

STUCK IN THE “AWFUL CAPITALIST PRESENT” OR FORGING A PATH TO THE COMMUNIST FUTURE?

A Response to Mike Ely’s Nine Letters*

By a writing group in the RCP

INTRODUCTION

Mike Ely and his Nine Letters¹ are wrong on every single question that matters. These Nine Letters constitute a highly unprincipled and opportunist attack aimed at the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP,USA) and its leadership.

What stands out is not just that Mike Ely and his Nine Letters are wrong on political conception and strategy, on philosophy and ideology, and on communist leadership and the contributions of Bob Avakian. All that is true, but what is most striking is that **we are NOT even talking about the same project!**

In a nutshell, the essence of Mike Ely’s criticism of the RCP, in his view, is that after many years in existence, it does not have “a mass partisan political base,” and the main reason is because of its “denigration of practice” and moving away “from actually organizing people in struggle” on one hand, and its “dogmatism” and its one-sided overemphasis and insistence on “theory and ideology” on the other hand, and in particular, “the heart of this – both its theoretical core and most visible manifestation – is how the RCP’s central leader, Bob Avakian, is seen and promoted,” promoting a “cult of personality,” based on his new synthesis, which according to Mike Ely is neither valid, verified in practice nor relevant at this time.

Alternatively, Mike Ely offers “thoughts about a different path” and what, in his opinion, is to be done. He offers a political program that in its essence calls for tailing the mass struggles of the day, rooted in and flowing from a pragmatic and empiricist philosophy, and marked by virulent hostility to ideological struggle among the masses, especially over religion – all in the name of being “presumptuous” and “creative.” Sorry, none too creative, and mainly preposterous, as we shall demonstrate.

What Mike Ely is doing, and has done with his Nine Letters, is capitulating, and promoting capitulation to imperialism and its horrors, while maintaining a threadbare camouflage of communism and in fact pandering to and cohering all kinds of anti-communist prejudices – in the name of “communism”! The only unifying “principle” of his Nine Letters is a highly unprincipled attack on the RCP and its Chairman Bob Avakian – the one party and leader in this country which are actually and actively working for revolution and communism, and contributing to that cause in the world.

But Mike Ely’s criticisms and gross distortions of the RCP’s line and practice and his alternative “thoughts” constitute a coherent revisionist framework and package. This package has nothing positive to offer in terms of achieving a radical alternative to the monstrous system we live under. In fact, the *only* positive aspect about the Nine Letters is that it constitutes a “teacher by negative example.” It would be impossible to speak to every mischaracterization or to refute every wrong line contained in these Nine Letters, but we will expose some of the main distortions and address some of the key questions of

*For readers’ reference, we are posting a copy of Mike Ely’s “Nine Letters to Our Comrades: Getting Beyond Avakian’s New Synthesis” ([click here](#))

1. “Nine Letters to Our Comrades: Getting Beyond Avakian’s New Synthesis”

ideological and political line that define this package. In so doing we hope to enable people to compare and contrast this opportunist package with a revolutionary communist line and methodology – and to grasp why it matters. In addition we encourage those who are interested to go to revcom.us and bobavakian.net for a more complete exposition of the line of the RCP, and the body of work of Bob Avakian.

Immediately, we must say that for a series of letters pompously titled “Getting Beyond Avakian’s New Synthesis,” there is almost zero substantive engagement or critique of the new synthesis. Far from refuting the new synthesis – and despite all the talk of “practice” in the Nine Letters – Mike Ely and his Nine Letters have shockingly little to say about nearly 60 years of the most advanced practice in the world in forging a path to communism – the historical experiences of socialism in the Soviet Union and China, impacting over a billion people.

The end of this first wave of socialist revolutions has posed tremendous challenges. How to go forward in the face of that? How to embark on a new stage of revolution? In this situation, Bob Avakian has led in defending, upholding and building on the monumental achievements of those revolutions and the profound revolutionary breakthroughs in understanding of its greatest thinkers and leaders. But he has also deeply analyzed the mistakes, and the shortcomings in conception and method, that led to those mistakes.

On that basis, Avakian has forged a coherent, comprehensive and overarching theoretical framework – that is, a synthesis. While this definitely comes out of and builds on what has gone before, this advance has also involved real ruptures with the past understanding and experience as a crucial element, which is why we call it the new synthesis. It is concentrated in three realms: philosophy, or how we understand the world; politics, especially but not limited to the political conceptions that guided the first attempts at socialist transformation; and strategic conception, which focuses on how one would actually make revolution in a country like this. Again, we refer people to revcom.us and bobavakian.net for elaboration and exposition on these matters.

In Mike Ely and his Nine Letters, on the other hand, we have both an opposition to this advance in our science, and in the process an inexcusable retreat to and replay of a road traversed before, strewn with the betrayal and blood of the masses of people – the road of economism. Opposed most notably by Lenin in *What Is To Be Done?*, economism is a trend that directs communists to focus their attention, and the attention of the masses, on immediate struggles (often in the economic realm), viewing this as a special stage which enables communists to get a mass following; only *then*, it is held, can communists bring in larger issues. In actual fact, there is nothing new about this notion – it has been tried many times, and in every case it has led to the desertion and finally betrayal of the goals of revolution and communism – and this has been especially sharp when it has been applied in imperialist countries. Politically this line and trend, first refuted by Lenin conclusively and incontrovertibly in *What Is To Be Done?*, and now championed by Mike Ely, charts a path to capitulation to imperialism, becoming yet another weight on the masses of people.²

Mike Ely’s main “sales pitch” for this tired old line is his past associations with and supposed “inside information” on the RCP, and an implicit – and sometimes explicit – assertion that his narrative is the “real deal” – his claims and experience being the “truth” that trumps any scientific assessment of the line and practice of the RCP. On this, we would like to quote the following excerpt from “Matters of Principle and Standards”:³ “Anyone who is not authorized by the RCP to do so but who claims to be revealing ‘inside information’ about the RCP establishes himself or herself, by that very act, as someone who, at a minimum, is acting very irresponsibly. Beyond that, spreading gossip, rumors, and distortions about the

2. We strongly encourage readers to go to the original source and study Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* to get a fuller understanding of the dividing line nature of this work in the development of communist theory and practice and of its relevance to the issues at hand.

3. See revcom.us, issue #122, March 9, 2008

RCP, and/or others in the communist movement, marks anyone who does so as thoroughly dishonest and highly unprincipled. The more that life unfolds, the more the opportunist character of people who do such things will be revealed.” Quite frankly, the fact that Mike Ely has gone about things in this way and not been immediately and roundly castigated says that the standards of the revolutionary movement need to be raised on questions of principle.

A FRAMEWORK TRAPPED IN THE BOUNDS OF “THIS AWFUL CAPITALIST PRESENT” – NOT A RADICALLY DIFFERENT WORLD

To start and clearly distinguish the framework of Mike Ely and the Nine Letters, let’s take some particularly stark and clarifying examples, from his political program, his comments on ideology, and his criticism of the RCP’s policies. While each of these aspects will be dealt with more thoroughly later, here we want to illustrate some particular points of approach to begin to illuminate the basic framework of Mike Ely and the Nine Letters, a framework that is ultimately and objectively destined to remain within the bounds of this capitalist system.

The following formulation in the Nine Letters captures the essence of what it is that Mike Ely is bringing forward in opposition to the revolutionary communist line of the RCP: “A revolutionary organization has to be integrated into the struggles of the people – directly in its own name while connecting with (or initiating) a variety of other organizations. *And it has to draw the thinking and activity of people toward creatively-conceived communist solutions to this awful capitalist present* – a task which can only be accomplished with methods that are bold yet sophisticated (not hackneyed or infantile).” (Emphasis ours) [Letter 3]

This is exactly and completely wrong!

The task of a revolutionary communist vanguard, the entire *raison d’être* of communists at this time in history, is precisely the opposite: to lead the masses in making communist revolution and getting rid of this entire capitalist system – not to find solutions within it, creatively-conceived or not, communist in name or not. This is the bedrock scientific understanding which must underlie the development of a revolutionary movement.

The capitalist-imperialist system is completely worthless and no basic change for the better can come about until this system is overthrown. It is driven by and all about the production of surplus value through the *exploitation* of wage-labor by capital. This is the dirty little – and at one level, very simple – secret of capitalism, that all the oppression, suffering and horrors flow from the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, the fruits of vast socialized labor being appropriated by a small class of capitalists – a class that also holds the reins of state power, claiming sole legitimacy and monopoly over the use of armed force to enforce this system, here and around the world. This is why we need to make revolution and to seize state power, to replace this system with socialism as the transition to communism, a world without these exploitative class and underlying production relations, and corresponding social relations and traditional ideas. There are absolutely no “communist solutions” to “this awful capitalist present” other than making communist revolution.

Since the time of Marx, this basic scientific fact has not been disproved or falsified, though many have tried – in theory and practice. Mike Ely might say that of course he agrees with this point. But, as we will show, Mike Ely’s whole conception of building the revolutionary movement is not anchored within this basic scientific framework – and anything other than getting rid of this entire capitalist system is reformism and accommodation to imperialism.

