

# Marxism and the Call of the Future: Conversations on Ethics, History, and Politics

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The *Revolutionary Worker* is proud to feature an excerpt from the forthcoming book *Marxism and the Call of the Future: Conversations on Ethics, History, and Politics* by Bob Avakian and Bill Martin.

Published by Open Court—whose titles run the gamut from works on analytic philosophy to philosophical studies of *The Sopranos* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—this provocative new book will be available in March.

*Marxism and the Call of the Future* is a wide-ranging dialogue between two provocative thinkers: Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, and Bill Martin, a radical social theorist and professor of philosophy at DePaul University in Chicago. The two address the relevance and challenges before Marxism in the contemporary world; imperialism and the state of world humanity; secularism and religion; animal rights; the prospects for revolution; and much more. They discuss philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre, and Derrida—and along the way make contact with diverse figures like Tecumseh and Bob Dylan.

*Marxism and the Call of the Future* is a lively exchange that often goes in unexpected directions. In the chapter we are printing, "**Calculation, Classes, and Categorical Imperatives**," Bob Avakian and Bill Martin explore people's "objective interests" in replacing the current system, the role of "the ethical" or "the good" in the revolutionary process, and the nature of ethics itself. The 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant and his view that people should be treated as an end and never only as a means is an important point of reference in the discussion.

We thank Open Court for their cooperation in making advance publication of this chapter possible.

## Calculation, Classes, and Categorical Imperatives

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**MARTIN:** What is the conclusion, what does it point to when we're not yet in a position, for example, where we can grow food a whole other way even if we thought that it would be much better to do so and maybe it would? But right now we're not in a position where we can make those decisions and yet people are; as I said, people have to. But it perhaps poses this in the most acute form, where I would argue that (I'll call it the point of underdetermination) the way that people are mapping themselves onto and understanding themselves in the context of the swirl of world events gets worked out mainly or purely in the form of: "Where do my true interests lie?" or "Where do my real interests lie?" or even, "Where do my basic interests lie?" That there's this moment of underdetermination, and that the only way, well, I'm trying to understand this myself, but

what has to happen in that moment is something other than the calculation of one's interest. Of course, people don't just sit down and draw up the balance sheet and check off on either side and see where it comes out in the end. It's a living thing; it's a grappling thing; but where people are grappling not just with their minds but how they're going to live their lives this or that day, this or that week or year or whatever. And there's that moment of undecidability where what has to decide it is something like, "What would be the right thing to do? What's the right way to go here?"

And something like Vietnam, who knows where the current wave of what are called wars or actions by the United States on Third World countries will go eventually and whether it will go into an arena where there are more casualties, there is more "feedback" so to speak, the actions come back onto the home front in more direct ways. Obviously it's coming back now after 9/11 in the form of strengthening of the repressive apparatus, but, I mean, as they always say, "when the bodybags start coming home." Who knows where that will go.<sup>1</sup> I tend to think, not that the existing system has anything like perfect freedom in this case, but I tend to think they're going to be very careful about ever—they may be forced to go into this no matter what they want, but I think they're very aware of the Vietnam syndrome. I think when George Bush "the first" announced, I think this was on the day when Sadaam Hussein surrendered in the Gulf War, Bush made a big point of saying something like, "And by God we have kicked the Vietnam syndrome." He said it very loudly. I don't think that's true at all. I think it's very clear that the whole war-fighting strategy is still very much shaped in an awareness of that. Who knows where it's going to go, but even in the case of something like Vietnam, where even though the numbers on the other side were all out of proportion to what casualties were suffered on the U.S. side, even there, there's that point where we have to support the people of Vietnam. And the thinking on that isn't and shouldn't be—and when I say "shouldn't" that already has ethical connotations of the *ought*, purely on the basis of a calculation of what interests are served.

As you pointed out, I think quite rightly, part of what's interesting in imperialism—interesting and extraordinarily ugly, as ugly as anything that's ever been in the history of humankind—is that in the lopsidedness of the world, basically what you do have is systems that have advanced means of production decimating systems that are in a semifeudal condition, that are primarily agriculturally based, etcetera. And so then our thinking on that, I just don't see where interests will motivate it fully to where it needs to go. And that's the moment where a question like "What is the right thing to do?" has to come in. I don't mean that, but I also don't think Kant ever meant it, as some sort of, as Hegel said of it, "empty formalism." I think Kant was fully aware that we ask ourselves this question in the context of whatever situation we happen to find ourselves in. But that is the *matter* of the ethical, to say "What would be the right thing to do?" and to do it because it is the right thing to do.

