

Bob Avakian's "New Synthesis": A Critique, Part 1

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In the last few years the ideological confusion and dogmatism wrought by the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA (RCP, USA) has had a disastrous effect on the international Maoist movement. The negative effect that Bob Avakian's "new synthesis" has had is disproportionate to the size and importance of the RCP, USA itself, and can be most noticed in the demise of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM). Recently Comrade Surendra of the Ceylon Communist Party (Maoist) [CCP(M)] has commented on articles on this blog and asked:

We are interested to know more about your claim that Bob Avakian had made important contributions during the initial period of the RIM, but that he had got caught in an idealist mess after. This is an important question, and we would like to know more fully how you develop this position. In our opinion, Bob Avakian's new synthesis is based on a profound and thoroughgoing critical analysis and summation of the historical experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat and the teachings of Marx, Lenin and Mao in general, which has served to crystallize the science of revolution on a new, positive basis. This question has served to split the International Maoist Movement, and should be dealt with seriously. We propose that a Conference of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia be convened so we can identify the main issues and struggle to achieve a higher level of conscious, principled unity through a process of struggle -criticism -transformation, based on MLM. This is the need of the hour.

I have always hoped that I would not have to really waste my time dealing with the idealist mess that is Avakian's "New Synthesis" however, feel that I must now do so because the CCP(M) is actually rebuilding itself, in the light of the degeneration that party experienced after the death of Com. Shanmugathan (for whom I have enormous respect, and really hope that a Selected Works volume will be compiled of his work soon), within the ideological walls of the "new synthesis". Unfortunately a sustained philosophical critique of the "new synthesis" really has not been forthcoming. However, the Communist (Maoist) Party of Afghanistan has provided at least a basic critique of the "new synthesis", and in many respects I agree with their critique but I feel like it does not go far enough and does not actually refute all of the component parts of the "new synthesis". It can be found [here](#). At the time I wrote about the "new synthesis",

I must admit that I find the ‘new synthesis’ to be quite underwhelming as many of Avakian’s insights have either been heavily debated in the last 30 years and Avakian’s own insights either a) do not reflect the already existing rich debate (especially in regards to his epistemological rupture with vulgar elements of Marxist philosophy and practice, the nature of truth, or even his re-structuration of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat); b) or are simply wrong in my opinion (his recourse to morality, his erroneous understanding of proletarian internationalism which is grounded in an incorrect understanding of determinations within a given conjuncture, or even his vision of the road to revolution in imperialist countries); c) or are simply unable to actually grasp the new limits of Marxist that have been established in recent years including the appropriation of lessons from Marxist semiotics, anti-psychiatry or psycho-analysis/schizoanalysis, gender and race analysis, contemporary sciences and maths, the fuller history of communist revolutionary practice and theory etc. Indeed, Avakian’s ‘new synthesis’ is so limited and narrow that it is far too small an intervention into the crisis that Marxism-Leninism-Maoism faces in 1) theory generally; 2) the capture of state-power in imperialist countries; 3) and the successful transition to a Stateless society. It is too little, too flawed and too late.

Nevertheless I have decided that I would deal once again with the “new synthesis”. I plan on doing so by responding to a speech given by Lenny Wolff, author of *The Science of Revolution: An Introduction*, who was tasked to explain the “new synthesis” in 2008. His speech remains one of the clearest explanations of what the “new synthesis” actually is. It is entitled, “Re-envisioning Revolution and Communism: WHAT IS BOB AVAKIAN’S NEW SYNTHESIS?” and is available [here](#). Also, one can purchase a CD of the talk itself. When necessary I will also turn to “COMMUNISM: THE BEGINNING OF A NEW STAGE; A Manifesto from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA” which has a section dedicated to the “new synthesis” as well. I must note that unlike my analysis of K.N. Ramachandran’s “Our Differences with the Maoist Trend: Genesis and Present Conditions”, I will not be analysing these documents with the same level attention i.e. paragraph by paragraph, rather I will be pointing to the key parts of the speech and sections in the Manifesto, and identifying flaws and contradictions that I see. However, most likely this analysis will be another series of approximately 4-5 posts because there is a lot of points that the “new synthesis” is trying to grapple with and fails at, and also because I want to stop writing 4000 word blog entries which are cumbersome to read. Also, if something comes up I may interrupt the series to cover it, but promise that I will deal with the “new synthesis” comprehensively over the coming weeks. So lets “grapple” with Avakian and the “new synthesis”.

