

# An Open Letter to Arundhati Roy

## On Field Notes On Democracy and Communism

### Two Questions and a Challenge From Raymond Lotta

This public letter aims to open a dialogue and debate with Arundhati Roy. I am putting these issues before all who are concerned about the state of humanity and the prospects for a radically different and better world.

The novelist and activist Arundhati Roy is a powerful and eloquent voice in the antiglobalization, antiwar, and social justice movements, within and outside of India. She has courageously stood against the repression of the poor and oppressed who have risen up with arms in India's countryside. In particular, Roy's recently published account of her time spent with the revolutionaries in Central India's Dandakaranya Forests is a brave and important work.

Her new collection of essays, *Field Notes on Democracy: Listening to Grasshoppers*, contains searing exposure of the "new India." But when it comes to revolution, to communism, and to the future of humanity, Arundhati Roy has unfortunately abdicated the "factual precision" (alongside of the "precision of poetry") that she calls for and applies in treating other issues in her essays. Rather than critically engage with the most important efforts at human emancipation thus far, in this one sphere she takes the conventional wisdom at face value. It's a stance that goes against the best impulses and work of Arundhati Roy, and it does real harm in today's movements for change.

This cannot go uncommented on and uncontested. So I am putting two questions and a challenge to Arundhati Roy:

1) You have written recently of learning that much of what you had been led to believe about the Maoists in India's countryside were lies, that the authorities had invented tales of Maoist atrocities. Might there be a lesson here in approaching similar tales told about what happened in China under Mao's leadership?

Specifically, **where is the evidence that Mao is guilty of genocide?** In chapter nine, "Listening To Grasshoppers: Genocide, Denial, and Celebration," you accuse Mao of perpetrating "genocide" (p. 146) and go on to write:

"The battle [between the Indian government and poor people who have taken to arms against it] stinks of death. It's by no means pretty. How can it be when the helmsman of the Army of Constraining Ghosts is the ghost of Chairman Mao himself? (The ray of hope is that many of the foot soldiers don't know who he is. Or what he did. More Genocide Denial? Maybe.)" (p. 167)

You have furnished footnotes in your book specifying or sourcing statistics and fact-based analyses of geno-cides in Congo, Iraq, and Indochina (p. 148). But there is **not a single piece of documentation in *Field Notes* backing the claim that genocide took place in Maoist China.** It is as though it were a self-evident truth.

But *where is the evidence?* Whether it concerns the food crisis of the Great Leap Forward of 1958-60; the policies taken towards former exploiters when the revolution came to power in 1949; or the struggles, policies, and transformations that took place during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76—I am more than willing to examine what you have read, critically engage it and get into the real truth of what happened during the all-too-brief period of socialist transformation in China.

Here I must note: you have spoken of the liberatory effects of revolution on the women of Dandakaranya Forest. You have, rightly, pointed to the role of a different, even if embryonic, state power—a people's army, and people's courts—in even enabling this to happen. Can you allow yourself to consider the idea that something on a far greater scale happened in China, when those who had formerly been oppressed had the backing of the state power? In actual fact, what happened in China during the period of Mao's leadership—from 1949 to 1976, before the coup and counter-revolution which took China on the road that, yes, had been fought against in the Cultural Revolution—was an emancipation of the oppressed unparalleled in history. In every sphere there were astounding achievements—and a scope for democratic criticism and participation by masses of people never seen before or since on this planet.

The charges, routinely bandied about in the mass media, of "mass murder" and "genocide" in Maoist China are lies. These are charges which I and others have refuted. At a time when the world cries out for revolution, for profound and emancipatory change, for the overthrow of the old state power and the creation of a new one, these lies about the experience of genuine communists in power contribute to the lowering of sights and to constraining the discourse on human possibility. Repeating and even spreading them goes against the spirit of the best of what you have contributed—and does real and great harm.