**AVAKIAN:** You were earlier sort of saying, well, you have to go from the more immediate and narrow interests to the larger interests. And I suppose there would be a point where that loses meaning, but I do think that, at least up to a certain point, that is not only real

but important. There are narrower and there are larger interests. A lot of what we're trying to do in making a revolution is motivating people to go against their most momentary and narrow interests. That's a lot of what Lenin was polemicizing against on the question of revolutionary defeatism, and even in some ways in "What Is to Be Done" around economism, and so on. And in terms of the point you raised about how we have to tell the workers the truth, that a revolution might result in lower wages, but it would still be worth it, I would say that it would still be in their larger interests to be rid of a society like this and to bring into being a better society. And I think that is actually in the objective interests of most people, even in a society like the U.S., let alone most people in the world where it's much more clearly and decisively in their interests.

As I was saying, Bush keeps harping on this thing: they're trying to get people to sacrifice for the greater good, to be willing to have their children or young adults in their families die in the service of imperialism. And making a revolution requires all kinds of sacrifices—not just the most extreme of giving your life but all kinds of other sacrifices that run counter to your interests or even your needs in the narrowest sense. You could never make a revolution or motivate people to make a revolution on the basis of anything other than the most sweeping kind of vision of a whole different way that society not only should be but could be—and understanding that you have to strive to bring it into being. So, is there a role for the good? Yes. There is a role for doing something because it is the right thing to do. There is a role for principles, to put it another way. That's another way of saying the ethical or the good. There's a role for principles—you do things out of principle, as opposed to the pragmatic motivation that you're going to get some immediate gain out of it, and whatever gives you the most immediate gain you do. You do things out of commitment to larger principles.

My point, though, is that those larger principles are ultimately grounded in what your view of society is—your class viewpoint, in class society—without viewing that in narrow economist terms. I've even used, as a sort of ironic phrase, "the godlike position of the proletariat" to describe not the spontaneous view of individual proletarians but what, from the vantage point of the proletariat and what's required for its emancipation in the fullest sense, you can see in terms of the sweep of history and in terms of where society is going and needs to go. Not inevitably going, but where, in what direction, there are very strong tendencies—and those tendencies have not inevitably developed, but they have developed. There's a certain tendency that points in a certain direction. There is also—as you've pointed out, and I've pointed this out as well—there's also the possibility humanity could become extinct through the same contradictions that make possible a whole different and better world of communism. So there's nothing inevitable, but there are certain tendencies, there are certain things to build on in terms of going for communism. And what we think is right and good and principled depends on how we view that, how we view what kind of society it is that is both possible but also desirable, if you want to put it that way.

And then, as I was trying to say earlier, this does take on a certain life of its own. In other words, it does have a certain autonomy: you have certain principles, and you act out of those principles, rather than out of immediate calculation. When I wrote that book *Preaching from a Pulpit of Bones*, I was trying to give some examples of these principles. Like you have women from the ruling class: yes, we oppose them, but we don't call them "bourgeois bitches." We don't say it's all right to sexually assault them since they're women of the ruling class, because those things would reinforce the oppression of all women, and the oppression of people in society in general. So those things are against our principles and we don't narrowly say, "Well, maybe in this case it's all right to do it because it's a minor instance." We say no, those things are against our principles.

There is a relationship—that's another way to say it—there is a relationship between means and ends (here I'm not speaking about the Kantian imperative regarding people being ends in themselves and not means). This accusation that communists believe that the ends justify the means—I believe it's the other way around: you have certain ends, or objectives, and your means have to flow from that and be consistent with it. Which, as I was trying to say earlier, doesn't mean you never make compromises, but you can't compromise the fundamental or essential principles. Sometimes you have to take a step back, but you don't take a step into the swamp.

In my book *Harvest of Dragons* there's a statement near the end about how we have to get down and fight the enemy in the trenches, literally as well as figuratively—literally when it comes to that, and figuratively all the way along—and we have to defeat them without becoming like them. And that's another way of saying we can't just adopt any old means, and certainly not *their* means. We have to adopt means that flow from and are consistent with and build toward our ends, our objectives—what kind of society we're trying to bring into being. We can't bring it all into being now, and we can't "live it all now"—we can't live without commodities, for example, as much as we want to eliminate them eventually. Even in socialism you can't live without them. But we don't want to worship them. We don't want to make a conscious fetish of them, to go along with their objective "fetishization." There are things you have to live with because you can't yet eliminate them; but that doesn't mean that principles don't matter. And it doesn't mean that you don't try to live as much of the future as you can at a given time, both in your personal dealings and in the larger way that you deal with society and what you're trying to do to affect society.