An overall denigration and even negation of ideology, of worldview and how one looks at the world, and ideological struggle – in the name of “practice” and “struggle” – is pervasive and prevalent throughout the Nine Letters. **The question is not whether we need to engage in “practice” and “struggle” – but what is the content of that, led by what ideology, with what strategy, and towards what goal:** social democratic reformist “practice” and “struggle” within “this awful capitalist present,” or revolutionary communist “practice” and “struggle.” Repeatedly, with blood and bones, we have learnt the painful and bitter lesson that ideology, communist ideology and nothing else, is the key link in forging a revolutionary dividing line between these two roads.

This “awful capitalist present” has its ideologies, in their more progressive and more reactionary forms, but ultimately flowing from and strengthening this system – be they religion, bourgeois democracy and democratic illusions, individualism, the calculus of “I want more,” the nationalism of oppressed nations, or be they extremely reactionary ideologies of white supremacy, patriarchy, patriotism and, in this country, a particularly virulent form of American chauvinism, to name just a few. As Marx first put it, to paraphrase, the ruling ideas of any society are ever the ideas of the ruling class. Making revolution and getting to a radically different world requires fierce struggle on these big ideological questions, reflecting what Marx also called the “radical rupture” needed with “this awful capitalist present” and its dominant ideas and ideologies, with increasing cores won to be emancipators of humanity, getting beyond these bourgeois ideologies. Else we are not seriously talking about revolution, at least not communist revolution – or any vision or possibility of a radically different world. In the approach of Mike Ely and his Nine Letters the aversion to matters of ideology and ideological struggle is stark; particularly manifest and concentrated in his “polemic” against the RCP on religion in Letter 5, a topic we will return to in some detail.

But let’s take another brief example of this now.

Mike Ely states, “...Avakian injects an idealist element into the RCP’s politics when he claims that his ‘re-envisioning’ is at the center of his synthesis. This ‘enriched What is to be Done-ism’ funnels massive energy into questions of the future ultimate transition to communism (like the controversies over ‘crossing the narrow horizon of bourgeois right’). This method denies the specificity of politics at each necessary stage of revolutionary practice.” [Letter 4]

Again, completely wrong!

What sort of revolution is Mike Ely envisioning where growing numbers of people are not won to the means and ends of communism and where communist ideas are not increasingly contending and setting new terms in society? Rendering this “idealist” and implying that it is irrelevant at this time, Mike Ely yet again betrays the essential content of his ideological and political line. Not grappling with and struggling for the masses of people to get beyond what is most characteristic of “this awful capitalist present” will lead to objectively settling for trying to find “creatively-conceived communist solutions” within this society and this system, not to making revolution to get beyond it – exactly because the communist revolution must be, and can only be, a conscious and voluntary act by the masses of people. One important element in Bob Avakian’s new synthesis is exactly the understanding of the need to put *heightened emphasis* on “...breaking down, to the maximum degree possible at any given time, the barriers to their [the masses] engaging in the sphere of ‘working with ideas’ and the struggle and contention in the realm of ideas (in the spheres of art and culture, science and philosophy, and so on) as well as putting before these masses the problems of the revolution – drawing them, as much and as fully as possible, at every point, into grappling with crucial questions relating to the need for communist revolution *and* the means for making that revolution.” [“Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity” (MREH) Part 2 available at revcom.us]

Why can’t we wait until after the revolution and the establishment of socialism to talk about these questions? First, there *must* be a significant section of masses – a solid core, if you will – who are fighting with the goal of communism fully in mind and a sense of the contradictions involved in getting there as part of making sure that once power is seized it will actually be *communist* power. This section must fight

to lead and set the terms for the broader sections of masses who will flood into political life when a revolutionary situation opens up. Otherwise, any revolution would get easily deterred to revenge, lesser goals, etc., precisely because of the tremendous remaining strength of what Marx called the “birthmarks” of capitalism – including both in production relations that still have elements of commodity relations, and in the realm of people’s thinking. No one can say in advance exactly how strong that core must be – but clearly a lesson of ALL revolutions is that what Lenin called the “petty bourgeois wave”⁴ that erupts in a revolutionary situation is great indeed and this core *should and must be as strong as possible* in order to overcome that wave and divert the struggle toward the actual seizure of power. And in fact Avakian has wrangled repeatedly with this question.

Instead of “drawing the thinking and activity of people toward creatively-conceived communist solutions to this awful capitalist present,” as Mike Ely poses it, a communist organization must draw people’s thinking to the future – to the goal of communism; to the dictatorship of the proletariat as the transit point to that; to the proletarian revolution as the only means to get there; and to the bringing forward of a revolutionary people and “hastening while awaiting” the development of a revolutionary situation – putting before the masses all the attendant problems involved in each of those things and linking all that at every stage to the current tasks of the struggle. This doesn’t reduce to only ideological work; there is an entire ensemble to “Enriched What is to Done-ism” laid out in Part 2 of “Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity”; but ideological work is essential to the whole process.

A “CULTURE OF ORGANIZING” – FOR WHAT?

Mike Ely charges that “The RCP’s current path and methods have not worked and will not work.” [Letter 3] Let’s start by examining what he proposes as an alternative path and methods.

Mike Ely puts forward: “...communists need a culture of *organizing* people to wage sharp struggle over the major questions of society. And we need a deeply creative new sense of how to bring *revolutionary understandings* to those who want to change the world.” [Letter 3]

For all of Mike Ely’s dissecting and decrying of Avakian’s formulations, he gives us very little to go on in terms of his own strategic analysis of how communists should carry out the urgently needed work of bringing into being a movement that can actually lead to revolution in this country. His formulations and solutions are perhaps intentionally vague, and largely unmoored from scientific analysis and methodology.

To put this “culture of organizing” in its very best light, this is a vision of communists being the generators and leaders of mass struggles – with communist and revolutionary principles and goals unfolded out of that.

What exactly is this “culture of organizing” – what are its ideological glue and theoretical foundations?

According to Mike Ely, how is it determined what are the “major questions of society” around which people should be organized? Is it based on a scientific analysis of “the main ways in which, at any given time, the exploitative and oppressive nature of this system is concentrated in the policies and actions of the ruling class and its institutions and agencies” and on an analysis of how this all fits into a strategy of re-polarizing society for revolution?⁵ If that is it, the RCP does, as Mike Ely knows full well, mobilize masses in struggle based on these criteria. Or is it instead based on whatever struggles happen to be attracting the

4. Lenin discusses this in a number of essays written during 1917 and earlier, making the point that these masses will “bring into the movement their prejudices, their reactionary fantasies, their weaknesses and errors,” and that the “class-conscious vanguard of the revolution” will be faced with the challenge of directing all this toward the overthrow of the bourgeoisie.

5. See “Some Crucial Points of Revolutionary Orientation – In Opposition to Infantile Posturing and Distortions of Revolution,” issue #102, September 23, 2007, available at revcom.us

greatest mass following at a particular time? Or is it something else? Here we are left to wonder...and meanwhile, there is a loophole wide enough to drive a truck through.

And what, according to Mike Ely, are the “revolutionary understandings” that are being brought into these struggles? Is it the fundamental and scientific understanding that humanity can only be emancipated through the revolutionary seizure of power, leading to the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat (DOP) as a transit to communism? Or is it instead an occasional, vague and disconnected, invocation of “revolution,” as, at most, an idea for the “sweet bye and bye”? Clearly, judging from Mike Ely’s disgust with “funnel[ing] massive energy into questions of the future ultimate transition to communism,” one must not talk about the continued existence of bourgeois right and other birthmarks of capitalism, the ways in which this becomes the soil for capitalist restoration and bourgeois headquarters, the corresponding need to wage struggle to dig up this soil, and the need for a dictatorship of the proletariat to do this – all of which have been fundamental to being a communist since Mao and which have been addressed and further developed by Avakian. So just what “understandings” does he propose to bring? Again we are left to wonder – as Mike Ely employs his Rorschach method of allowing his various readers to fill in their own understandings from his vague references.

Fortunately, we don’t really need to puzzle over this, because in fact this line being pushed by Mike Ely has a long history.

From the time of Lenin, and with far too many instances and examples since, this path of first uniting with the struggles of the day, as “the most widely applicable means”⁶ of organizing the masses, and then unfolding revolution and communism out of that, has been shown to inexorably lead to reformism and betrayal. This is a line of seeking more palpable and immediate results, where the tasks of communists are reduced to getting a mass following with revolutionary politics “added on” to that.

This approach inevitably leads to the severing of revolution and the ultimate goal of communism from today’s realities and struggles, leading ultimately to an approach that is best expressed in the catchphrase that Lenin used to characterize the economists of his day: “The movement is everything, the final aim is nothing”⁷ where the building of struggles and the development of a following becomes an end in itself – and the criterion becomes whether one is “getting somewhere” in terms of numbers, without regard to direction – to whether it is actually contributing toward the ultimate goal of revolution and communism.