Wolff explains that the “new synthesis” has four basic component parts:

Bob Avakian has identified and deeply criticized weaknesses along four different dimensions of communist philosophy. These concern: one, a fuller break with idealist, even quasi-religious, forms of thought that had found their way into the foundation of Marxism and had not been ruptured with; two, a further and qualitatively deeper grasp of the ways in which matter and consciousness mutually interpenetrate with and transform each other; three, a critique of a host of problems associated with pragmatism and related philosophical tendencies; and four, a radically different epistemology, or way of getting at the truth.

These parts then of course have a series of political and strategic implications, which I will also discuss. In this post I will deal with the first two dimensions of communist philosophy. The first dimension that Wolff addresses is the idealist quasi-religious forms of thought that argues communism is inevitable. He writes, "But communism is *not* inevitable. There is no "god-like" History with a "Capital H" pushing things to communism. And while communism *will* bring about an end to antagonistic and violent conflicts among human beings, it will still be marked by contradictions, debates, and struggles—which will be carried out without violent conflict, *and which will in fact be a very good thing*, since this will continually contribute to the achievement of further understanding and further advances in transforming reality in accordance with the overall interests of humanity." I agree with Wolff and Avakian that this is truly a quasi-religious idea, however, cannot attribute this "big change" to Avakian as a whole host of Marxist theorists, from the Frankfurt School to the Althusserians/post-Althusserians to the Trotskyist-influenced Political Marxists, had already put forward this critique of orthodox forms of Marxism. However, I am glad to hear that Avakian and his supporters have actually caught up with those of us who have already incorporated this in our thinking and method of work. Furthermore, I would like to even suggest that neither Marx, Engels, Lenin or Mao actually believed that communism was inevitable, and one can find copious writings in their oeuvres that backs up this point. And it is very clear to us all I think that communism is not some end of History in which there is no further development due to contradictions, but what I do find astounding is that Wolff and Avakian take this one step further by writing that these contradictions will be resolved without violence. I think it is very telling that Marx himself never wrote about what communism would like and it is because he realised that the very content of communism would change in relation to the social relations and relations of production that are the outcome of the class struggle, indeed communism can be regarded to be largely an empty signifier (indeed, how can we forget Marx's difficulties with articulating a post-commodity form of exchange in his critical notes on the Gotha programme). However, Avakian seems to have been gifted with a crystal ball, one which Marx was never privy to, and has decided that any contradictions in communism will be resolved without violence. This is the re-introduction of idealism into the Avakianist 'new synthesis'.

The second component of the 'new synthesis' is that

Avakian has developed a far deeper understanding of the potential role and power of consciousness. Put it this way: to the extent that you *do* scientifically and deeply grasp the complex and multi-level contradictory character of society, with all its different constraints and its many possible pathways...to that extent, your freedom to act on and to affect that situation is immeasurably magnified.

Previously, the importance of the economic base (that is, the production relations) was not just recognized—but over-emphasized. This was a tendency toward *reductionism*—that is, reducing complex phenomena to a single over-riding cause, flattening out processes that have different levels to them in a way that doesn't correspond to and actually distorts reality. Yes, the political institutions, the ideas, the morality of society—in other words, the *superstructure* of society—all ultimately grow out of its economic relations; this is a foundational insight of Marx.

But these institutions and ideas of the superstructure have a relative life of their own; plus they operate, and affect each other, on a lot of different and interpenetrating levels.

