

# Bob Avakian in a Discussion with Comrades on Epistemology- On Knowing and Changing the World

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"EVERYTHING THAT IS ACTUALLY TRUE IS GOOD FOR THE PROLETARIAT,  
ALL TRUTHS CAN HELP US GET TO COMMUNISM."

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—*Bob Avakian*

**Editors' Note: The following is based on a discussion by Bob Avakian with some comrades on the subject of epistemology. Epistemology refers to a theory of knowledge, to an understanding of how people acquire knowledge, what is the nature of truth and how people come to know the truth. In what follows an effort has been made to retain the original character of what was said and how it was recorded: these were not prepared remarks by Chairman Avakian (or the other comrades) but are comments that were made in the course of a discussion, and what follows here is based on notes that were taken of that discussion. These were not verbatim (exact word-for-word) notes, but were typed up at the time and then gone over for sense and minor corrections by a participant of the meeting. Not every contribution by every comrade has been included; but there are parts which respond to or expand upon a point made by Chairman Avakian that are helpful and so we have included them. This has been further edited for publication here, and footnotes as well as notes in brackets within the text have been added.**

**In the coming period, we will be publishing further remarks by Chairman Avakian on the question of epistemology.**

**BA:** It does focus up a lot of questions, this attitude toward the intellectuals. From the time of *Conquer the World*<sup>1</sup> (*CTW*) 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<sup>2</sup> 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. *End to the Horror*<sup>3</sup> has a whole point that there is no such thing as class truth, but there is a methodology that lets you get at the truth more fully; the open letters to Sagan

and Gould (and Isaac Asimov) wrestled with this more fully.<sup>4</sup> Then there is the point I have been stressing by referring to, and expressing some agreement with, the argument of John Stuart Mill on contesting of ideas—on the importance of people being able to hear arguments not just as they are characterized by those who oppose them but as they are put forward by those who strongly believe in them. It is not that Mao never had any of this approach, but still what I have been bringing forward represents an epistemological break. Even though many people welcomed CTW on one level, it divided into two again, and that division became sharper as things went on. I was pursuing CTW where it was taking me, I didn't have an *a priori* understanding [a priori here refers to forming conclusions in advance of investigating something]. There's a logic to what I was pursuing in CTW—it takes you to a certain place, and if you resist that you go to another place. There's been a clinging to this old way the communist movement has approached these questions, epitomized in class truth—this is still a real problem.

Your attitude towards intellectuals has to do with the philosophical question of what you think we're trying to do, and what is it the proletariat represents. What is the "godlike position of the proletariat," as I referred to it in "Strategic Questions"?<sup>5</sup> On one level, you're sort of sitting on a hill watching this procession go by of the development of humanity. Some of it you can see more dimly and some more clearly—you look at this whole sweep and then at a certain point this group called the proletariat emerges from within this set of social relations that can take it to a particular place, to a whole different world. But you shouldn't reify the proletariat: Yes, it's made up of real people, but it's not a matter of individual proletarians but of the proletariat as a class, of its position in society and of where its interests lie, in the most fundamental sense, as a class. On another level, looking at the sweep of history, you see the role of intellectuals as well. Are they basically making trouble for us? This is how some people see it—and this has been a definite tendency, and real problem, in the history of our movement.

But from the standpoint of a sweeping view of history, you look at this a different way. For example, there is this physicist Brian Greene who has written some books popularizing questions of physics, and he speaks to this big contradiction the physicists can't yet resolve between relativity and quantum mechanics, so the question they're facing is: how do you get the next level of synthesis? What do we think of that—is that a big waste of time unless we can use that narrowly? Yes, people like this, people in these fields generally, need to be struggled with—but in a good way. If we were working in the right way in these spheres we'd be having a lot of good struggle with people around all kinds of questions, including questions arising in their work, but first of all we would be seriously engaging the work they are doing and the questions they are wrestling with. We would do this in a different way than it's often been done in the history of our movement. Is it important for what we're trying to accomplish or should be trying to accomplish whether these physicists understand more about the world? Yes. Do they need "loose reins" to accomplish this? Yes. Do we need to struggle with them? Yes. Do we need to have them come down and learn from the masses? Yes. But there is a legitimate part to the point that Bill Martin has made, in an introduction to a book that will be coming out soon—consisting of a conversation between him and me—the point

that, yes, there are problems of intellectuals getting isolated in their ivory towers but at the same time there is a definite need for intellectuals to have the right atmosphere and space in which to do their work.<sup>6</sup>

Yes, we have to get down from the mountain and get with the masses, but you have to go up to the mountain too or we won't do anything good. Stalin—some of his errors are his own, resulting to a large degree from his methodological problems, and some of it was carried forward from Lenin (I spoke to some of this in CTW).

That stuff [a narrow view] on intellectuals has pretty much been the conventional wisdom in our movement, including in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. But for a couple of decades there's been a clear motion of what I've been fighting for that's going in a different way. Do you recognize that, or do you reject that and go for something else? There are different lines and roads represented by this. XXX [a leading comrade in the RCP] said to me, one of the most important things is for you to do what you do; but I said at least as important is for *you* to do this too. We need a solid core united around the correct line—and if we don't have that, then it's not gonna be good if people take a lot of initiative. If people are with this, we'll unleash a lot of stuff and it'll go in different directions, even funny directions, but we'll struggle and get somewhere.