So I do think there is a role for principle, there is a role for morals, for the ethical, but it's "situated" in that sense, it has a certain content, and different people with different views of society, and how it ought to be and could be, have different views of the same phenomena and of what they regard as the good, the moral, etcetera. For example, let's take exploitation. You wrote something saying, "Well, we could take it as sort of fundamental that one person exploiting another is the definition of evil."

**MARTIN:** Right.

**AVAKIAN:** Well, yes—except that we and the bourgeoisie don't agree on what constitutes exploitation.

**MARTIN:** Exactly.

**AVAKIAN:** You read Ayn Rand and she says, "Well the communists they take business enterprise and creative initiative and call it exploitation."

**MARTIN:** Right, we call it "giving people jobs."

**AVAKIAN:** Right. "And yes, we're paying people low wages in Indonesia but if we didn't go there and do that, they'd be even worse off."

**MARTIN:** Right.

**AVAKIAN:** And they're only willing to partially call exploitation what we might call super-exploitation, where a kid somewhere in Haiti or Pakistan or wherever is working twelve hours a day, sleeping under the machine, seven days a week, and having their health ruined and their life stolen from them. They might say, "Well, yeah, that's exploitation"—unless they're doing it themselves. Some bourgeois theorists and apologists might say, "Yes, that's exploitation"; but we would say, as you were pointing out, the whole thing of being in a situation where other people's livelihood depends on, is conditioned by, the fact that you've monopolized the means to a livelihood and the only way they can have a livelihood is by creating more wealth for you—that's exploitation. That we got from Marx, but it's exploitation. This goes back to your statement I was referring to earlier about the Romans, when you said, once something better becomes possible then, damn it, we should support the better thing. Well, something better has become possible, and we don't have to wait for capitalism to play itself out to the *n*th degree. Because, for one thing, it never will.

**MARTIN:** Right.

**AVAKIAN:** So the basis has already been brought into being for something better. We view everything from that standpoint, that something better is possible. So it doesn't matter if you call it exploitation or rabba-dabba-dooba, there's a certain thing going on with people, the way in which people are being treated in this society, in production and the overall social relations, the culture and everything—something better than that is possible. And so we want that something better. And it's not just that we want it subjectively, we recognize that it's in the interests of the great majority of people. And so, from that vantage point, these other things are intolerable. And, again, it does get tricky. As we were talking about before, what about earlier times when the peasants rose up in Germany but they really couldn't bring into being a different mode of production or even a different society, or at least it was unlikely that they could. And maybe the bourgeoisie had a much better basis—not better but more favorable basis—for being able to bring its mode of production and its society into being. So why support the peasants, not only against the feudal oppressors but against the bourgeoisie, when the bourgeoisie went to suppress the peasants?

Because, again, what I was trying to say about that earlier is that the revolution that we're about is a revolution made by people and not by technology. Even though technology that is created by people plays some role in creating some of the material conditions—and even in providing, or requiring, some of the social relations—that establish some of the foundation for where we're trying to go, it's not made by those things. It's made by people, and just the wiping out of whole peoples doesn't contribute to the kind of world that we want to have, even back five hundred years ago. That's the way I look at it anyway. To me, that's some of the complexity of this question of the good and the right, principle, the moral, the ethical.

**MARTIN:** So, there's a lot there to talk about. I want to respond to a lot of it. But just as a provocation, I want to say that to me everything you just said was very Kantian in its general character. And even to just make a formula out of it: once something else becomes possible, for example, once it becomes possible to have a society where everybody can eat, starvation is intolerable. It would be one thing if there truly was some condition where only some would be able to eat. But once there is not that condition, to have some sitting at the table and others lying in the gutter starving is intolerable. That to me would be a very Kantian sort of thing to say.

**AVAKIAN:** Well, I guess we probably can't really get . . .

**MARTIN:** And it wouldn't be something that Marx would say. If you think about it, not to beat up on Marx, but when class society emerges from so-called primitive communal societies, that is in some sense for Marx an *advance*, even though it's also a fall. It's both the fall of humankind and an advance. It's partly an advance because it leads to the day when there will be a "humankind" in a global sense, which can only be seen retrospectively. But it is, for Marx, in some sense an advance to go from primitive tribal society to class society. And somehow out of this the good thing is going to come, ultimately. That's part of the teleology. But maybe just as a provocation, what would you say to my saying that a great deal of what you just said has a very Kantian sort of character to it?

