

Three Alternative Worlds

by Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA

Bob Avakian is the leader of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA. And he is more than that: he's an innovative and critical thinker who has taken Marxism to a new place; he's a provocative commentator on everything from basketball to religion, doo-wop music to science; and he's a pit-bull fighter against oppression who's kept both his solemn sense of purpose and his irrepressible sense of humor.

We invite you to meet this revolutionary leader through the following excerpt from his collection of essays, *Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy*.

And we urge you to go to bobavakian.net or revcom.us to hear an important recent series of talks which explore communist theory and apply it to a breathtaking range of questions, including political questions which are urgently and sharply posed in today's situation.

As the world exists today and as people seek to change it, and particularly in terms of the socialist transformation of society, as I see it there are basically three alternatives that are possible. One is the world as it is. Enough said about that. [laughter]

The second one is in a certain sense, almost literally and mechanically, turning the world upside down. In other words, people who are now exploited will no longer be exploited in the same way, people who now rule this society will be prevented from ruling or influencing society in a significant way. The basic economic structure of society will change, some of the social relations will change, and some of the forms of political rule will change, and some of the forms of culture and ideology will change, but fundamentally the masses of people will not be increasingly and in one leap after another drawn into the process of really transforming society. This is really a vision of a revisionist society. If you think back to the days of the Soviet Union, when it had become a revisionist society, capitalist and imperialist in essence, but still socialist in name, when they would be chided for their alleged or real violations of people's rights, they would often answer "Who are you in the West to be talking about the violation of human rights—look at all the people in your society who are unemployed, what more basic human right is there than to have a job?"

Well, did they have a point? Yes, up to a point. But fundamentally what they were putting forward, the vision of society that they were projecting, was a social welfare kind of society in which fundamentally the role of the masses of people is no different than it is under the classical form of capitalism. The answer about the rights of the people cannot be reduced to the right to have a job and earn an income, as basic as that is. There is the question of are we really going to transform society so that in every respect, not only economically but socially, politically, ideologically, and culturally, it really is superior to capitalist society. A society that not only meets the needs of the masses of people, but really is characterized increasingly by the conscious expression and initiative of the masses of people.

This is a more fundamental transformation than simply a kind of social welfare, socialist in name but really capitalist in essence society, where the role of the masses of people is still largely reduced to being producers of wealth, but not people who thrash out all the larger questions of affairs of state, the direction of society, culture, philosophy, science, the arts, and so on. The revisionist model is a narrow, economist view of socialism. It reduces the people, in their activity, to simply the economic sphere of society, and in a limited way at that—simply their social welfare with regard to the economy. It doesn't even think about transforming the world outlook of the people as they in turn change the world around them.

And you cannot have a new society and a new world with the same outlook that people are indoctrinated and inculcated with in this society. You cannot have a real revolutionary transformation of society and abolition of unequal social as well as economic relations and political relations if people still approach the world in the way in which they're conditioned and limited and constrained to approach it now. How can the masses of people really take up the task of consciously changing the world if their outlook and their approach to the world remains what it is under this system? It's impossible, and this situation will simply reproduce the great inequalities

in every sphere of society that I've been talking about.

The third alternative is a real radical rupture. Marx and Engels said in the *Communist Manifesto* that the communist revolution represents a radical rupture with traditional property relations and with traditional ideas. And the one is not possible without the other. They are mutually reinforcing, one way or the other.

If you have a society in which the fundamental role of women is to be breeders of children, how can you have a society in which there is equality between men and women? You cannot. And if you don't attack and uproot the traditions, the morals, and so on, that reinforce that role, how can you transform the relations between men and women and abolish the deep-seated inequalities that are bound up with the whole division of society into oppressors and oppressed, exploiters and exploited? You cannot.

So the third alternative is a real radical rupture in every sphere, a radically different synthesis, to put it that way. Or to put it another way, it's a society and a world that the great majority of people would actually want to live in. One in which not only do they not have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, or if they get sick whether they're going to be told that they can't have health care because they can't pay for it, as important as that is; but one in which they are actually taking up, wrangling with, and increasingly making their own province all the different spheres of society.