How do you put your arms around the history of humanity? What about these indigenous people whose religion is so crucial to their sense of identity? Difficult—but we don't have a shot without this kind of outlook and methodology I'm arguing for. Without this, you're either gonna uncritically tail this or brutally suppress it when it gets in the way. Mao had some sense of this. He sharply criticized the Soviet Union's policy of forcing people to raise pigs in the Moslem areas. But we need to go further with this. Mao's been dead for 30 years and Lenin 80—what are we doing if we don't go beyond them?

This was a beginning rupture, an epistemological break, that was represented by CTW. The point is to change the world, and we need to understand reality. Darwin and Newton brought forth some understanding of reality. This has been shown to be limited and wrong in some ways, particularly in the case of Newton—Darwin was basically correct, and it's very important to uphold this, especially in the face of attacks on evolution by religious fundamentalists, but the understanding of evolution has progressed beyond Darwin. Yes we don't want people in ivory towers, but Bill Martin's point on this [that intellectuals do need the setting in which to do their work]—we have to solve that contradiction. We have to put this problem to the masses. And if we don't solve it right, even after power has been seized and we're leading a socialist society, the people will overthrow us or sit aside when a bigger army comes in. Saddam Hussein is an example: he was an oppressor of the people, and while the people didn't overthrow him, they also didn't rise to defend him when a more powerful oppressor, the U.S. imperialists, invaded to get rid of him. That will happen to us if we don't solve the real problems—including the day-to-day problems of the masses—in socialist society, but we have to lead the masses and even struggle with these intermediate strata by putting the contradictions to

them. Here's how we're dealing with this, what's your criticism of that? As opposed to bringing out the army to suppress things. I'm no idealist—sometimes you do need the army—but it shouldn't be the first thing you reach for. You have to pose the contradictions and ask: what's your idea for how to solve this? Here people are going without health care, and how do we solve that without reproducing the same gross inequalities so that a few people can do their work in the sciences, and on the other hand so that people in the sciences aren't stopped from their work. Or what is your solution to dealing with imperialist encirclement of our socialist state? Here's the contradiction—let's wrangle with it. How do we handle this?

It's not like Mao didn't have a lot of that, but it's a little bit different way, what I'm putting forward. You trust the masses that if you put the problems to them you can struggle with them, learn from them, lead them and win a big section of the masses as you do this. I don't want to be by myself on this road—that's no good, that won't take things where they need to go—I want more people on this road, enabling me to do work and doing work themselves. Many people here and people in our Party and more people beyond the Party can contribute to all this. This is a very good process. In response to a talk I gave, "Elections, Democracy and Dictatorship, Resistance and Revolution,"<sup>2a</sup> a professor, referring to my criticisms of Stalin and his methodology, and the need for us to do better than this, raised that it wouldn't have been such a problem if Stalin had had people around him who would challenge him; and this professor went on to put forward: "Here's my challenge—how would you do better than in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and '30s and China in the GPCR?" And he elaborated on this: "Here's how I see the problem: people are gonna start speaking out against you when you're in power, and pretty soon you're gonna bring out the army and suppress them." This is an important point—a real contradiction—and there needs to be ongoing dialogue about that with people like this, and more generally. I believe we can find a good resolution to this contradiction—but it won't be easy, it will take real work and struggle, all the way through, to handle this correctly.

Here is a big problem: when the time comes, when there is a revolutionary situation, our material force has to be able to meet and defeat the imperialists, it has to be the leading force in doing that, so that we can get the solid core and then open things up. If you open up the basic question of socialism to an electoral contest, you'll sink the ship. We have to bring forward the material force to defeat the enemy and set the terms for the new society. Then we have to do all this other stuff, to "open the society up" and lead the masses in accordance with this—that's the whole point on the moving process of solid core and elasticity. [This refers to the concept and approach of "a solid core with a lot of elasticity," which Chairman Avakian has been giving emphasis to—a principle he insists should be applied in socialist society as well as to the revolutionary process overall, aiming for the final goal of a communist world. For more on this, see the talk by Chairman Avakian, "[Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism](#)." The full text of this talk is available online at [rwor.org](http://rwor.org), and selections from this talk have been published in the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper in issues #1250-52, 1254-55, 1257-58 and 1260.]

This question of "solid core with a lot of elasticity" is not something that's settled once and for all—the more solid core we get, in every situation, on every level, the more elasticity we should have. Can't have a solid core that has no elasticity within it. The core can't be so strong that everything is like a black hole and sucks in the light.

It is hard to do both sides of that. Look at this aspect of having the material force to defeat and then set the terms. This is like the movie *Remember the Titans* —the decision was made to integrate the high school in Virginia and the football team, and that the football coach was gonna be Black. Then they struggled things out from there. It provided better terms than simply saying, "do you want this integration"—a lot of white people would have said "no!" If you have the ability to set the terms, it's more favorable. "No, in socialist society you can't have religion taught in schools—if you want to, you can talk to your kids about that on your own time. But they're gonna come to the public school and learn science and history and a true approach to reality." How does that fit in with Catholics who can't be happy without the Pope? There's no Catholicism without the Pope. And that's a big contradiction. These are difficult contradictions, but we won't have a chance if we're not on this road. I wasn't being insincere in the talk on the dictatorship of the proletariat—in saying some of these ideas I'm bringing forward are, at this point, posing contradictions and indicating an approach, not attempting at this point to give a complete answer to all these things. But this is the way I am convinced we have to go about this whole thing we are doing. Both because it takes us where we want to go and because it's in line with our final goal of communism.