What this approach does not comprehend is the problem that Lenin pointed to of “the spontaneous striving [of the masses and mass movements] to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie”⁸ – witness the anti-war movement, immigration rights activists and others appealing to the Democrats. Especially in an imperialist country like the U.S., these movements cannot and will not spontaneously represent the interests of the international proletariat or the people of the world. For example, the line of “support the troops” may be a more “widely-applicable” means for building a bigger anti-war movement, but it covers over and distorts the essential reality that these troops are enforcing imperialist interests – and committing crimes that shock the conscience of humankind and which go against the fundamental interests of the people of the world and in the U.S.⁹

And since Mike Ely claims to be so fascinated with practice, let us point out that there is a long history of practice of the kind that he advocates – of supposedly tacking on revolution to leading the day-to-day struggles – beginning with the Communist Party, USA (CPUSA) even in its “glory days” and extending

6. See *What Is To Be Done?*

7. See *What Is To Be Done?*

8. *What Is To Be Done?* cited in MREH Part 2

9. See “Why You Can’t Support the U.S. Troops” revcom.us Issue #121 February 24, 2008

to every other Comintern party in the imperialist countries – which over and over again has only led to betraying the historic interests of the proletariat. And, by the way, Bob Avakian’s new synthesis is based in part on summing up that practice – including our own errors in the early years of the RU¹⁰ and the RCP that led us to come to grips with and grasp Lenin’s points in *What Is To Be Done?*¹¹ All of this has been part of forging a more correct understanding of what should be the practice of communists.

The question is not whether communists need to lead mass movements and struggles in relation to the key concentrations of social contradictions. In fact, it is difficult to think of a major social contradiction or a major struggle – including opposition to the war and torture being carried out by the government, or the move to suppress dissent and critical thinking in academia, the attack on science and the scientific method, the drive toward abolishing the right to abortion and the intensification of the oppression of women, Jena and New Orleans and the oppression of Black people overall, the attacks on immigrants – in which the RCP is not significantly involved.¹² The main question is *how* to lead those movements with ideological and political work that contributes to communist revolution, and related, with methods of leadership that rely on and unleash the masses. How, in short, to lead this in such a way that it contributes to building a revolutionary movement and bringing forward a revolutionary people which is won to seeing that the whole system is worthless and must be overthrown.

The point is that the orientation and the guiding strategy of the RCP is to approach all this from the standpoint of serving the struggle for revolution and the ultimate aim of communism, rather than subordinating, and in effect burying, revolution and communism beneath particular struggles, or promoting the illusion that somehow revolution and communism will be brought forth spontaneously – or somehow emerge organically – out of such struggles, which is the essence of an economist/revisionist line.

Going further, Mike Ely unleashes a diatribe about the RCP’s line and practice – grossly mis-characterizing it as “telling” the people things in patronizing fashion – and then marshals the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (!) as justification for liquidating the role of the vanguard party.

Mike Ely states, “Re-reading documents from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, I noticed again how Mao believes people develop consciousness and sophistication *in the course of political struggle*. One key document announces: ‘Let the masses educate themselves in the movement.’ People learn to appreciate and apply the ideology of revolution and communism in the course of political struggle.”¹³

This statement is absolutely stunning in its distortion of the truth and history of the Chinese revolution, leaving out the most critical aspect – which was exactly the line and leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao. Without the leadership of a vanguard communist party, how could the people “learn to appreciate and apply the ideology of revolution and communism in the course of political struggle”?

As Avakian says, “...a central and pivotal point in Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* is his analysis of why and how communist consciousness – which involves a scientific outlook and approach – cannot be developed ‘spontaneously’ but must be brought to the proletariat and masses of people *from outside the realm of their own more direct and immediate experience*; and that, for this as well as other reasons, the communist

10. Revolutionary Union, the forerunner to the RCP,USA

11. *For a Harvest of Dragons: On the “Crisis of Marxism” and the Power of Marxism, Now More Than Ever*, “Leninism: fundamental departure or decisive advance?”, RCP Publications 1983, pp. 57-99, especially pp. 74-81.

12. We also refer the reader to the section “Overcoming Obstacles and Limitations, ‘Mobilizing All Positive Factors’” in MREH Part 2 where Avakian calls for critical summation and interrogation of the work of our Party in relation to Hurricane Katrina.

13. From Letter 3, citing “Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” adopted August 8, 1966, Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.

revolution must have the leadership of an organized vanguard party, which is made up of people, drawn from all sections of society, who have taken up the communist viewpoint.” [MREH, Part 2]

In relation to these mass struggles, the understanding of the need for revolution and communism represents a radical rupture, a rupture from the confines of bourgeois democracy and this capitalist system – and this understanding does not occur spontaneously.

For example, what about the understanding of the fundamental contradiction of capitalism – between socialized production and private appropriation – which is, in an ultimate sense, responsible for all the horrors we see today, from mass starvation in Africa to imperialist war and torture? How would this understanding arise spontaneously, from direct and immediate experience alone, even while people are protesting and struggling sharply against these very same horrors?

What about the basic scientific fact that: “The essence of what exists in the U.S. is not democracy, but capitalism-imperialism and political structures to enforce that capitalism-imperialism. What the U.S. spreads around the world is not democracy, but imperialism and political structures to enforce that imperialism.” [quoted in “Bringing Forward Another Way” (BFAW) by Bob Avakian, available at revcom.us] Can you understand that merely from the experience of suffering under and struggling against the abuses of that system? The rupture with bourgeois democracy does not occur spontaneously, and requires a whole lot of science and theory along with struggle. It is illusory and false to think that spontaneous struggles within the bourgeois-democratic framework can and will go over this hump, or that people in large numbers within these struggles, through their direct and immediate practice alone, can come to this understanding.

Avakian has been hammering at this point, breaking new theoretical ground on getting beyond bourgeois democracy, and rupturing even further with any notions of the communist project as the perfection of democracy – and in this context, Mike Ely’s passing reference to – in fact dismissal of – what he calls “Avakian’s idiosyncratic critique of democracy” is quite revealing. Take just one aspect of this “idiosyncratic critique of democracy” [Letter 1] – does Mike Ely think that the confounding of bourgeois democracy with communism going back to the “United Front Against Fascism” line adopted by the Comintern in 1935 (and which still remains conventional wisdom for much of the movement) has *not* been a problem? What, for example, were its consequences in the abandonment of revolution by many “communist” parties during and after WW2? Just what is Mike Ely’s critique of democracy – or does he even have one? Or is this facile dismissal in fact a confession that he intends to follow along with so much of the movement and begin to openly speak in the language of extending and “perfecting” a non-existent classless democracy?

The masses need to have an understanding of the need and basis for the emancipation of humanity from capitalism – for communism – and for how to get there, through making revolution and going through a complex period of socialist transition – what is called getting beyond the “4 alls.”¹⁴ All of this is the concentration of a tremendous amount of science, developed over more than 150 years, and synthesizing and distilling what we have learned from the vast social practice and study of the international communist movement.

All of this science cannot arise from direct and immediate experience in struggle. If we could look at the stars and tell the laws of physics, or look at animal and plant life around us and tell the laws of evolution, what need is there for science? Why would it be different for communism? Making communist revolution is not just activism and organizing against the outrages the system gives rise to – though it certainly

14. The “4 alls” refers to: “the abolition of all class distinctions, of all production relations that underlie those class distinctions, of all social relations that correspond to those production relations, and the revolutionization of all the ideas that correspond to those social relations” [MREH Part 1] which Avakian is paraphrasing from Marx.

requires and comprehends the need for such struggle. It is the application of science and the thoroughly scientific method and approach of dialectical materialism to analyze the contradictions underlying reality and transforming all of this towards the ultimate goal of the emancipation of humanity, and the development of an all-sided revolutionary struggle based on that. The one-sided insistence of Mike Ely that “...people develop consciousness and sophistication *in the course of political struggle*” is false and destructive to any genuine effort to develop communist and revolutionary consciousness.

Mike Ely and his Nine Letters state, “There are significant numbers of people curious about revolutionary politics. We meet them whenever we walk out the door. But even the most advanced, discontented, restless, conscious sections of the people, even those who CRAVE a revolutionary change, are often not particularly inclined toward a revolutionary communist pole. It is a gap that is objective to us ... This is a gap that a communist movement either learns how to bridge or doesn’t.” [Letter 2]

This is exactly the problem that Mike Ely gives the wrong answer to:

In the face of the historic defeat of the first wave of communist revolutions and the verdict that’s been hammered into people’s consciousness that this is a failed project, it’s not surprising that many people are not spontaneously inclined toward a revolutionary communist pole. These are precisely the questions that Bob Avakian has dug deeply into as part of forging his new synthesis and which Mike Ely has rejected as irrelevant. And this is a big reason that the RCP has been opening up discussion of these questions broadly among the masses as part of fighting for people to envision a radically different world and to combat the anti-communist verdict and to take up the only understanding and ideology that can bring about the emancipation of humanity. Below, we will dig more into the question of the ideological rupture that’s necessary to win people to the revolutionary communist pole, but it’s important to note here that the refusal to challenge people to rupture with deeply held and wrong beliefs is a hallmark of revisionism and economism, the logic being “why bring in things that would alienate people when we need more people around us, not less.” Yes, we need “more people around us” – but the crucial question again, is for what?