2) Your critical edge against the hypocritical claims of today's democracies is welcome and important. But there is a sentimentality when it comes to the ideal of democracy which blurs the vision. Specifically, **where has democracy ever existed as a pure, classless political-social-economic form?** You advance a certain dream and vision of democracy, not what you describe as the currently flawed democracy that now exists in India, but something that lives up to democratic ideals:

"Whether democracy should be the utopia that all 'developing' societies aspire to is a separate question altogether. (I think it should. The early, idealistic phase can be quite heady.)" (*Field Notes on Democracy*, Introduction, "Democracy's Failing Light," p. 1)

Let us, for the moment, leave aside socialism and the unparalleled democracy it opens up for the great majority of society, while exercising dictatorship over old and new exploiters.

**Name a single situation**—any place in the world, in any time period—in the history of societies which have claimed to be, or which you would consider to be, democratic (whether in ancient Greece, the U.S., Europe, India, or anywhere else) where such democracy was **not** in fact marked by the profound social divisions and inequalities and **ruthless exploitation and oppression** of large parts of society reinforced by **murderous repression** directed against individuals and groups that posed any serious threat to those who in reality ruled over that society and its people.

Name **one**. And, if you cannot successfully cite any such example, **what implications must be drawn from that?**

The framework and horizons of democracy are harmful illusions that keep people locked within the current social order. While you yourself hunger for a better world and support those who fight for it, in your recent book and elsewhere you fall into propounding a politics that can only lead to tinkering on the edges for “more democracy”—in a society based on dictatorship of exploiters.

3) **And my challenge to you. Re-examine your assumptions about the past, and future, of communist revolution. As someone who is deeply concerned about the nightmare that is daily life for the majority of humanity and who sees the ecological precipice the planet is approaching, you have a responsibility to engage with a solution that is commensurate with the magnitude of the problem.**

That solution is revolution... communist revolution. Communism has not stood still. Bob Avakian, the Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, has developed a new synthesis of communism, “criticizing and rupturing with significant errors and shortcomings while bringing forward and *recasting* what has been positive from the historical experience of the international communist movements and the socialist countries that have so far existed; in a real sense *reviving*—on a new, more advanced basis—the *viability* and, yes, the *desirability* of a whole new and radically different world, and placing this on an even firmer foundation of materialism and dialectics...” (*Revolution and Communism: A Foundation and Strategic Orientation*, a *Revolution* pamphlet, 2008, pp 36-37) Avakian’s vision of socialism recognizes that a new state power and vanguard party are indispensable—while also recognizing that leadership must be exercised in ways significantly different from how this was understood and practiced in the past.

**This is a socialism that is as determined to forge a society in which intellectual and cultural ferment and dissent will flourish on a scale unseen in human history...as it is committed to solving the most pressing material problems confronting humanity.** Socialism must be a society of experimentation, initiative from below, questioning and debate...all done in a wild and risky process which must be led in a way to simultaneously strengthen and continually transform the state power for which millions will have sacrificed. This is a different vision—and one you really must engage with. There is too much at stake to refuse to.

Indeed, Avakian himself—in answering a question about remarks you had made—spoke to the role in future socialist society of those who “may be raising criticisms coming from a different perspective—a different ideological perspective, and a different political perspective—than the leading forces inside socialist society; but they may still bring forward important truths. And even if they don’t, in any particular instance, it’s important that there be the kind of atmosphere where they are encouraged to bring forward their ideas, and to be part of, and to create, and to help stimulate the intellectual and the political ferment that we need—which we, with our methodology, have to be continually sifting through, embracing, integrating, and more deeply synthesizing in the correct way.

“I’ve said this before: If you really get this epistemology, you *want* people to challenge you.” (“The Revolution We Are About Should Not Only Encompass But Welcome the Arundhati Roys of the World” *Revolution* #67, October 29, 2006)

So, I invite you to publicly discuss and debate these questions—as part of the search for the truth and the struggle for a world that human beings can truly thrive in.

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