Engels' *Anti-Duhring* is very open about the fact that much of what was understood then would be surpassed and replaced by further understanding. This is the right orientation and approach—it is dialectical as well as materialist, it is not religious. The stuff from Newton is true on one level, but there's a larger reality he didn't grasp. This applies to us —there are many things that we don't understand, many things that will be discovered later that will surpass and replace some things we think are true now—but you have to go on this road to get there. It's a road with many divergent paths. How do you keep them all going in a good direction without being tightly in formation? The more you grasp that this is correct, the more you can have the solid core which enables you to do these things. This is about whether our communist project is going to have any viability and desirability, and on the positive side it is opening up further pathways to solving these contradictions, and providing a path for others.

Those are the roads and that's how I see it—are we gonna get on this road, or not? Is this right what I'm saying? Is this how we should envision what we're all about? Or is it unrealistic, idealistic, nothing to do with the real world, not what we should aim for, not try to get there—are the people right who say "you want to do this, but you can't"? Not only can we, it is the only way we can do what we need to do. You can't repeat the experience [of the proletarian revolution and socialist society]. You couldn't do the Paris Commune again to do the Soviet Union. Too much has gone on, even besides the propaganda of the bourgeoisie, people are not going to get inspired to do the same thing. They should recognize that in its time and place the inspiration was the main

thing. The Chinese revolution was much better than what they had before and much better than what they have now in China. But it's not enough to inspire people to do that again. And they shouldn't want to. Is what I'm arguing for a bunch of idealism? Or is it the only way we can go forward? What's the truth of this?

## OBJECTIVE AND PARTISAN: GETTING AT THE TRUTH

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**BA continues:** Some of this in Feigon book on Mao<sup>9</sup> where Mao talks to his niece on reading the Bible—responding to her question about how to "inoculate" herself against it: "just go deeply into it and you'll come out the other side." Mao had some of this approach too, mixed in with other stuff. This has been there as an element: Mao had this aspect of not fearing to delve into things and seeking out the truth— perhaps he had this even more than Lenin—but then there's still a question of "political truth" or "class truth" getting in the way of this. In the name of the masses—and even out of concern for the masses. Mao had great concern for the masses, but these things were contending in Mao too. "You don't need any inoculation! Just go read it, you'll come out the other side." [There are] definitely correct things like that with Mao, but then there's also some "proletarian class truth," if not in the most narrow Stalinesque Lysenko way.<sup>10</sup>

**A comrade:** What about objective and partisan [that the outlook of the proletariat, of communists, is objective and partisan]?

**BA:** We should be able to get at the truth better than anybody. Our approach is not partisan in a utilitarian sense. We have an outlook and method that corresponds to a class that's emerged in history in the broadest sense, and it can't get itself out of this without overcoming all this stuff and transforming it all. This outlook corresponds to the proletariat's interests, but not narrowly.

I'm reading this book on Iran and Mossadegh (*All the Shah's Men*, by Stephen Kinzer).<sup>11</sup> Most of the newspapers [in Iran at that time] were controlled by the CIA, they had this political mobilization to oppose Mossadegh, and with all these attacks on him, he did not move to suppress any of this. And I said, "what the fuck have I set us up for with this solid core and elasticity?!" [laughs] That's why you don't let go of the solid core, and why we're different than Mossadegh.

The example of Brzezinski: On the tradition of autocracy in the Russian communist movement. I answered him, and said that the Russian Revolution negated all that [this refers to a part of the book *Phony Communism Is Dead, Long Live Real Communism!*, by Bob Avakian, which has been recently republished].<sup>12</sup> But when I thought about that more, I said that's not a complete answer—he has a point here, and we have to acknowledge that the autocratic tradition seeped into the communist movement in some ways. I spoke to this in "Two Great Humps."<sup>13</sup>

It is not "a clever device" when I say that reactionaries should be allowed to publish some books in socialist society—it is *good* to have these people interrogating us because we learn more about reality. It's part of how we're gonna learn and how the masses are

gonna learn. It's tricky—flying universities and misogynist hip-hop. [Another comrade in the discussion had raised earlier the examples of how hip-hop had emerged from the masses and was contradictory, and the example of the "flying universities" in Poland during the '70s, which contained anti-regime lines and were suppressed.] If all you do is mobilize the masses to crush this, it's the same as state repression in other forms. You can't let misogyny run rampant and not challenge it and not suppress it in certain ways—but on the other hand, even just coming up with ways that masses oppose this is not always the way to do this. Flying universities—what to do? Let them go on in a certain way? Or shut them down? We have to know what they're doing. You can't be Mossadegh, you need a political police—you need to know about plots, real plots that will go on, to overthrow socialism—but you shouldn't rely on state repression as the way to deal with opposition in every form, and sometimes you don't even want your own people to go into these things, because then it's not really a free university because you've got your people in there and it can be chilling, so we have to think about it. But if we don't have a lot of people proceeding from this outlook and methodology and applying themselves to this, people who have deeply internalized this kind of outlook, method and approach, we'll never be able to handle it right. This is a different vision— it's different than even the best of the GPCR—there is the other dimension that we need of ferment in society as I've been speaking about it, a different, an additional dimension to ferment in society, including intellectual ferment. This is not alien to Mao, but he didn't develop this into a whole strategic approach.

In the Feigon book, he says Mao came up inside of the Soviet model, so to speak, and then Mao said no, we gotta break out of this whole way of building socialism. Mao was the first attempt in this. Then there is a whole other dimension as a strategic approach that incorporates things from the GPCR. It was and has been for a long time and acutely something I've had to fight for. What I'm calling for is really hard to do, but it's the only way we can really do this. In the future, people will go further with everything that's involved in getting to communism; but at this point, this is what we have to go through.