**AVAKIAN:** I am going to resist saying, "I Kant understand that." [ *laughter* ] I'm not going to resist, but I'm not going to go any farther with it. Before, we were talking informally, while we weren't taping, about Marx—and saying that you have to recognize some positive things in Marx in terms of his statement about how capital comes into the world dripping with blood from every pore, and how the pedestal for child slavery in England was literal slavery in America, and many other statements of that kind. Or that famous statement about how the entombment in mines of the indigenous population in Latin America, and the hunting of black skins for slavery constituted the rosy dawn of capitalism. There were a lot of things like that from Marx, in terms of talking about primitive accumulation, in terms of colonial depredations and things that he did come to see more clearly, which he sharply condemned. So I think it is two-sided, just to be dialectical about Marx, too. But getting more directly to the thing about Kant, I guess we

can't really evaluate that without talking more directly about what is the heart of, or at least one of the main things in, the Kantian ethic: treating other people never as a means but only as an end unto themselves.

**MARTIN:** I think the way he put it was never *only* as a means; as an end and never as a means only. So, if you're purely instrumentalizing people...

**AVAKIAN:** Okay. I want to comment on that, but first let's go back to your other point about Marx and class society being an advance. One of the things about some of these early tribal or communal societies is that they often had, generally speaking, a lack of exploitative and oppressive relations, as we recognize them in a more fully developed form in other kinds of society, like feudalism or capitalism or slavery. But they also contained some seeds—for example, the sexual division of labor, while it might not have been oppressive right there, had the potential to become that with changing conditions. But, even beyond that, I don't think we could say in every case—and I'm not in a position to know about this in great detail, but there are a number of situations that I do know about that have been studied where a people would have been nonoppressive, nonexploitative within their own ranks, but then in dealing with another people they could be very antagonistic and violent. There are different people, including Jared Diamond in his *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, who have discussed and analyzed that phenomenon.

**MARTIN:** It partly comes down to who is recognized as people.

**AVAKIAN:** Right. For example, when you look at the names that different indigenous peoples have given to themselves, even in different parts of the world, often the name means "the people." They kind of see themselves as "the people," and anything else they encounter is often not part of "the people." And they often have hostile relations and even warfare with these other peoples, which doesn't in any way excuse what European colonialism did on a whole other level and scale of genocide. That's a different matter. But I'm just making the point that they often were not able to relate to other peoples without antagonism. And I think that goes back to my point much earlier, by analogy with your statement that you can't do good if you're not trying to do good. I said I think you can do some good, but you can't do good in an overall sense if you're not trying to. And the analogy I was drawing is that you can't really develop a society and a world that doesn't have exploitation and oppression and antagonistic relations and violent eruptions among people unless you have, yes, the material conditions but also the corresponding ideological orientation that enables you to integrate the relations among people on a world scale in a way that doesn't say, "Here's the people, and everybody else is the non-people."

And I do think there's a question of science here, not understood in a mechanistic sense, or in the instrumentalist sense, but I think in the sense of really understanding reality or engaging and increasingly developing your understanding of reality in a comprehensive and systematic way. That's necessary to be able to handle all the contradictions that arise among people in a way that's not antagonistic. So I think it's wrong, in other words,

to completely romanticize these early societies, even while we recognize that, as compared to the class societies that we contrast with them, they were relatively—and I stress relatively—free internally of exploitation and oppression.

I also think that here your point about reading back through history, or seeing it in retrospect, is also important. In other words, if you sit here at any given time and say, well, whatever's been done, it's all good—it's all going to lead to communism in the end, anyway—I think that would be (a) teleological and (b) wrong and (c) harmful. It would lead you to not oppose a lot of things you should oppose and to sort of mash all of reality down in a very crudely reductionist way.

**MARTIN:** The other term I apply to it is theodicy. In other words, nothing that looked evil really was evil, because in the end it all comes out good; it all works out.

**AVAKIAN:** Right, we'll all get redeemed or whatever.

**MARTIN:** Exactly.

**AVAKIAN:** In the end, yeah. Well, for all the reasons that you're pointing to and that I would also agree with, I think that's wrong and harmful. But to turn more directly to the Kant thing, I think that principle of means and ends as applied to people is not applicable in a class-divided society. First of all, we can see that it's not applicable on the part of the bourgeoisie or the other ruling and exploiting classes. They don't and can't apply that principle. By definition, what they're doing is treating other people as means.

**MARTIN:** As things.

**AVAKIAN:** Yes, they need to in order to exploit them in the way they do. That's built into the exploitative and oppressive relations. But even from the point of view of the proletariat, while there are still classes and still a need...even in socialist society there is still a need for the state, a need for the dictatorship of the proletariat—you have to prevent "the full flourishing" of some parts of society, individuals who make up the bourgeois class and counterrevolutionary forces, or else the rest of society is going to be prevented from flourishing and being emancipated, and you're not going to be able to transform society to where eventually it's not necessary for one part of society to be held down and restricted by another part. There are, we know, a lot of contradictions involved in that, and that can turn into its opposite. But still, for the proletariat, you can't avoid suppressing some of the "flourishing" of the bourgeoisie, if you're going to get to communism.

