masses to do that. Yes, in an overall sense, it is necessary for the party to lead the masses, as long as there is a need for a vanguard party; but it is a very complex and contradictory process that I think we have to envision and that is envisioned in this new synthesis, which has to do with unleashing a lot of mass upheaval, turmoil, tumult, debate, dissent, and thrashing it through among and together with the masses, in order for *the masses*, in growing numbers, to synthesize what's true and correct and revolutionary out of all that. And, yes, on that basis, to suppress what actually needs to be suppressed, but also to carry forward what needs to be carried forward, and to deal correctly, at any point, with the two different types of contradictions (contradictions among the people and contradictions between the people and the enemy). This is a different way, a not so linear way. It's not like you're fly-fishing [*laughing*] and throwing a line out—it's much more "throwing out" a process that goes in many different directions and then working through, together with the masses, to synthesize it, without letting go of the core of everything. And that's the very difficult part, to do that *without letting go of the core of everything*.

So there is the challenge of *continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat*, to dig up the soil—materially and ideologically, in the economic base and the superstructure—that must be uprooted and abolished, in order to get to communism, to the realization of the "4 Alls," in relation—and yes this definitely involves contradiction—to continually giving fuller expression to the ways in which the socialist state actually is radically different from all previous kinds of states and actually is moving toward its own eventual abolition, even while—and here's another contradiction—even while that abolition will require a whole process, constituting a whole world-historical epoch, through which the necessary material and ideological conditions for communism are created, not just in a particular country but on a world scale.

I think we have come to see, from the experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat so far—in sifting through and summing up this first stage of proletarian revolutions and socialist society and projecting to the future, we've come to understand more fully, and have much more a sense of the complexity, of the fact that this is a long-term process, involving a whole historical epoch, as contrasted even with what Lenin understood at the time he died in 1924, and certainly in contrast with what we would have to say, with historical perspective, were the more naive views of Marx and Engels concerning the abolition or the "withering away" of the state. Marx and Engels more or less thought that once you socialize things—they were looking at this happening first in a more capitalistically developed society—that once you socialize ownership of the means of production under the rule of the proletariat, it would be not that long of a period, and not that profound and complex a struggle, to get to where more and more of the people would be drawn into the administration of society, and the state could accordingly wither away. And we've learned that this is rather naive, not surprisingly. [*Using a deliberately sarcastic sounding voice:*] "He said Marx and Engels were *naive*." [*laughter*] Yes, he did. Because we're historical materialists and not religious and idealist people; and in this

aspect, the understanding of Marx and Engels was very undeveloped, not surprisingly. But we've learned much more through, first (after the very short-lived and limited experience of the Paris Commune), the Soviet Revolution and then the Chinese Revolution and the Cultural Revolution in China—and looking at the international dimension of this much more fully in dialectical relation with the advance in any particular socialist country—how complex this will be, and how repeatedly the contradictions that are driving this will assume acute expression and there will have to be another leap forward, in order, first of all, to preserve proletarian rule, but much more fully in order to advance it further, to carry out further transformations in the base and the superstructure, together with supporting and advancing revolutionary struggles throughout the world.

So, in this context I want to come back and speak more directly to the solid core with a lot of elasticity—and elasticity *on the basis of the necessary solid core*. Now in talks I've given on "Elections, Democracy and Dictatorship, Resistance and Revolution," (3) I spoke about four objectives in relation to the solid core with state power. Now, the whole thing can be characterized, and I have characterized it, in the formulation that the point is "to hold on to state power while making sure that this state power is worth holding on to." And of course that's a boiled down, or basic and simple, concentration of a much more complex phenomenon and process. But the four objectives that relate to that are: 1) holding on to power; 2) making sure that the solid core is expanded to the greatest degree possible, and is not a static thing, but is continually expanding to the greatest degree possible at every point; 3) working consistently toward the point where that solid core will no longer be necessary, and there will no longer be a distinction between that and the rest of society; and 4) giving expression to the greatest amount of elasticity at any given time on the basis of that solid core.

The dialectical interplay of these things is another way of expressing what's involved in what I've described as a nonlinear process of, on the one hand, continuing to exercise the dictatorship of proletariat, and on the other hand—through this whole tumultuous and wrenching process, and through a succession of leaps—not only holding on to power, but transforming the character of that power, as the economic base and the superstructure as a whole are transformed, in dialectical relation with each other and in dialectical relation with the advance of the overall world revolution toward the goal of communism on a world scale.

Footnotes

1. This polemic, titled "Democracy: More Than Ever We Can and Must Do Better Than That," appears as an Appendix to the book *Phony Communism Is Dead...Long Live Real Communism!*, 2nd edition, by Bob Avakian (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2004). The polemic originally appeared in the 1992/17 issue of the magazine *A World to Win*. Available at revcom.us. [[back](#)]

2. The full title of the talk is *Getting Over the Two Great Humps: Further Thoughts on Conquering the World*. Excerpts from this talk appeared in the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper (now *Revolution*) and are available online at revcom.us. The series "[On Proletarian Democracy and Proletarian Dictatorship—A Radically Different View of Leading Society](#)" appeared in *RW* #1214 through 1226 (Oct. 5, 2003-Jan. 25, 2004). The series "[Getting Over the Hump](#)" appeared in *RW* #927, 930, 932, and 936-940 (Oct. 12, Nov. 2, Nov. 16, and Dec. 14, 1997 through Jan. 18, 1998). Two additional excerpts from this talk are "[Materialism and Romanticism: Can We Do Without Myth?](#)" in *RW* #1211 (Aug. 24, 2003) and "[Re-reading George Jackson](#)" in *RW* #968 (Aug. 9, 1998). All of these articles can be found online at revcom.us.] [[back](#)]

3. This was a talk given by Bob Avakian before the elections in 2004. Audio file of this talk is available online for listening and downloading at bobavakian.net. [[back](#)]

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