Even the best of the GPCR posed against this turns into its opposite. Revolution develops through stages and people get stuck—and things turn into their opposites and what's advanced doesn't remain advanced when there are new necessities posed that you have to break through on.

This approach will involve a tremendous struggle with the masses. When speaking to that professor's question [how would you do better than in the Soviet Union and in China] I had to speak to this: there are masses who have been lorded over by people who know more than they do, and they're not gonna want to listen under socialism to people saying the new society is no good. I said: I don't believe in tailing people just because they've been oppressed. They're gonna be leading society and we have to struggle with them over what this is all about. In order to do this, people have to understand how to make the distinction between voicing reactionary opinions and actively working to overthrow the whole socialist system; and even more fundamentally they have to know **why** it is important to make that distinction. He asked this question so

I explored it as best I could. Because this is something that adds a whole strategic dimension and embodies but goes further than the GPCR; and if, in the name of upholding the GPCR, you resist the part that goes further—then you're opposing the whole thing.

It's a tricky contradiction that, on the one hand, we have to always go for the truth—and not for "political truth" or "class truth"—and, on the other hand, we have to know how to lead without giving up the core. In taking all this up, some people are veering to social-democracy and others refuse to recognize there's any problem here and don't even want to criticize Stalin. And, in this situation, you can convince yourself that if you criticize Stalin then you have someone to the left of you and someone to the right and then you must be correct(!)—as opposed to whether you're correct or not is based on whether it's true.

Objective and partisan is like this: If it's true, it should be part of advancing, getting us where we're going. If it's not true, it would get in the way. If it's true, even if it reveals the ugliest side of what we're about—if that black book thing were true we'd have to say how did that happen and how do we prevent that?—but the thing is, what matters is that whatever is true, we can encompass it and make it part of what we're all about, even when it's truths that reveal bad aspects of what we've done. [The "black book" refers to a book purporting to tell the "true story of communism"—and to attack it as a monstrous crime—it is a combination of slanders and lies mixed in with some references to actual shortcomings and errors in the experience of socialist society so far.]

That's the synthesis of partisan and objective. Either we actually believe the most fundamental truth about capitalism and communism is what it is—either we have a scientifically grounded understanding of why communism should and can replace capitalism, all over the world—or we don't, in which case we end up fearing truth.

We have to rupture more fully with instrumentalism—with notions of making reality an "instrument" of our objectives, of distorting reality to try to make it serve our ends, of "political truth." The dynamic of "truths that make us cringe" is part of what can be driving us forward. This can help call forth that ferment so that we can understand reality. This is scientific materialist objectivity. If you go deeply enough and understand that these contradictions now posed could lead to a different era based on the resolution of those contradictions, then you want to set in motion a dynamic where people *are* bringing out your shortcomings. Not that every mistake should be brought out in a way to overwhelm everything we're trying to do, but in a strategic sense [we should] welcome this and not try to manage it too much—you *want* that, the back and forth. On the web, there have been slanders and outright pig-type stuff in relation to me, which doesn't do any good for anybody trying to do good in the world, and this kind of harmful stuff should not be tolerated by anybody who does want to do good in the world. But there has also been political debate about my role as a leader and about communist leaders in general. This has generally been fairly low-level, but at least it has had some substance, and is it bad to have this kind of debate not only now but also



under socialism? No, *this* is a good thing. Not only because people will be able to learn more in general, but *we'll* be able to learn more. What is coming forward? What are the ways that we have to go forward? What is the baggage that we have to cast off? If you get the epistemology, you really want this. This is not just a tactical, but a *strategic* view flowing from this epistemological view of what this process should be—and we'll get where we need to go with this ferment. Not just tolerating this, but being enthusiastic—not about everything insulting, but generally. Do we think this is a good process, not only now but under the dictatorship of the proletariat? Or should we just stick with the seemingly safer path of what we've done before?

I'm talking about a new synthesis—a more thoroughly materialist epistemology. Lenin wrote *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* where he argued against these things [like "political truth," or "truth as an organizing principle"] but sometimes the practical Lenin got in the way of the philosophical Lenin. The political exigencies that were imposed contributed to a situation where some of the way Lenin dealt with contradictions had an aspect of Stalin. There are many examples of this in *The Furies*, [a book on the French and Russian revolutions by Arno Mayer].<sup>14</sup> In some instances, the Bolsheviks had a kind of "Mafia" approach in some areas, especially during the civil war that followed the October 1917 Revolution. In some cases, when people would be organized by reactionaries to fight against the Bolsheviks, the Bolsheviks would retaliate broadly and without mercy. Or they would kill people not only for deserting the Red Army but even for dragging their feet in fighting the civil war. While sometimes in the midst of war, extreme measures may be necessary, overall this is not the way to deal with these contradictions. I addressed some of this in "Two Great Humps"—I read Lenin on this and thought, "this is not right." There's epistemological stuff bound up with all this as well.

## WE COMMUNISTS STAND FOR TRUTH

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**BA continues:** I'm trying to set a framework for the whole approach to our project. Who's right: me, or people who say, you can't avoid doing things the way that people have done it up to now? Some even say: "I wish you could, but I don't think you can." Is what I'm arguing for really a materialist way of approaching our project? Is this really what we have to go through now to get where we need to go? Is this, analogically, Einstein to Newton, or is it a bunch of nonsense—since Newtonian physics can describe the reality around us and has empirical evidence on its side? Is there in fact no other way to do what I'm arguing for, no other way to get to communism? Or is the other road really the reality of it?

Is what I'm arguing for just, at best, some interesting and intriguing ideas and provocative thinking—or is it really the way we have to approach things, as I've said?