Okay then, when you get to communism, here to me is where it gets trickier. And I think it goes back to the statement from Marx we were talking about earlier—about how human beings are social animals and they can only individualize themselves in a social context. In other words, to me the flourishing of individuals, and their interrelations on a nonexploitative basis—that's also socially conditioned. It depends on what's going on with the relations among people in the society as a whole. And the realm of freedom for individuals is going to be dependent on what the society as a whole is doing and how



people are interrelating. And how they're still interrelating with nature, for that matter. Because, as we talked about, people are still going to need to eat and have other necessities, and you're still going to need to put away stuff "for a rainy day," as well as to expand the sphere of people's freedom by being able to develop production so that less effort, less time in the day on everybody's part, has to go into just reproducing the things necessary for life. All that is still going to be operating, even in the various stages of communist society, a communist world. And the relation of individuals, as I see it, is not unimportant at all, but it's situated in that kind of a context. So, then, I'll end up my comments right now with a question back to you: how then does the Kantian maxim or principle fit into that?

**MARTIN:** Great. I like the way the word "flourishing" has entered into the conversation. I think the root of the use of this word in political philosophy really goes back to Plato but especially Aristotle in this Greek word *eudaimonia*. There are different translations of it. Sometimes it's translated as "happiness," actually. Kant would object to this translation, because he was very skeptical about mixing questions of pleasure and pain with matters of right and wrong. This is often seen as a kind of Puritan side to Kant or a very strict side. Sometimes Kant is seen that way, as having this very strict demeanor, whereas apparently he was a very jovial man, at least on some levels.

Kant did have a very strange side—I don't know if you know this, but Kant apparently never had a sexual encounter with another person and would even wrap himself tightly in sheets at night for fear of becoming aroused in the night. A friend of mine wrote a book where he partly used that aspect of Kant to interpret some other parts of his philosophy. It's a bit worrisome to me. [laughs]. And I should say, too, that Kant himself was somewhat aware, not as aware as we would need to be, of the contradiction involved in that whole means/ends question, especially around the question of revolution. Because in a revolution one class violently overthrows another, and with that violence those who are overthrown are instrumentalized in the sense that some of them are even killed. It's hard to put that into the mix of their supposed flourishing, if they're killed. So Kant found himself with this contradiction that, before the fact he couldn't justify the French revolution. But after the fact he thought it was a great thing and was very positive toward it. But that's a contradiction, and I don't think he necessarily has the full resources for resolving it.

But to go back to the flourishing point. Here's where I think it really makes a difference. I guess what I'd want to say is it comes down to the question of ideas that matter. And that one could talk about ideas that matter without being philosophically idealist. And what I mean by that is that, well, something Adorno said is helpful here. There was this interesting conversation that was recorded in some form, but we have it anyway, between Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch—these two Frankfurt School/Marxist theoreticians. And it's interesting that the conversation was given the title "Something's Missing." Adorno is talking about utopianism, and he's basically saying, we're really down the road in society toward complete philistinism when to call something utopian can just automatically be taken to be a criticism or...not just a "criticism," as Marx said, a "critical

criticism" or a bit of critical thinking. Not a criticism in the sense of, "Oh, your idea is utopian," in that it's not really rooted in where we could really work toward. Or it's not really looking at the real divisions in society and what we need to do. But more the sneering attitude toward anyone who has any dream of something different and better than what we have now.

And that's where I think that you can see the importance of something like ideals, whether they be of flourishing, of not instrumentalizing, of working toward a world where people are not reified into mere things, where they are not under a commodity logic that then circulates them just like every other thing that is circulating. That it *matters* that we have those ideals. It matters that we think that that's what we need to do. And in that materialist sense, we *need* that idea. That's the materialism of it. We need that idea; it matters that we can talk in this language, that we want to create a world where... Because one way I like to spell out the word "communism" is that it's where we can attempt to create a global community of mutual flourishing. And I think mutuality is in the ideal of flourishing, as I've understood it historically, but it helps to reinforce that that's what flourishing is, it is a mutual thing. It is a "we" thing. It is a collective thing. It matters that we can use that language and that if instead all we had to fall back on was the calculative language, we materially couldn't get there.

**AVAKIAN:** What do you mean by "calculative language"?

**MARTIN:** Well, interest, I suppose. If that was all we had.

## **NEW TITLE FROM OPEN COURT**

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