Mike Ely constructs a whole argument about “Avakian’s linear view of first theory and ideology, and then mass organization”: [Letter 3] He quotes Bob Avakian from “Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity, Part 1”: “It is important to grasp this point that the need for radical change in society gets *called forth in the superstructure* – in the thinking of people, and then in the political organization of people. People form groups, they form parties with programs and objectives which reflect – reflect not in a reductionist, linear and one-to-one sense, but reflect ultimately – what’s going on in the basic relations in society, in terms, most fundamentally, of the contradiction between the forces and relations of production. This gets reflected more or less consciously in people’s thinking and then in their political organization.”

And from this statement by Avakian, he concludes, “This linear view is embodied in the RCP’s current linear tactics: First study Avakian, then go tell people about it, then expect them to congeal as organization on that basis.” [Letter 3]

Here in unprincipled fashion, Mike Ely is taking a quote from Avakian out of context and distorting its meaning in a reductionist way in order to fabricate his own version of our Party’s line and “tactics.” What he is quoting from Avakian is an overall general sweeping scientific observation on the relationship between economic base and superstructure, and how this relates to the process of radical change. What Mike Ely does not include is what Avakian goes on to say: “And in acting on their ideas, in seeking to bring about change in correspondence with their ideas, they come up against constraints – not only economic but also political constraints – the force of the state and the power relations in society which they have to shatter and transform in order to (once again in relative, not absolute terms) unleash and liberate the productive forces, including the people. *This* is how societies change in a fundamental and qualitative way – how and why revolutions are called forth and occur, through momentous struggle.” [MREH, Part 1] This makes perfectly clear that what Avakian is talking about has nothing to do with Mike Ely’s version of “RCP’s current linear tactics.”

In fact in the following quote it is Mike Ely who betrays a profoundly simplistic and linear understanding of the relationship between struggle and consciousness:

“However, the ripening of a revolutionary people is in many ways an *objective* process. For example: The civil rights generation of African American activists were quite organized, while deeply wedded to bourgeois democratic illusions about integration and voting. They *became* revolutionized by their practical experiences and by events that formed the larger context for that work.

“Such moments of mass political experience cry out for revolutionary communist activity, so that strands of oppositional and revolutionary sentiments actually go over to communist consciousness and serious preparation.” [Letter 3]

This is just wrong and historically inaccurate. To begin with, Mike Ely leaves out the tremendous influence of revolutionary ideas and currents “in the air,” the influence of Revolutionary China and Mao, and the whole ethos of the '60s and its emergent radicalism which both contributed to and was strengthened by the Black people's struggles. And how do Malcolm X and other revolutionary intellectuals from the '60s – who were highly critical of the ideology, goals and methods of the “civil rights movement” and who were themselves influenced by revolutionary struggles taking place around the world – fit into his neat little paradigm? And what about the important ideological struggles waged by the Black Panther Party against other trends – from MLK's reformism to the “porkchop nationalism” of Karenga and Baraka? This is precisely where Mike Ely is negating the role of the subjective forces, the revolutionary communist vanguard, by claiming that “the ripening of a revolutionary people is in many ways an *objective* process.” Yes, there are objective factors but the fact is that just the struggle against the system, as heroic as it was at times – and “events that formed the larger context for that work” – did not spontaneously revolutionize that generation. There were different trends that emerged, and if it had not been for the ideology of communism being brought “from without” that struggle, a communist trend would not have developed. And by the way, even then, communism had to engage in a fierce ideological struggle against nationalism and reformism – on a theoretical level – and did not emerge organically from that struggle. Fundamentally the process that brings about the ripening of a revolutionary people is objective to the communist vanguard, but the *dynamic and essential element within that* is conscious work and struggle waged by the vanguard – in other words a dynamic between the subjective forces working for revolution and communism and the influence of objective developments that are at play, in which the subjective fights to wrench out as much initiative as possible. In sum, Mike Ely presents a historical mischaracterization of the 1960s, which Mike Ely attempts to marshal in support of his argument that revolutionary consciousness spontaneously emerges out of, and can only emerge out of the “practical experiences.” There is much more that could be said about this example, including much to learn from that historical period that is relevant to the questions at issue here. But one thing is certain: “strands of oppositional and revolutionary sentiments” do not “actually go over to communist consciousness” without the all-around conscious work of the communists in bringing communism and revolution – yes, in dialectical relationship with political struggles and changes in the objective terrain.

Applying this same mistaken methodology to the present, we get the following statement: “I believe we may be entering such a radicalization period among immigrant workers in the U.S. – who come here as refugees of the larger ‘planet of slums.’ I hope we see such a period emerge among Black youth in the wake of Katrina and the Jena events. We need to be very sensitive to such potential radicalization, and poised to respond with energy and strategic appreciation.” [Letter 3]

This is an approach that is completely devoid of any comprehension of the decisive role that the vanguard, using the newspaper as its main weapon, spreading revolution everywhere, bringing forward and training cores of masses with revolutionary theory and science, must play in bringing into being a class conscious revolutionary force which Lenin envisioned as being the backbone of the struggle for the revolutionary seizure of power. It leaves the communists and class conscious masses in a passive position, taking the

initiative out of their hands; Mike Ely advocates waiting and hoping for such “potential radicalization” and being “poised to respond with energy and strategic appreciation.” And again, we have to ask: Energy to do WHAT? Strategic appreciation from what basis? From an understanding of the need to combat spontaneity, or to tail it? To refuse to specify in this case is to actually reveal one’s answer.

Mike Ely states, “The RCP now holds that there are ‘two mainstays’ of communist work – one ‘mainstay’ is the work of ‘AP&P’ (developing the appreciation, promotion and popularization of Avakian). The other ‘mainstay’ is the work of the newspaper. And the newspaper has also been reconceived to give greater weight to Avakian’s theoretical articles and to promoting his ‘re-envisioning of communism,’ while the concepts of agitation and exposure have undergone a related transformation. This new conceptual package is called ‘Enriched What-Is-To-Be-Done-ism.’ That enrichment is a *negation* of Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done*. It represents a different (and idealist) view of how the activity and consciousness of people can be diverted in a communist direction.” [Letter 3]

We cannot here go into a full discussion of “Enriched What Is To Be-Done-ism” and we refer readers to “Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity” for a fuller exposition of this important concept put forward by Bob Avakian. There, in addition to talking about the importance of the newspaper and AP&P as the two mainstays, Bob Avakian discusses a whole ensemble of communist work which is necessary to the bringing forward of a revolutionary people – including building “massive political resistance to the main ways in which, at any given time, the exploitative and oppressive nature of this system is concentrated in the policies and actions of the ruling class and its institutions and agencies”¹⁵ and solving the problems of how to involve the masses in “meaningful revolutionary work. “ But it is Mike Ely, as we have seen, who in fact negates Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done*?

Where is Mike Ely’s discussion of the role of the communist newspaper as the “better part of preparation” – ideologically, politically, and organizationally – for the eventual struggle for the seizure of power for revolution – a concept which was at the heart of Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done*? Where is his discussion of the “tribune of the people”: “someone who shines a penetrating light on the outrages and abuses perpetrated by the capitalist system, the ways in which all this affects different strata among the people, and how different strata respond to major events in society and the world; who brings to light, in compelling ways, the underlying causes and relations at the root of all these outrages and injustices – pointing through all this to the need for revolution and the establishment of a new, socialist and ultimately communist society, and the decisive role of the exploited class in the present (capitalist) society, the *proletariat*, in bringing about such a revolutionary transformation, as part of the overall world proletarian revolution.” [MREH, Part 2]

Where is his discussion of the central and pivotal point in *What Is To Be Done*? of Lenin’s analysis of why and how communist consciousness – which involves a scientific outlook and approach – cannot be developed spontaneously but must be brought to the proletariat and masses of people from outside the realm of their own more direct and immediate experience? Where is his discussion of how indispensable is the leadership of an organized vanguard party, which is made up of people, drawn from all sections of society, who have taken up the communist viewpoint and are dedicated to bringing that understanding to the masses of people?

In fact, it is nowhere – studiously avoided in the service of opportunism.

15. From “Some Crucial Points of Revolutionary Orientation – in Opposition to Infantile Posturing and Distortions of Revolution” cited in MREH Part 2 and available in full at revcom.us

DO THE MASSES NEED CONSOLATION – OR EMANCIPATION?

Nowhere is the economism that permeates Mike Ely’s argument more pronounced than in his dissertation on religion, and on why he thinks it is wrong to make the challenging of religious beliefs a key part of the struggle for revolutionary consciousness.