Even more fundamentally, having to do with my point on communists having the most trouble admitting their mistakes—which has to do with no one else is trying to remake the world—but is it even important for us to try to get to the truth of things?<sup>15</sup> Or are we politicians who are trying to achieve certain political objectives, and all that other stuff

about getting to the truth is a bunch of petty bourgeois nonsense, since we're about "getting to power"? It's a fundamental question of two roads here. One of the big questions is "are we really people who are trying to get to the truth, or is it really just a matter of 'truth is an organizing principle'?" Lenin criticized this philosophically—"truth as an organizing principle"—and you can criticize it to reject religion and opportunism which you don't find particularly useful, but you can end up doing this yourself in another form. Mao said we communists stand for truth—we should be scientific and honest. Is this a concern of ours? Or is our concern to just know enough truth to accomplish our objectives as we perceive them at a given time? Just enough truth to accomplish our objectives—even if we apply this not on the most narrow level and instead our approach is that the truth we need is what we need to get to the "four alls." [The "four alls" refers to the achievement of the necessary conditions for communism. It refers to a statement by Marx that the dictatorship of the proletariat is the necessary transition to the abolition of all class distinctions, of all the production relations on which these class distinctions rest, of all the social relations that correspond to these production relations, and to the revolutionizing of all the ideas that correspond to these relations. For a fuller discussion of this see the talk by Bob Avakian, "Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism."]

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**A second comrade:** Fundamental answer is that we're part of material reality and our stage or canvas is matter in motion—that's what we're trying to work with, work on. There is no such thing as determinate human nature. We are trying to transform things.

The question of falsifiability. This is a big critique of Marxism from the outside—that Marxism is not really a science, Marxists are not rigorous and don't follow scientific methods. One of the criteria of real science is that it's inherently falsifiable. Lot of confusion about what that means. Example of Karl Popper: Marxism is not really a science but a faith. [Stephen Jay] Gould's point on evolution as a fact. Is the theory of evolution inherently falsifiable? Yes. If you came up with something that challenged the whole framework, it would collapse. One of the strengths of evolution is that it's been open to falsification for a long time now but no one has been able to do it.

We communists have some foundational assumptions about the fundamental contradiction [of capitalism], etc. which are solidly established, but that doesn't mean that there's a lot that isn't going to change and evolve. Human knowledge develops and matter is never static. If we're dealing with matter in motion, there's a lot to learn—whatever field you're studying. There's a tremendous amount of cross-fertilization between different spheres of science and knowledge. If you're looking at it [communism] as not being a religious faith, but a science, the truth matters for that. If we're trying to transform things, then we can't do it without a grasp of the truth. The only way we couldn't be concerned with the truth is if we want it to be a religion, or just reduce communism to a sort of code of ethics.

Is our thing a science? Very different than some code in the name of the masses.

A lot of people think that the reason for the evolution series was an offensive by the Christian fascists against evolution.<sup>16</sup> That was one reason—but on the other hand it is important for the communists and the masses to be trained in a basic understanding of how the life of the planet evolved.

This narrow-mindedness would be the death of us. It matters a lot that people understand the basic laws and so on of the transformation of matter.

**BA:** A lot of the things I've been struggling for in terms of methods of leadership is [against the notion] that when you get down to reality you can't do things this way. Partly because this is very messy. This is turbulent. To somehow open the gate to the truth is letting the sharks into the water. Well, we have our criticisms of Stalin and other people have theirs, and there is the reality of Lenin's statement that it takes ten pages of truth to answer one sentence of opportunism—that's gonna be true in the world for a long time. You don't always have ten pages that you can devote to answer a sentence of bullshit—you're at a disadvantage. People can pick out something and divorce it from the larger reality from which it arises. In China people went hungry and starved in the Great Leap Forward—but what's the larger context? Our enemies don't have to be materialist or dialectical and go into the reality and contradictions and necessity. We have an orientation of grasping what they were up against and then talking about how to do better in the context of that kind of reality. Other people won't do that. They'll come from their own class viewpoints—often ignorance combined with arrogance to make pronouncements. This is messy. It isn't like we're all just talking in the realm of a bunch of scientists about evolution and what's true—creationists are not interested in getting at the truth. Other people have their own agendas and their own "political truths"—so to say "knock down the breakwater, let the sharks get in" makes things messy. So then the question is, is that really a better way to do it? Or should we swim behind the breakwater and head straight for the shore, keep your arms inside the boat. And there **are** sharks out there.

So methodologically and epistemologically and ideologically this is a question of what I'm fighting for versus the thing of "you can't do it that way." "It's not what we're about and we can't do it this way." Are we a bunch of instrumentalists? Do we want just enough truth so we can navigate narrowly to some notion of where we need to go?—which will end up the wrong place. Because your boat will get turned around with the wrong course. Philosophically you can't do it that way—you can't navigate reality that way to get to where you need to go. It's not the way reality is. We can't get there that way—and the "there" will not be the there that we want. That's the only communism there'll be—not a kingdom of great harmony, but turbulent. And for the same reason that's what I'm struggling for. If you don't see that, then you become what I fear our movement has been way too much: "why we would want to concern ourselves with that?"

The reason I'm raising this dimension is that it relates to the stereotype—but not simply the stereotype—of what we communists have been like. Right now I'm wrestling with Rawls' *Theory of Justice*. He insists that you cannot justify things on the basis that they

serve the larger social good if it tramples on the needs and rights of individuals—if you proceed down that road you get to totalitarianism.

