

Bob Avakian: On Internationalism

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Editors' Note: The following are excerpts from a recent talk by Bob Avakian. They have been edited for publication and footnotes have been added here.

In going back over some previous remarks I made concerning the international struggle and the international movement, it struck me that, while these remarks focused on the question of principal contradiction in the world, and although this question—and in particular our party's basic approach to this¹—very much relates to crucial principles for the international movement, and specifically to the concept and practice of internationalism, still there is the whole question of internationalism itself that needs to be gone into much more directly and explicitly and struggled out in the international communist movement. In the epistemology notes,² I made the observation that from the time of *Conquer the World*³ there has been a certain epistemological break or rupture that I have been pursuing. But, in going back to and re-reading *CTW* and also "Advancing the World Revolutionary Movement: Questions of Strategic Orientation,"⁴ another talk I gave in the first part of the 1980s, I was struck that there has been not just an epistemological rupture but also a rupture with regard to proletarian internationalism. Again, this is not just in *CTW* but also in "Advancing the World Revolutionary Movement"—which, even more than *CTW*, has not been made the focus of discussion and struggle to the extent that it should.

There is, for example, in both those works, but actually developed more in "Advancing," a new synthesis brought forward of what internationalism is and means. There is a discussion about the Connolly model of internationalism — the viewpoint of that Irish revolutionary, a contemporary of Lenin's, who basically proceeded "from the nation out" and saw internationalism in that light, essentially a nationalist view of internationalism—vs. the more Leninist view of internationalism. In "Advancing" in particular there is, on the one hand, a somewhat elaborated discussion about Lenin's definition of internationalism—striving for revolution in one's own country and supporting this line and program in other countries. And there is Lenin's argument (for example, in "The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky")⁵ that the fundamental orientation should not be "my country" but *my contribution to the world revolutionary struggle*. But what is in "Advancing" that is new and very important is not only opposition to and criticism of what has become the prevailing view of internationalism within the international communist movement—which is more in line with the Connolly view, even though Connolly wasn't a communist, more in line with the notion that internationalism is something extended from one country to another, and in practice it is more "my country" than *my contribution to the world revolution* that has been the basic point of orientation and point of departure. First of all, there is, in "Advancing," a rupture with and a critique of that. But, beyond that, there is a call to combine Lenin's stance on and definition of

internationalism with an approach of proceeding first and above all from the world level, and looking at the world as a whole at any given time to determine where it is that, through a combination of objective and subjective factors, the most important breakthroughs for the whole international struggle can be made—and for parties in particular countries to act accordingly, to give political support in relation to those "breakthroughs," even at the cost of some sacrifice on the part of particular parties and in terms of the struggle in "their" countries.

This call for a synthesis of those two things is new in the international movement. But this has been not sufficiently engaged and struggled over.

Here I want to make a few additional comments about this approach to internationalism, and the emphasis that the world arena is ultimately and fundamentally decisive—which, yes, involves some criticism of Mao's internal and external point (Mao's argument that the internal conditions within particular countries are decisive in terms of struggle and change in those particular countries, and that conditions and developments "outside" those countries are external and secondary elements). Some time ago in the *RW* there was an article by me, "[The Philosophical Basis of Proletarian Internationalism](#),"⁶ which argued that, in fact, in the era of imperialism in particular, the international arena, and changes and developments on that level, are more decisive and determining of what happens in particular countries than the "internal conditions" in the particular countries, taken by themselves. This is an extremely important—and extremely controversial—point.

However, we should not ourselves conceive of this, nor allow others to characterize it, as a conception that means that we are all, as Lenin once put it, "suspended in mid-air" and nobody can make revolution anywhere, in any particular country, because the international arena is ultimately and fundamentally decisive. That itself is a mechanical vulgarization of this principle. I was recently re-reading "Two Great Humps,"⁷ it quotes the following from *Phony Communism is Dead, Long Live Real Communism*,⁸ which I think is very important in this context:

"the achievement of [the necessary conditions for communism] must take place on a world scale, through a long and tortuous process of revolutionary transformation in which there will be uneven development, the seizure of power in different countries at different times, and a complex dialectical interplay between the revolutionary struggles and the revolutionization of society in these different countries—a dialectic in which the world arena is fundamentally and ultimately decisive while the mutually interacting and mutually supporting struggles of the proletarians in different countries constitute the key link in fundamentally transforming the world as a whole.'" (citing *Phony/Real*, p. 116, footnote 21)

And, in another part of "Two Great Humps," this related point is emphasized:

"the initiative seized by the revolutionary vanguard and masses in particular countries and the advances they make in the revolutionary struggle will significantly affect the international situation and struggle and may, in certain circumstances, even qualitatively transform it. Here again is an illustration of the dialectical relation between the situation and developments on the world level and in particular countries, and the 'interweaving' and constant interpenetration between them, including the fact that aspects of the one exist in the other—changes in particular countries are both part of that aspect (the particular country) and part of the other aspect (the world situation), and major changes in particular countries will both be bound up with and in turn will significantly affect the international situation....While recognizing the ultimately decisive importance of the world arena, and while taking the world revolutionary struggle as their fundamental point of orientation and doing everything they can to contribute to that struggle, they [the vanguard and masses in the various countries] should seize the maximum possible initiative at any given point, transform necessity into freedom to the greatest degree possible at every point, and keep their eye fixed firmly on the prize, so as not to miss, or throw away, the chance to get over the first great hump and go all-out for the seizure of power, whenever and however—through whatever combination of objective and subjective factors, within the particular country and worldwide—that opportunity arises."

A Residue of the Past... *Or* a Vanguard of the Future?

In a real sense, a lot of what is "up," a major way in which all these decisive matters get concentrated, is in the question— not only for our party but for the whole international movement—of whether we are going to be simply a residue of the past (even in the sense of the residue of the past waves of proletarian revolution) *or* are we going to be a vanguard of the future? With all the twists and turns that this involves—invoking once again Mao's very important and insightful observation that the future is bright, the road is tortuous—are we going to be the representatives of the revolution of the future? This is what is actually being battled out—and it needs to be battled out much more consistently and thoroughly and systematically: Are we going to be a residue of the past or a vanguard of the future? And this whole question of how to understand and how therefore to carry out proletarian internationalism—this is of decisive importance in terms of those two possibilities, those two roads: being a residue of the past *or* a vanguard of the future.

FOOTNOTES:

¹These remarks were part of the discussions at the fourth plenary session of the Central Committee of the RCP,USA in 1980 and were published under the title "Fundamental and Principal Contradictions on a World Scale," in *RW* #132 (November 27, 1981). This was republished in *RW* #172 (September 17, 1982), along with a new article "More on the Principal Contradiction in the World Today."

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²"On Epistemology—On Knowing, and Changing, the World," RW #1262 (December 19, 2004).

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³ *Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will*, in *Revolution* Special Issue, No. 50, December 1981.

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⁴ *Revolution*, No. 51, Spring 1984.

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⁵V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965, pp. 105-113).

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⁶ "The Philosophical Basis of Proletarian Internationalism," RW #96 (March 13, 1981).

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⁷ 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. 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 under the following headings: On Proletarian Democracy and Proletarian Dictatorship, Getting Over the Hump, Recent Writings, and Further Thoughts and Writings.

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⁸Bob Avakian, *Phony Communism Is Dead... Long Live Real Communism!*, 2nd edition (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2004).

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