Before digging into the substance of this, it is important to make a point about Mike Ely’s eclectic method, which stands out in this discussion of religion (and more generally in these Letters). The following quote from Lenin, in *The State and Revolution*, is particularly illuminating: “Dialectics are replaced by eclecticism – this is the most usual, the most widespread practice to be met with in present-day official Social-Democratic literature in relation to Marxism. This sort of substitution is, of course, nothing new: it was observed even in the history of Greek philosophy. In falsifying Marxism in opportunist fashion, the substitution of eclecticism for dialectics is the easiest way of deceiving people. It gives an illusory satisfaction; *it seems to take into account all sides of the process, all trends of development, all the conflicting influences, and so forth, whereas in reality it provides no integral and revolutionary conception of the process of social development at all.*”¹⁶ [Emphasis ours]

Mike Ely charges that Avakian “profoundly underestimates how deeply religious faith is rooted in the *needs and desperations* of people’s existence,” and asserts, “Faith and religious community are rooted in the search for consolation and meaning,” and that Marx’s “assessment [of religion] is a sharp contrast to Avakian’s.” [Letter 5] In particular and in essence, Mike Ely charges that Avakian and the RCP do not comprehend how, in Marx’s words, “Religion is...the heart of a heartless world...”¹⁷

Mike Ely must hope that his readers cannot read and especially that they do not turn to page 223 of Avakian’s *Away With All Gods! Unchaining the Mind and Radically Changing the World*, in which he states that “it is important to understand why many people, especially oppressed people in a world that seems so crazy and intolerable, often turn to religion in the hope of finding something solid that can hold things together amidst all this madness,” and in which he goes on to warn against approaching things in a “simple-minded” way and to discuss in some depth the reasons why people take up these beliefs, and yet why these are so harmful.¹⁸

The point is, we fully understand how religion is “the heart of a heartless world.” But more fundamentally, like Marx, we also understand, first, that the world does not need to be heartless in the way it is in “this awful capitalist present” – that for the first time in history there is the basis to achieve a world which does

16. “The State and Revolution,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 25, p.405

17. The full quote from Marx is as follows: “The basis of irreligious criticism is: Man *makes religion*, religion does not make man. Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic *point d’honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic* realization of the human essence because the *human essence* has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual *aroma*. *Religious* distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.” Abstract from *The Introduction to Contribution to The Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, 1844, marxists.org. Cited in Letter 5.

18. And if Ely wants to claim that this is only recently written, we refer him not only to Avakian’s two audio talks on religion but also *Preaching from a Pulpit of Bones: We Need Morality but not Traditional Morality*, Banner Press, 1998.

not need this kind of “consolation and meaning,” a world where all the oppressive relations and ideas in society have actually been eliminated and uprooted; and second, that religion stands in the way of achieving that goal, that radically different world, and is in fact, at this point in history, a mighty weight and shackle on the emancipation of humanity. Bringing about this radically different world requires a thoroughly scientific and conscious approach to knowing and changing reality, and not relying on non-existent gods or other supernatural forces. On one hand, religion opposes and obscures this scientific approach and our conscious actions in changing this world, and on the other hand, it actively promotes an ethos of blaming the victim, of ultimately putting the blame back on the oppressed and exploited through notions of sin, shame, guilt and fear. To say nothing of actively reinforcing tradition’s chains with backward and medieval ideas about women and gays.

What about Hindu peasants who attribute their “awful” “present” to sins in past lives and consequent bad karma, and hope for salvation in the next? What about the view that the suffering of Black people in New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina was God’s doing, and rightful punishment for sin, or else the “mysterious ways of god”? What about Muslim youth in the Middle East who see what Mike Ely and the Nine Letters call “political Islam” as the antidote to U.S. imperialism, a trend that views the Islamic Republic of Iran as an ideal society? Does all this stand in the way of a radically different world and emancipation? Is the state of the world, “this awful capitalist present,” the product and outcome of man’s original sin, and the solution is prayer and asking forgiveness and salvation from non-existent gods?

Marx so correctly and succinctly stated, in the very same paragraph quoted in the Nine Letters, “The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against the world of which religion is the spiritual *aroma*” – and this is where the crux of the disagreement lies. By upholding as principal the fact that religion is “the heart of a heartless world,” and not that religion, in fact, now poses a huge obstacle to ridding us of this heartless world – and really fighting for and holding onto these “hearts” with dear life – Mike Ely and the Nine Letters yet again betray their sentiments of which world they are fighting for. Is it the one in which “religion is the spiritual aroma,” “the heart” of “this awful capitalist” world, or is it the one in which this “heart” – religion, is no longer needed, and religion actually stands in the way of getting there?

Does Mike Ely actually want us to believe that a revolutionary movement can be built, and a revolution actually succeed, without there being a significant section of masses – including masses who formerly held religious beliefs – being won to a consistently materialist (as well as dialectical) worldview and method, which includes, as a crucial element, atheism? Or does he want us to believe that this can happen – that such a politically, and ideologically, advanced section of masses can be brought forward without ideological struggle with masses of people over these questions, without what will necessarily be an intense ideological struggle to win masses of people to rupture with religious beliefs and a religious worldview?

Communist revolution relies on the masses more deeply and correctly understanding the world around them, and acting consciously to change it. Whereas religion, even when advocated by more progressive adherents, insists, by definition, that at least in an ultimate sense the world cannot be understood by us mortals, that what governs things is ultimately the will or plan of a supernatural entity that we cannot understand. It instills in people an idealist methodology of looking to the (mythological) “Word of God” or seeking the guidance of “divine spirit” to understand and transform reality, rather than getting a deeper grasp of the nature of reality and on that basis determining plans and policies for how to transform it. People cannot be scientific communists (and communists are in their essence scientists) and believers in the supernatural at the same time!

Mike Ely’s line here is in essence the same as that of the old Communist Party, which not only united in struggle with people who were militant in opposing oppression but held to religious views – which should have been done – but often recruited such people and never really struggled with them to rupture with a religious worldview (and specific religious convictions and tenets) either before recruiting them, and in

order to recruit them on a communist basis, or after they had joined the CP. This orientation and approach of the CP was one – of a number – of key expressions of the fact the old CP was really never a communist, not ever a revolutionary, organization and in fact was, from the beginning and increasingly, characterized by economism, pragmatism, eclecticism and in essence revisionism.

Also we should look at the logic of what Mike Ely argues for with regard to religion – that these convictions are too deeply rooted and too dear to masses of people for them to rupture with them, and therefore they must have a positive value and it is wrong to really struggle with people to rupture with them – then, logically, the same principle should be applied to anything which is deeply held by different people and groups among the masses – including bourgeois-democratic illusions, a pacifist world outlook, and things such as white supremacy, male supremacy, American chauvinism...and, not least of all, anti-communism! The point is not that Mike Ely has explicitly upheld these things – or explicitly argued that they should not be struggled against – but that the ways of thinking and principles involved in what he does argue, with regard to religion, logically apply to all these other strongly held views of significant sections of masses of people who, again, must be won to rupture with these backward, and indeed in some cases outright reactionary, views.

Mike Ely states, “The Christian fervor by many African American people over the last two hundred years is rooted not mainly in the imposition of ‘false consciousness’ from without, but in a deep need for ecstatic relief and mutual consolation in a horrific world.” [Letter 5]

First, yet another example of eclectics. Do the masses of Black people need “ecstatic relief” or do they need emancipation from their horrific oppression through communist revolution? What actual relief has “Christian fervor” ever objectively provided – from slavery, from lynching, from the constant terror of the KKK and Jim Crow, from the demonization, criminalization and incarceration of Black youth? It has been nothing but a salve when what is most desperately needed is revolution and getting rid of this whole goddamn system with its endemic white supremacy and legacy of slavery interwoven in the fabric of this society, in its class relations, in its production relations, in its social relations and in its ideas. As a so-called communist, Mike Ely should be ashamed of advocating salves when what is needed is radical surgery to excise the cancer, the paltry consolation of religion instead of revolution.

The problem with Mike Ely and his Nine Letters, as we have come to recognize so clearly, is that he is truly stuck in this “horrific world,” and within this framework and context he elevates the “deep need for ecstatic relief and mutual consolation” above what is, in fact, the principal role of religion today in relation to getting rid of this whole goddamn system and the horrific world it spawns – that of a shackle and a weight on the masses of people. The plain and simple truth is that revolution and emancipation require a scientific approach to the world, knowing and changing reality, and not being caught in a religious worldview that keeps the fundamental truth obscured that nothing but revolution and communism is what is needed.