To me that's wrong—founded on idealism, not on a real, materialist understanding of society. But we have to wrestle with that, as in *GO&GS* on the individual and the collective.<sup>17</sup> There's more work to be done even in that sphere—not trampling on individuals just because it's in the interests of society as a whole.

In reply to those who attack Mao for sending intellectuals to the countryside, there is the correct point of, "look, nobody in China asked the peasants if *they* wanted to be in the countryside"—a very important point, but if that's the end of it, or the only point, you're back to what we've been too much. This is parallel to whether the truth should matter to us.

**A third comrade:** [In regard to] method and approach and sharks in choppy water. There is a lot of stuff out there which is not encompassed in our understanding at this point. And it often seems to present itself as irrelevant, a distraction, or a refutation of our understanding. And there is a question of fundamental orientation epistemologically. To how one is looking at that. And your [Chairman Avakian's] concept is attacking a lot of barriers to that. That is welcome. Look at the analysis of the 1980s. [This refers to the RCP's analysis that, during that period, there would be the outbreak of world war, between the imperialist bloc headed by the U.S. and that headed by the Soviet Union, unless this world war were prevented by revolution in large and/or strategic enough areas of the world.] There is your insistence on examining what it was that we did [in terms of that analysis]. Or the self-criticism you [referring to Chairman Avakian] have made about underestimating the "information technology revolution" and [having missed] the relevance of that. [This refers to a self-critical observation by Chairman Avakian that in his book, *For a Harvest of Dragons*, written in the early 1980s, he was too dismissive of comments by revisionist leaders of the Soviet Union at that time about the great changes that were being brought about by the "information revolution."] Here was something coming from Soviet revisionists! But [though seeming] irrelevant, in one context, all these different levels of reality are aspects of reality. Ignore them at your peril. There is a lot of resistance [to this approach] but the masses need to understand the world in all its dimensions. Mankind consciously transforming itself. It has to do with transforming all of material reality...What is communism? And where do things go from there. Has to do with getting there. A materialist understanding of the world and the relation of humanity to it. We can't get there if you are picking the parts of reality which seem to matter. Marching along an economist and revisionist road, those other aspects of reality are unwelcome intrusions into that. It matters to understand material reality if you are really a communist and a materialist. To really understand Marxist economics, to comprehend the world now, to accurately reflect material reality.

**A fourth comrade:** On this question of the sharks. The heart of the question is can we handle the sharks. Can we handle the problems? If we can do it then why couldn't the masses? I remember a discussion of *End of a Stage/Beginning of a New Stage*,<sup>18</sup> where the

tilt was: how much can we keep of Stalin? There was a lot of bad shit that happened under Stalin, and there were problems in the GPCR too. We have to look at that. You can't do it unless you sit in that "godlike position of the proletariat." But religious faith keeps us from looking at that. I came to that Nat Turner place on this: This is the slaves making history. We have to look at this in that light. It is valid for slaves to end slavery. People get uptight about looking at these things, but we will have to deal with this....If we can't take this on now, how can we take it on when we have state power?

In the "Reaching/Flying" series, in the last installment, it says there are two things we don't know how to do.<sup>19</sup> We don't yet know how to actually defeat the other side and seize power when the time comes, and we don't yet know how to actually withstand the much heavier repression that is coming. This is heavy. Is this the right way to go about things? Here's this idea that we can put this out to the masses. Is that the way to go? The solid core/elasticity dialectic. Can we withstand all this? People are going to do things in practice that you aren't going to have under your control. Is this the way to learn about and transform the world? Why do we need a poetic spirit, as the Chair has said? Why is it dangerous not to have one, and how is it related to an insatiable desire to know about and transform the world? Do you need the perspective of the "god-like position of the proletariat" and your [Chairman Avakian's] earlier point on looking at the parade of humanity walking by? If you don't do that, it's sentimental—phony emotionalism as opposed to a grasp that the potential of people is what is being held back and chained in by this system.

I have often wondered about why the second to the last paragraph in *Harvest of Dragons* says what it does. ["In the final analysis, as Engels once expressed it, the proletariat must win its emancipation on the battlefield. But there is not only the question of winning in this sense but of how we win in the largest sense. One of the significant if perhaps subtle and often little-noticed ways in which the enemy, even in defeat, seeks to exact revenge on the revolution and sow the seed of its future undoing is in what he would force the revolutionaries to become in order to defeat him. It will come to this: we will have to face him in the trenches and defeat him amidst terrible destruction but we must not in the process annihilate the fundamental difference between the enemy and ourselves. Here the example of Marx is illuminating: he repeatedly fought at close quarters with the ideologists and apologists of the bourgeoisie but he never fought them on their terms or with their outlook; with Marx his method is as exhilarating as his goal is inspiring. We must be able to maintain our firmness of principles but at the same time our flexibility, our materialism and our dialectics, our realism and our romanticism, our solemn sense of purpose and our sense of humor."] <sup>20</sup> Why would that be in there if it hasn't come to that? This is what the Chair "models" and challenges us on. That is not something off to the side of what we are doing, but integral to what we're doing.

## EMBRACE BUT NOT REPLACE: SHARKS AND GUPPIES

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**BA:** I have been reading this interview with Chomsky and Barsamian. At one point Barsamian says, I won't ask you what your politics has to do with your linguistics, and Chomsky says thanks. He sees them as completely separate, and he's been assaulted with an instrumentalist view—i.e., that the two should "have something to do with each other," in a mechanical sense. No doubt, there *is* a connection, but it's on a whole other level and not in some mechanical, reductionist, one-to-one sense.