Again I have no issue with what is stated above inasmuch that if one is actually politically conscious than one is far better suited to intervene into a given situation. However, I think it is unfair to claim that Avakian has pioneered this insight when in fact Louis Althusser had made this very insight in the early 1960's! Althusser in his seminal work *Reading Capital* explains that there is semi-autonomy between the base and the superstructure, and that relation between the two is not a reflection but rather, has its own historical development and temporality. Just because Avakian only figured this out does not mean that it can be called a "new synthesis", and perhaps speaks to the ignorance of the Avakianists. The real issue I have with Wolff's is how he articulates this point, and I think demonstrates how Avakian and his supporters have not actually incorporated this insight into their analysis of the society in which they live in. For example, within the four walls of the essay that I am discussing we can see how this has been employed by the Avakianists in its study of the Bible and its relation to slavery. Indeed, one finds Wolff completely contradicting himself in the section entitled, "Putting the Study of Society on a Scientific Foundation". What is astonishing is that the relationship that Avakian seems to want to establish to the ideological superstructure in regards to the Bible and its relation slavery contradicts the semi-autonomy that the two are supposed to have from one another. This relationship, for all of Avakian's emphasis on newness, rests actually on the very outdated and outmoded reflection theory of base-superstructure in which the production relations are simply reflected in the superstructure that he wants to attack. He writes,

For example, the Bible—including the New Testament—was written during an era when an important part of production was carried out through slave relations. That's why there is no sense anywhere in the Bible that slavery is a horrible crime against humanity—unless it happens to be done to the Israelites in the Old Testament by non-Jewish people. And the Bible was thus easily used by the slave masters of the Old South to justify slavery.

Today, when slavery no longer corresponds to the interests of the dominant class, the political and cultural consensus finds it to be horrible. But the exploitation of the workers by the capitalists, and the casting off of these workers when they can no longer be profitably exploited, is just seen as “the way things are, and human nature”—just like slavery used to be. Like the abolitionists before the U.S. Civil War, but on a much more scientific basis, we need to bring forward that this is NOT human nature any more than slavery was, but is just the result of *capitalist* relations—and we need to bring forward our *different* and opposed morality, based on a whole different set of production and social relations.

Indeed, it is odd to see that Avakian and his supporters, despite their desire to break from this outmoded way of thought, continue to retain this very analysis. I am not trying to defend the Bible, however, I think that we need to avoid the historicist argument that underlies Wolff's statement as it simply assumes that there was a theoretical consensus at the time of the Bible's writing that slavery was acceptable (Domenico Losurdo in his *Counter-History of Liberalism* effectively argues against a historicist explanation for slavery by showing that the French political theorist Bodin had attacked the notion of slavery a 100 years prior to the liberal defence of slavery by American liberal thought). Indeed, it becomes clear that the authors of the Bible were very aware of the cruelties of slavery when they oppose the ownership of the Israelites as slaves by non-Jews. Wolff does not reflect this nascent critique of slavery in the Old Testament in his analysis of the Bible, slavery or abolition which is incredibly problematic since the Bible itself was used by abolitionists to attack the very institution of slavery, and saw the abolitionists actually used the language regarding the Israelites in the Old Testament to argue against the enslavement of black people in North America. But all of this complexity and contradictoriness is lost in the work of the Avakianists who simply assume that the Bible is simply a reflection of the production relations at the time of its writing, and could simply be used as a justification for slavery. Also, this does not take into account how the Bible was used by the liberation theologians to make a case for socialism in Latin America, and the kinds of united front work that one must do with such elements especially in a country like the USA in which the black liberation church has a profound effect on black consciousness. Again there is a re-introduction of an outmoded package through the back door. Thus, we can see in both cases outlined above that Avakian first claims theoretical advances that are actually not his, and then is unable to theoretically sustain them in concrete analysis,

In the next post in this series I will deal with the two remaining components of Avakian's "new synthesis", 1) pragmatism and related philosophical tendencies and 2) Avakian's "radical advance in epistemology".