Mike Ely states, “Surely we have to understand the historic *institutional* role of Black churches, as economic support, as a political voice for a voiceless community, and even as the wellspring of world-changing music. Yes, those churches have been a force for accommodation and even reactionary purposes. But how can we evaluate all this if we don’t understand that religion (including the Black church) has had progressive and even revolutionary currents *all* through history.” [Letter 5]

The Black church has had a very contradictory political role, but the defining feature has been steering clear of, and in fact opposing revolutionary currents. As Avakian comments in *Away With All Gods!*, “[the role of the Black Church and the Black clergy] has involved negotiating with the slavemasters (and the white supremacist authorities who have exercised power after slavery was ended) to try and bring about some improvement in the conditions of people – but always doing so on a basis that would keep things from getting out of hand in a way that would fundamentally threaten the interests of the oppressors; always waging the struggle, or seeking to confine struggle that breaks out, within a form that wouldn’t

fundamentally challenge the oppressive relations. Time and again, especially when tension would mount and the anger of the masses would threaten to boil over, the preachers would go to the oppressors and say, in effect: ‘If you don’t give me something to go back to the people with, I won’t have any way to keep things from exploding.’” [p. 146]

And he goes on to describe the role played by Martin Luther King in the ’60s, including that “when it came down to it, when the anger of the masses did erupt out of the confines that were acceptable to the powers-that-be, King joined in the chorus calling for the government to send in the army to forcibly put down urban mass rebellion. This is the stand King took in the context of the extremely powerful urban rebellion in Detroit in the summer of 1967...” [p. 146-147] But this role that King played is well-known to Mike Ely, even though he refuses to discuss it – the better to obscure what the actual defining role of the Black church has been when the class struggle has sharpened up.

Mike Ely states, “The RCP has recently promoted the observation that ‘The Bible Belt is the lynching belt’ – to suggest that violent racism is one of fundamentalist Christianity’s bedrock ‘traditional values.’ But this approach lacks a sense of both history and dialectics: Christianity of the southern Bible Belt is not *just* the religion of the lynch mob – but *also* of the lynched. This is because the Bible Belt *and* the lynching belt is centered on the Black Belt – the former plantation areas of the deep South (what Black people called ‘the soil of our suffering’), a place where *two* distinct nations and national cultures cohabited in gruesome ways. Christianity there *includes* the African American churches.” [Letter 5]

This is an astounding example of eclectics which results in upholding and defending the very ideas that hold people in chains. Is Mike Ely really that obtuse that he can’t grasp what is essential – that what is dominant in the southern Bible Belt is the Christian Bible which has been a cornerstone of the “southern way of life” of white supremacy which first in slavery, then in the period of Jim Crow segregation, produced the lynchings and all the other horrendous crimes against Black people? Does he not see that this was only made worse by the fact that those who were the victims of this were, and still are, tied to that same reactionary system of beliefs?

Mike Ely states, “There is little appreciation of the complexity, sophistication and diversity of what people actually believe. And quite frankly there is little respect for the people and little real understanding of *why* many believe – or why some don’t.” [Letter 5]

In fact, we have a full sense of why many believe. But we also understand that gods do not exist, and continuing to hold onto faith in non-existent gods, not confronting, understanding and transforming reality as it actually is, will not make communist revolution. For Black people especially, religion is a slave mentality, in essence nothing but bowing down to an oppressive master. And this is the truth, whether people want to accept it or not.

In terms of “respect for the people,” what greater respect can one have than telling the truth – about what it will take for emancipation. Respecting people enough to tell the truth – and not the utter condescension of a so-called communist like Mike Ely. Quoting Avakian from *Away With All Gods!* – and in this instance, it is worth quoting in some detail, because it captures the crux of the disagreement: “[I]t is a form of contempt for the masses of people to think that they can’t be challenged with the truth and can’t come to embrace the truth and wield it to emancipate themselves and to emancipate all humanity. When you say that people are being indoctrinated with, and are even taking up, a slavish mentality, you are not saying it is their fault, or that this is something they can’t change. You are calling on them and challenging them to get rid of this, to cast it off – to rise to what they are actually capable of – and you are bringing to them an understanding of why they are *really* in the situation they are in today and *what is the way out* of this. But you can’t do that without challenging this mentality. And you can’t do it while being apologetic about challenging this mentality.” [p. 153]

LIVING IN THE HOUSE OF TONY SOPRANO

One of the most foundational principles of Marxism, which Mike Ely barely pays lip service to in his *Nine Letters*, is internationalism. Lenin spoke of the duty of all communists in imperialist countries to work for the defeat of one's own bourgeoisie and to lead the masses to rupture out of the framework of support for the nation. In this context, the importance of "Enriched What Is To Be Done-ism" takes on even more profound meaning, particularly inside the most powerful imperialist country in the world where the "spontaneity" of the masses is not just bourgeois in the sense of being non-revolutionary, reformist, etc., but in large measure it is patriotic and pro-imperialist.¹⁹

Avakian uses the example of "Living in the House of Tony Soprano" to make the point that most people in the U.S. have overall conditions of life significantly better than most of the rest of the world, and are somewhat aware of the fact that this standard of living has a lot to do with the crimes of the rulers around the world and the extreme parasitism of imperialism, an international food-chain, which the U.S. sits atop. But like Tony Soprano's family, people within the U.S. don't want to look too closely at this or confront this reality and act on that responsibility, because that would make their "way of life" very uncomfortable. And beyond this, Avakian talks about people who are consciously opposed to the U.S. war crimes, but who at a certain point in the struggle against the "War on Terrorism" gave up because it was proving too difficult and perhaps too dangerous. While appreciating the importance of the struggle that has been waged, and the real difficulties that it ran up against, Avakian nonetheless makes the point, in relation to all this, that "Refusal to Resist Crimes Against Humanity Is Itself a Crime."²⁰

This stand provoked horrified howls from Mike Ely – how wrong to criticize, and struggle with, the masses for objectively standing by while crimes are being committed in their midst, and in their name.

In this context, let's examine Mike Ely's (almost gleeful) assessment that the October 5, 2006 demonstrations called by World Can't Wait were, in his opinion, "spectacularly unsuccessful" – and his closely related criticism of Bob Avakian for "blaming the masses" for that "failure."

First, we have to say that by any measure, this assertion that October 5th was "spectacularly unsuccessful" shows Mike Ely to be spectacularly out of touch with the actual contradictions and needs of the moment. Clearly the numbers fell far short of what was called for and needed. But what of the thousands of people who were desperately searching for some way to take a stand against the war and the whole Bush program, who without the October 5th protests would have found no other avenue to make their voices collectively heard? And what does Mike Ely have to say about whether the situation would now be better, or worse, if WCW had not come into being and set out to achieve what is embodied in its "Call"? And is there not still an urgent need to fight to divert the deep anger of millions at the war, torture, and attacks on fundamental rights away from their striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, in this case especially the Democratic Party, enabling the masses to act in a way that does genuinely oppose these horrors?

Mike Ely quotes Avakian writing: "Now as Maoists, we're not supposed to blame the masses when things don't go well. But goddamnit – I want to blame the masses a little bit! Not strategically. Ultimately it is our responsibility – it is the responsibility of those who do understand the urgent need for massive opposition and political resistance to this whole course that the Bush regime is driving things on. But in line with, and

19. An important recent example of actually going against a massive wave of spontaneous patriotism and pro-imperialism was the editorial which the *Revolutionary Worker* issued in the wake of the 9/11 attacks: "WANTED: A POWERFUL ANTIWAR MOVEMENT" (Dec. 2, 2001). This call was issued in the face of the "conventional wisdom" that it would be too difficult to go up against these sentiments and challenge people to oppose U.S. aggression around the world just at the time when the U.S. itself had come under attack. And as Mike Ely well knows, the RCP went on to join with others to initiate the Statement of Conscience and the Not In Our Name movement.

20. See *revcom.us*, issue #108, November 11, 2007

as a part of that responsibility, terms have to be presented sharply to people. Someone made the point that we should say to those people who knew about October 5 and who said they agreed with its basic stance and aims but did not come out that day: ‘Shame on you if you sat on your ass on October 5! If you knew about it or had a basis to know about it and you did not make use of this vehicle and help make this vehicle as powerful as possible — shame on you!’” [BFAW cited in Letter 3]

By now the discerning reader may be asking him or herself what Mike Ely is leaving out. And sure enough, it is the very next paragraph which puts all this in context: “Now, if that’s all we say, it won’t get very far – and it wouldn’t be fundamentally correct. But there is an element where this has to be joined with people. It is a truth, which people do have to be confronted with, that if in the name of avoiding upheaval and chaos, and in the name of trying to stay safe – even in the sense of staying within a political process and political confines that you are more familiar and comfortable with, yet this process leads to terrible things, one after another – if on that basis you don’t join in the kind of massive outpouring of resistance that is called for, and if you don’t contribute to that – then yes, you are complicit. The ad that World Can’t Wait put in the *New York Times* on October 4 was very right in its basic stance, as expressed in the headline of that ad: ‘Silence + Torture = Complicity.’ People have to be confronted with this.” [BFAW]

Mike Ely is positively indignant about this. He says:

“There is complicity and corruption within an imperialist superpower. But blaming, shaming and literally cursing the masses is wrong – both in principle *and* in this particular case. (And it is wrong with or without a caveat like ‘Ultimately it is our responsibility.’)” [Letter 3]

These statements from Mike Ely speak loud and clear to his accommodation with the extreme parasitism that characterizes the U.S. today – and his refusal to struggle sharply with the ideological effects of this parasitism on the masses.