In another discussion, speaking of human beings' capabilities with language, Chomsky asks whether we can conclude that the human competence for language is a product of evolution? Yes, he answers, but we can't say exactly how. Well, obviously, the point is not to leave it there, more will have to be learned scientifically about all this. But is this work on how humans acquire knowledge important to us? Yes.

What's involved is somewhat like doing art in a certain way. Here again we could say there are three models: First, the classical CP trade-unionist economist approach of get the artists on the picket lines. Second, let the artists be cogs and wheels in the machinery of the revolution. Or let them do art that serves the revolution, even if not in a narrow sense. Yes, let them do art that serves the revolution; but besides "model works"—which they developed in the Cultural Revolution in China and around which we also need to do better, and which require attention—we also need a third approach, or model: artists doing their art that does not narrowly serve things. When I raised these contradictions with one artist—how would artists create art in a new society and yet not lose their connection with other artists, and with the masses of people—he raised the idea of artists living and working in cooperatives and, besides their art, also doing some things to contribute to society in other ways. This is worth thinking about, as one dimension of things. And of course people are going to have to get funded and the funders are going to have to combine funding for things that directly serve the revolution and things that do not directly serve it.

There's a role for people going off and you don't know what it's gonna lead to. We need art that directly relates to the struggle, art that is like the model works, and art where the artists go off and follow their impulse. That dimension in the arts and sciences—with that process going on of people being funded with a general idea of what they want to explore and you don't conclude it's wasted if sometimes they don't come up with anything. You have to recognize that part of the process is that some of this won't lead to anything. This actually relates to Lenin's point on communism springing from every pore of society, understood in the broadest sense. Yes [a young comrade who is studying science] should wage struggle regarding philosophy of science, and should struggle for MLM, including as a means to get more comprehensively to the truth. But it's also true that if someone discovers something about what happened the day before the Big Bang it is, (a) interesting to know, and (b) not in a narrow way becomes part of the revolutionary process and the class struggle. Different classes will interpret things in different ways and seek to suppress things in different ways. (It's not just the proletariat that has sometimes sought to suppress science for political and ideological reasons—look at what Bush, et. al., are doing right now!!)

Look, the world actually is made up of matter in motion, and materialism and dialectics does correspond to the way the world is and enables us to get more deeply to it. And therefore, discovering more about reality can be encompassed by and actually strengthens dialectical materialism; and when there are classes struggling over this, it becomes part of the class struggle in the ideological realm. The pursuit of knowledge should not be reduced to discovering things in order to wage struggle in the ideological realm, but the way it works is that you learn more about reality and if you correctly understand dialectical materialism whatever is learned, whatever truths are discovered, will reinforce, strengthen and enrich dialectical materialism and will inevitably become part of the class struggle—and even under communism part of the ideological struggle. Yes, part of it for that young comrade is waging the class struggle in that realm [of science and philosophy of science], but it's not limited to or reduced to that.

**The second comrade:** This gets back to how are we training people to think. What kind of people do we want to be in terms of fitting ourselves to rule. We talk about the masses searching for philosophy, [but] are we searching for philosophy. The Chair is trying to push the limits. The opposing approach is that "we have our kit," and he keeps upsetting that. How are we going to answer the questions posed by various intellectuals on whether we can really wield state power in this way? How are you going to handle this or that? Too often communists give facile answers. They rule things out of order and that gives rise to Orwells. Some questions come from the wrong place, but you can't determine that *a priori*. The waters are choppy, and there are sharks, but it turns out a lot are toothless guppies. We have to train people including in relation to contradictions among the people. A sweeping view of "embraces but does not replace" means we look to learning from all these spheres. ["Embraces but does not replace" refers to a principle formulated by Mao Tsetung that Marxism embraces but does not replace theories in physics, the arts, etc. This has been further developed and applied by Bob Avakian. See, for example, his discussion of this in "Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism."] There is struggle over how the world actually develops: in a gradual way or through punctuations. Does this matter to us? How the universe is? It matters to how matter is in motion. We are part of matter. There are some principles underlying all matter in motion. And we need to understand these things through the sciences and arts [with] the correct approach, and not ruling things out of order. In the Soviet Union people were suppressed wrongly in relation to this. If this wrong line gets into power, this will happen. There is this point to the toothless guppies. But we can't tell the difference between sharks and toothless guppies if we don't go for the truth of things. There are a lot of ways the truth matters. Why were people shocked by statements by you [referring to Chairman Avakian] that not just in terms of our party but historically there has been a problem in the communist movement—that most of the time most communists are not communists!—and that if we don't rupture with certain things, then we won't be able to seize power—or do anything good with it if somehow we did seize power? If people are steeped in materialism, they would not be shocked by this and would be able to deal with this. We're not going to be able to manage and control the truth. It springs forward from matter. The truth is not scary.

**BA:** All that is very important. At the same time, if we don't understand what we are trying to take on with this method and approach I'm struggling for—if we don't grasp the principles involved in "solid core with a lot of elasticity" and related things—we will be drawn and quartered. It is going to be messy and difficult. It is going to be messy. It is also going to be exhilarating. It is going to mean that we really have to be communists and apply this on the highest level. I want to make very clear that if this other kind of line holds sway and people come to power with that line, it is going to be very bad. You are right that strategically this is not frightening. I agree with the basic thrust of your comments, but maybe there is a secondary aspect in which this is a bit frightening. We shouldn't underestimate the difficulties. Within this is going to be a lot of tumult. The argument that you can't do this [the way I am proposing] is not without any basis in material reality.