Achieving that kind of a society, and that kind of a world, is a very profound challenge. It's much more profound than simply changing a few forms of ownership of the economy and making sure that, on that basis, people's social welfare is taken care of, but you still have people who are taking care of that *for* the masses of people; and all the spheres of science, the arts, philosophy and all the rest are basically the province of a few. And the political decision-making process remains the province of a few.

To really leap beyond that is a tremendous and world-historic struggle that we've been embarked on since the Russian revolution (not counting the very short-lived and limited experience of the Paris Commune)—and in which we reached the high point with the Chinese revolution and in particular the Cultural Revolution—but from which we've been thrown back temporarily.

So we need to make a further leap on the basis of summing up very deeply all that experience. There are some very real and vexing problems that we have to confront and advance through in order to draw from the best of the past, but go further and do even better in the future.

Now I want to say a few things in this context about totalitarianism. Just as an aside here, I find it very interesting that you can read innumerable books delving deeply into the psyche of Stalin or Lenin or Mao—"What went on in the deranged minds of these people [laughter] that led them to think they could remake the world in their maddened image [laughter] and led them, in the name of some greater moral good, to bring great catastrophe on the humanity that they were affecting?" I don't know how many books I've seen like that. I have never yet seen—maybe there are some, but I have never seen—a study of the deranged psyche of Thomas Jefferson [laughter] or George Washington: "How is it that a person could come to believe in their own mind [laughter] that they were benefiting not only humanity in general, but other human beings whom they owned? [laughter]"

What depth of psychological derangement must be involved in that? [laughter] What is more totalitarian than actually owning other human beings?"

Or what about the study of the depths of the depraved minds of Lyndon Johnson or Ronald Reagan [laughter], who murdered millions of people, including vast numbers of children? "What must have gone wrong, somewhere in their childhood or somewhere else in their lives? [laughter] What demented ideas must they somehow have internalized that led them to believe that in the name of the shining city on the hill, or whatever [laughter], they had the right and the obligation to slaughter thousands and millions of innocent people?"

I have never seen those studies. Certainly I haven't read about them in the *New York Times Book Review* section. [laughter]

Still, there are some real questions that are raised about totalitarianism by the ideologues and the "intellectual camp followers" of the imperialists that do need to be taken on. In particular, they make the charge that in a society which they call totalitarian, but which is in reality the dictatorship of the proletariat, there is first of all an official ideology that everyone has to profess belief in, in order to get along in that society. And there is an official politics that everyone has to be involved in, in order to get along in that society and not get in trouble. Well, what about this?

Fundamentally, this is a distortion of what has gone on in socialist societies: why these revolutions were necessary in the first place and what they were seeking to accomplish and to overcome, and how they were going about doing that. The reality is that, for the great masses of people in capitalist (and certainly in feudal) society, they are barred from really being involved in any significant way in official politics and the politics that actually affect the affairs of state and the direction of society. And they are indoctrinated with an outlook and methodology and ideology that prevents them—discourages them and actively obstructs them—from really understanding the world as it is and changing it consciously. And that is what socialist revolutions seek to change, as well as bringing about fundamental changes in the economy and the social relations.

But what about this question of official ideology that everyone has to profess? Well, I think we have more to sum up about that from the history of socialist society and the dictatorship of the proletariat so far.

With regard to the question of the party, I think two things are definitely true. One, you need a vanguard party to lead this revolution and to lead the new state. Two, that party has to have an ideology that unifies it, an ideology that correctly reflects and enables people to consciously change reality, which is communist ideology.

But, more broadly, should everyone in society have to profess this ideology in order to get along? No. Those who are won over to this ideology should proclaim it and struggle for it. Those who are not convinced of it should say so. Those who disagree with it should say that. And there should be struggle. Something has to lead—the correct ideology that really enables people to get at the truth, and to do something with it in their interests, has to lead; but that doesn't mean everyone should have to profess it, in my opinion. And this is just my opinion. But it's worth digging into this a bit, it's worth exploring and wrangling with the question. □