To Mike Ely and frankly anyone who is drawn to his argument, we have to pose these questions:

1. Should we struggle sharply with the masses who would rather line up for the latest trinkets (iPhones) all night than protest torture going on at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo (and renditions in unknown places)?
2. Should we struggle sharply with youth who would rather spend time in the shopping mall – or on the Internet – than protest the stripping away of habeas corpus and other fundamental rights?

On one hand, to deny that this is like living in the house of Tony Soprano is just idiotic – and instrumentalist. But to be indignant at this very thought of the need to struggle sharply with the masses on this question betrays an imperialist chauvinism that is nauseating.

History is full of examples, from Nazi Germany to the Algerian War in France, where millions stood by in the face of horrors being committed in their name despite the recognition by some within those societies of the need for people to act in opposition in ways that could bring about a whole different trajectory in society. In fact it is the responsibility of the vanguard both to struggle sharply with the masses to recognize and act in their own fundamental interests in opposition to the interests of the imperialist rulers and to provide leadership so that the masses can act in a way that advances things and creates more favorable terrain for re-polarizing society for revolution.

It is particularly heinous at this point in history to gloat and bray, as Mike Ely does, about the lack of success in mobilizing large numbers of masses to oppose the crimes of the U.S. today being committed by their government, and it is beneath contempt to use that opportunistically to try to make the case that the only force in this country today that has consistently fought to do that – and to do that from a thoroughly revolutionary and internationalist outlook – has not yet succeeded in this and should, according to Mike Ely, at least, therefore be opposed.

In fact, nowhere in the Nine Letters do we find any comprehension of the responsibility of the vanguard to go up against and challenge “the spontaneous striving of the masses to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie,” to wage determined struggle for the masses to rupture beyond the ways in which the ruling class shapes and sets the terms of their thinking and political activity. And this refusal to wage ideological struggle with the masses to recognize and act in their historic interests, this trimming of the activity of the vanguard to where the masses are at, is a script we’ve seen before in history with horrible consequences. In the lead-up to World War 1 when communist parties throughout Europe grouped around the Second International refused to stand up to the wave of patriotic sentiment which their governments stirred up to rally the masses in defence of their own “fatherland,” the result was the capitulation of the majority of the parties just at a time when revolutionary opportunities could have been wrenched from the upheaval brought about by the world war. In *The Collapse of the Second International*, Lenin drew the links between a whole history of economism and tailing behind the spontaneous thinking of the masses – between that and the self-justification by the parties for betraying the fundamental interests of the masses. All of this was done in the name of the masses, and being sensitive to their patriotic sentiments. When Lenin opposed this, he was accused of being out of touch with reality, dogmatic and ultra-left.

The example of the CPUSA in this country is also very illustrative on this front. If the criteria is getting masses around your banner, with no regard to the content of that, then by that token, the CPUSA in the 1930s would have to be said to have had the most advanced revolutionary practice ever – even though their “success” was based on convincing the masses that Franklin Roosevelt was someone they should follow, and even though the “revolutionary practice” was all cast in the framework of America, tailing behind patriotism, reaching its height with “Communism as 20th Century Americanism” (a formulation which was later criticized but never fully ruptured from by the CP). And this, again, was at a time when the imperialist system faced huge cracks and crises with tremendous potential for revolutionary openings for seizure of power and making revolution.

Again and again when the necessity and potential for revolutionary advance has been sacrificed on the altar of “let’s get real,” or as Lenin characterized it, “what is desirable is what is possible, and what is possible is what is happening now,” horrendous crimes have been committed, paid for in blood and tremendous setbacks for the cause of getting to the future communist society that humanity needs.

ONCE AGAIN – GETTING A FOLLOWING FOR WHAT?

To return to where we began – Mike Ely’s charge: “The RCP’s current path and methods have not worked and will not work” – we again have to say that one’s criteria for what “works” depends on what one is trying to accomplish.

Here is another way to look sharply at Mike Ely’s criteria: while communist revolution is actually the only way forward for humanity and corresponds to the long-term interests of the great majority of people, only a tiny minority of people understand this today and there are currently no socialist countries. Now if we were to approach this contradiction in the Mike Ely spirit and logic of pragmatism,²¹ we would have to conclude that Communism “has not worked and will not work.” What about the “Gang of Four” in China, upholding the revolutionary legacy and direction of Mao in the face of capitalist-roaders like Deng Xiaoping – since the “gang of four” lost, and then those who had pulled off the revisionist coup could (surprise, surprise!) mobilize larger numbers of masses to “repudiate the gang of four,” this had to mean that the “gang of four” were wrong and the revisionists were correct. Correct about what – and aiming for what?

If it is simply a question of “numbers” – of getting a following, regardless of on what basis, then there are many ways to do that which are far easier, particularly in today’s situation, than working to bring revolution

21. Pragmatism is “the notion that, even in the short run, what prevails is true and good, and what suffers losses is flawed and bankrupt” – from *Away With All Gods!* Insight Press, 2008, p. 109

and communism to people and win them to that. But the point is precisely that it is revolution and communism that the masses of people need – in this country as well as throughout the world – and, because that is true, there is the need to continue to wrestle with how to break through on what is now a very great contradiction between that objective need of the masses and where most of the masses, not just in this country but in the world, are at, and what, in the short term and through some powerful “spontaneity,” they are being pulled toward.

ON PHILOSOPHY AND EPISTEMOLOGY – AWASH IN PRAGMATISM, EMPIRICISM AND RELATIVISM

For someone who presents himself as a veteran communist, capable of providing great and creative new insights into the communist project, Mike Ely exhibits a stunning lack of Marxist theory in these Nine Letters. We hear a great deal about practice, and a constant refrain against dogmatism.²²

The entire philosophical approach of Mike Ely and his Nine Letters is a rejection of dialectical materialism – the science and philosophy of communism – and the embrace and application of pragmatism, empiricism, and relativism. These philosophies and epistemologies constitute the entire framework of the Nine Letters, and are starkly manifest in Letter #4, particularly his approach to the relationship between theory and practice, to truth, and in his objections to the new synthesis. Let’s excavate this philosophical package, and then identify why it is mutually reinforcing of a political program of economism and revisionism.

Jumping right in:

Mike Ely asserts: “It defies the insights of materialist dialectics (and of communist epistemology) to think anyone can make an overarching new ‘re-envisioning’ solely by mulling over the bones of past revolutions, or that the nagging world historic problems of socialist transition can be pre-solved in some definitive and decisive way.” In other words, he insists that a new synthesis cannot be forged out of a summation of past socialist experiences, and that these theoretical breakthroughs cannot “run ahead of” and guide future practice.

No. It defies the “insights” of pragmatism and empiricism, not materialist dialectics or communist epistemology. Let’s sort out the correct relationship between theory and practice.

First we have to state that Ely’s language and phraseology here betray his true sentiments and his ideological outlook. What he derisively dismisses as “the bones of past revolutions” are the history and legacy of incredible achievements, the experience and social practice of hundreds of millions in humanity’s first attempts at building socialist societies free of exploitation and oppression – with their strengths and their shortcomings, their epics of tremendous heroism and sacrifice, and yes, of painful defeat as well – but not “the death of communism” or the “end of history.” These are not ghastly skeletons to turn away from

22. Mike Ely peppers the Nine Letters with charges of “dogmatism” in the RCP. Now on one level it has to be said that (other than his spirited defense of and fawning on the masses’ religious convictions which the RCP is too “dogmatic” to appreciate) he never clarifies what he means by this term. We have come to believe that for Mike Ely, the term “dogmatism” serves as a placeholder for communism and its cardinal principles, and struggling for communism in an all-round way. For an anarchist who disagrees with vanguard parties, perhaps “dogmatism” is the Party’s insistence on having leadership at all. For those influenced by identity politics or nationalism, the RCP’s “dogmatism” can be its orientation that all of us must reach beyond our own direct experience with oppression and embrace the struggle to emancipate all of humanity. For those hankering for a situation like back in the ’30s when communists were the backbone of the U.S. trade union movement and would lead demonstrations of tens or even hundreds of thousands of workers while these “communists” waved the American flag, then “dogmatism” is perhaps the RCP’s rupture with economism, its internationalism which “alienates” many of the organized workers, or its emphasis on unfolding resistance out of revolution and not the other way around. Mike Ely writes in such a way that adherents of any of these mutually contradictory trends could feel welcomed into his big umbrella, his very “presumptuous work.”

as Ely's language conveys and evokes, not pasts best left dead, but principally positive experiences to be fundamentally built on and learnt from, so that we can do much better the next time around. In the case of Mike Ely and his Nine Letters, these are just "bones" to pay perhaps some homage to – with Lenin and Mao at best reduced to religious icons – and then cast aside in the name of moving forward into the 21st century.