But the more powerful material reality is that this can be done—this method and approach of solid core with a lot of elasticity, as I have been developing and fighting for it, can be carried out—and in fact this is the only way to do it, the only way we can get to communism.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Bob Avakian, *Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will* (Revolution, No. 50, December 1981).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

2. "Circular of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party," May 16, 1966 in *Important Documents on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1970).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

3. Bob Avakian, *A Horrible End, or An End to the Horror?* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 1984).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

4. "Some Questions to Carl Sagan and Stephen Gould" and "More Questions to Carl Sagan, Stephen Gould, and Isaac Asimov" in Avakian, *Reflections, Sketches and Provocations: Essays and Commentary, 1981-1987* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 1990).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

5. Excerpts from "Strategic Questions," a tape-recorded talk by Bob Avakian, appeared in RW Nos. 881, 884-893, Nov. 10, 1996 and Dec. 1, 1996 through Feb. 9, 1997. These are available at [rwor.org](http://rwor.org) under Bob Avakian, [Uniting All Who Can Be United: On the Revolutionary Strategy of the United Front Under the Leadership of the Proletariat](#). Additional excerpts from "Strategic Questions" on propaganda and agitation appeared in RW #1176-78, Nov. 24-Dec.8, 2002 and are available at [rwor.org](http://rwor.org) under Bob Avakian, [On Agitation and Propaganda, Speaking, Writing](#).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

6. Bill Martin is a social theorist and professor of philosophy at DePaul University,



Chicago. His numerous books include: *Politics in the Impasse* (1996), *The Radical Project: Sartrean Investigations* (2001), and *Avant Rock* (2002). The book *Marxism and the Call of the Future: Conversations on Ethics, History, and Politics* by Bob Avakian and Bill Martin is forthcoming in Spring 2005 from Open Court.

[\[Return to article\]](#)

7. Audio files of this talk are available on the web at [bobavakian.net](http://bobavakian.net).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

8. This refers to the talk "[Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism](#)," referred to earlier.

[\[Return to article\]](#)

9. Lee Feigon, *Mao, a Reinterpretation* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 2002).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

10. See "[The Struggle in the Realm of Ideas](#)," from "Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism," *Revolutionary Worker* No. 1250 (August 22, 2004). Available on the web at [rwor.org](http://rwor.org).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

11. Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003). Mossadegh was the head of a popular and popularly elected government in Iran, who was overthrown by the U.S. government in 1953, through a CIA-led coup, working with and directing reactionary forces in Iran, and then putting the Shah on the throne as the ruler of Iran. The rule of the Shah, backed by and serving U.S. imperialism, led to widespread popular opposition but also strengthened the hand of reactionary fundamentalist Islamic forces in Iran, and in the late 1970s a popular uprising led to the overthrow of the Shah but unfortunately also to the rule of these reactionary religious fundamentalists.

[\[Return to article\]](#)

12. Avakian, *Phony Communism Is Dead. Long Live Real Communism!*, 2nd edition (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2004).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

13. *Getting Over the Two Great Humps: Further Thoughts on Conquering the World* is a talk given by Bob Avakian in the late 1990s. Excerpts from this talk appeared in the *Revolutionary Worker* and are available on the web at [rwor.org](http://rwor.org). The series "[On Proletarian Democracy and Proletarian Dictatorship—A Radically Different View of Leading Society](#)," appeared in *RW* #1214 through 1226 (October 5, 2003-January 25, 2004). The series "[Getting Over the Hump](#)" appeared in *RW* #927, 930, 932, and 936-940 (October 12, November 2, November 16, and December 14, 1997 through January 18, 1998). Two additional excerpts from this talk are "[Materialism and Romanticism: Can We Do Without Myth?](#)" in *RW* #1211 (August 24, 2003) and "[Re-reading George Jackson](#)" in *RW* #968 (August 9, 1998).

All of the articles mentioned above can be found on the web at [rwor.org/chair\\_e.htm](http://rwor.org/chair_e.htm) under the following headings: [On Proletarian Democracy and Proletarian Dictatorship](#), [Getting Over the Hump](#), [Recent Writings](#), and [Further Thoughts and Writings](#).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

14. Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

15. "[Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism, Part 8: Moving Towards Communism](#)," *Revolutionary Worker* #1260 (November 28, 2004).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

16. Ardea Skybreak's series *The Science of Evolution* appeared in the *Revolutionary Worker* #1157, 1159-1160, 1163-1164, 1170, 1179-1183, and 1215-1223 (June 30, July 21-28, August 18-25, October 6, December 15, 2002-January 19, 2003 and October 12-December 21, 2004).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

17. *Great Objectives and Grand Strategy* is a talk by Bob Avakian at the end of the 1990s; excerpts from it have been published in the RW, issues #1127 through 1142, November 18, 2001 through March 10, 2002. They are available online at [rwor.org](http://rwor.org) under Bob Avakian, [Great Objectives & Grand Strategy](#).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

18. Avakian, *The End of a Stage—The Beginning of a New Stage* (late 1989) in *Revolution* No. 60, Fall 1990.

[\[Return to article\]](#)

19. "[Conclusion: The Challenges We Must Take Up](#)," *Revolutionary Worker* #1210 (August 17, 2003). This is from the series *Reaching for the Heights and Flying Without a Safety Net*, a talk by Bob Avakian toward the end of 2002; excerpts from it appeared in the RW #1195-1210 (April 20-August 17, 2003).

[\[Return to article\]](#)

20. Avakian, *For a Harvest of Dragons: On the "Crisis of Marxism" and the Power of Marxism—Now More Than Ever* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 1983), p 152.

[\[Return to article\]](#)

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