Also it must be pointed out that the new synthesis – its philosophy, its re-envisioned socialism and communism, its advanced understanding and conception of internationalism, and its strategic conception of making revolution in the U.S. – was not forged solely out of a summation of past socialist experiences, but out of a rich and multi-dimensional assemblage which included summation of the vast social practice of the international communist movement. This has been done as part of leading the revolutionary vanguard in the U.S. and forging the theory of making revolution in the U.S., and in re-forging the international communist movement with others – along with learning from and drawing from those outside the communist movement, synthesizing what is true and what is not.²³

Mike Ely's position reflects a lack of appreciation – or a serious under-appreciation – of the fact that, while in a fundamental and ultimate way, practice, in a broad not narrow sense, is the point of origin and point of verification of theory; and while important elements of theory can be drawn from the summation of one's own practice – providing this itself is not done in a narrow and empiricist way but instead through the application of dialectical materialism – theory can be, and must be, drawn from practice much more broadly (and drawn from what is, for the particular person or group, indirect experience: the direct experience of others, or in any case phenomena one is not directly experiencing). Theory, drawn from experience – in this broad and ultimate sense – can, and in certain ways must, "run ahead" of and anticipate (new) practice. This, again, is something that applies in all fields – and it is certainly no less true, or important, in terms of communism and the communist movement than in any other sphere.

As a very relevant "thought experiment," let's apply Mike Ely's approach to how the science of Marxism developed and see where this leads us:

Let's start at the very origins of Marxism as a science, of both understanding the underlying dynamics of society, and of emancipating humanity – truly a revolution in the world of philosophy and ideas. It is true that Marx and Engels were deeply involved and in touch with the revolutionary struggles of the day, but the principal aspect of Marx is that he spent a decade in the Reading Room of the British Library studying, synthesizing and writing the science and philosophy of Marxism, drawing on sources from Hegel to Darwin. What went into this emerged from a very complex, multi-faceted engagement of humans with

23. The following is an encapsulation of the new synthesis drawn from MREH Part 1: "This new synthesis involves a recasting and recombining of the positive aspects of the experience so far of the communist movement and of socialist society, while learning from the negative aspects of this experience, in the philosophical and ideological as well as the political dimensions, so as to have a more deeply and firmly rooted scientific orientation, method and approach with regard not only to making revolution and seizing power but then, yes, to meeting the material requirements of society and the needs of the masses of people, in an increasingly expanding way, in socialist society – overcoming the deep scars of the past and continuing the revolutionary transformation of society, while at the same time actively supporting the world revolutionary struggle and acting on the recognition that the world arena and the world struggle are most fundamental and important, in an overall sense – *together with* opening up qualitatively more space to give expression to the intellectual and cultural needs of the people, broadly understood, and enabling a more diverse and rich process of exploration and experimentation in the realms of science, art and culture, and intellectual life overall, with increasing scope for the contention of different ideas and schools of thought and for individual initiative and creativity and protection of individual rights, including space for individuals to interact in 'civil society' independently of the state – all within an overall cooperative and collective framework and at the same time as state power is maintained and further developed as a *revolutionary* state power serving the interests of the proletarian revolution, in the particular country and worldwide, with this state being the leading and central element in the economy and in the overall direction of society, while the state itself is being continually transformed into something radically different from all previous states, as a crucial part of the advance toward the eventual abolition of the state with the achievement of communism on a world scale." From MREH Part 1.

reality, of social practice over millennia, and not some immediate direct practice. These theoretical abstractions from a vast range of human experience pointed to the need and possibility of communism – in advance of any successful revolution leading to the dictatorship of the proletariat, to say nothing of the final achievement of communism.

In 1852, Marx wrote to Weydemeyer, “As to myself, no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society, nor yet the struggle between them. Long before me, bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this struggle of the classes, and bourgeois economists the economic anatomy of the classes. What I did that was new was to prove: 1) that the existence of the classes is only bound up with particular historical phases in the development of production; 2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; 3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society.”

This was nearly two decades before the Paris Commune. The gall of Marx, to assert these theories principally before there was any practice to verify them. According to Mike Ely, one would have to conclude that Marx defied the laws of materialist dialectics and communist epistemology.

Then, what was Marx doing in summing up the lessons of the Paris Commune? He neither led the Commune nor did he wait until he had led a successful socialist revolution before attempting to draw lessons from the Commune, which could then be applied precisely in the struggle to bring about a successful socialist revolution, beginning with the seizure and consolidation of political power, the DOP. And had Marx acted in that way – refusing to sum up crucial historical experience, such as the Paris Commune, and to draw crucial lessons from that experience – the struggle for socialism, and ultimately communism, would have been that much the weaker, not the stronger, for this “lack of arrogance” on the part of Marx!

Marxism at its inception would not be considered to be true, or, at best, would be considered remarkably tentative according to Mike Ely’s conception of how theory originates and becomes recognized as true. Imagine what a breakthrough Marxism was, and then, as a thought experiment, imagine how Mike Ely’s methodology and conception of theory and truth would treat this new and revolutionary theory of Marxism.

Let’s take Lenin. On one hand, Lenin did not treat Marx’s theories, and the need for revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat, as just tentative theoretical suggestions, but rather as something true to be acted upon and realized in reality. Nor did Lenin refuse to sum up previous historical experience – both of the proletariat and its revolutionary struggles and experience more broadly – before he led a successful socialist revolution; and had he adopted such a philistine empiricist approach, he undoubtedly would not have been able to lead such a successful socialist revolution. Lenin concentrated in *What Is To Be Done?* the need for a vanguard party that would lead in bringing the understanding, science and ideology of Marxism to the proletariat from outside of the spontaneous struggles, and based his leadership and political program on new theories that clearly “ran ahead” of and guided practice.

And the same applies to Mao. Mike Ely says: “It is a historical fact that this assertion of a new synthesis [Mao Tsetung Thought] came after Mao had actually started to lead millions on a new road toward liberation, after he was actually leading both an army and expanding liberated zones in the midst of revolutionary war. Mao’s theoretical innovations were worked out and tested in that living practice of making a revolution.” [Letter 8]

But the truth is that long before the final victory of the new-democratic revolution – and in fact as a decisive part of leading that revolution – Mao drew lessons from previous revolutionary struggles, of the proletariat and other classes, as well as experience much more broadly. In fact, to wage the revolutionary strategy of protracted people’s war, Mao had to wage fierce struggle in the realm of theory and line with existent and dominant thinking in the international communist movement and Chinese Communist Party. Nor is it true that Mao drew lessons about socialism, and in particular the experience of the Soviet Union, only after the

Chinese revolution he led had entered the socialist stage. It is true that, on the basis of rich (if still, in a historical sense, beginning and limited) experience of socialism in China, Mao was able to further develop and qualitatively enrich the theory of socialist revolution, and in particular the continuation of the revolution under the DOP; but had he waited until he had accumulated this particular, direct experience of socialism to draw conclusions and formulate theory about socialism, he too would not have been able to lead the revolution, even in its new-democratic stage (or at least he would not have been able to lead it to victory in that stage), let alone in the socialist stage.

According to Mike Ely, one would have to conclude that Lenin and Mao also “defied the laws of materialist dialectics and communist epistemology.” Their gall!

Without the theory and vision of a radically different world that “runs ahead of” and guides practice, and everything we do to get there, Mike Ely and his Nine Letters are doomed to be stuck in “this awful capitalist present,” for leading the masses in making revolution relies on a complex dialectic of the “push” of the horrors of this society, and the “pull” of a radically different world that is visionary and viable. Mike Ely and his Nine Letters offer no such vision.

TRUTH...A “PAINFULLY TENUOUS” LINK TO REALITY?

This pragmatic and empiricist line on theory/practice is intertwined with a relativist epistemology. Let’s examine this.

Mike Ely charges that Avakian “deliberately downplays all the ways *relative* truth divides into two – into both truth *and falsehood*,” and then asserts, “The relationships between our relative truths and reality are dynamic, contradictory and often painfully tenuous.” [Letter 4]

The context and rationale for this charge in the Nine Letters is that Avakian, after quoting Mao’s *On Practice* on relative truth,²⁴ adds: “It is relative truth, but it *is truth*” and according to Mike Ely, this “addition here pooh-poohs Mao’s point.”

First, as we have come to recognize so often, Mike Ely excerpts the Avakian quote in a way to suit his argument. The full quote is: “It is relative truth, but it is truth. *Such are the dialectics of the matter* [emphasis added]. [MREH, Part 1, “Science and scientific truths”]

Mike Ely is essentially claiming that Avakian absolutizes relative truth, not recognizing or downplaying the recognition that we may be wrong about particular aspects, or even about the whole thing. This is completely false, and in fact, the truth (no apologies to Mike Ely) is that Avakian has given emphasis to the question of: “How do you handle that contradiction – between mobilizing people around what you understand to be true, while at the same time having a critical attitude, and being open to the understanding that you may not be right about this or that particular, or even about big questions? That is a very difficult contradiction to handle correctly. It is something we have to sum up and learn how to do better on as well. And it’s not easy. But we have to do better.”[“Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism,” available at revcom.us] This is repeatedly addressed in Avakian’s body of work.

It is a matter of great irony that Mike Ely on one hand attempts to claim that Avakian essentially absolutizes relative truth, i.e., implying that there is no degree of relative in what we do hold to be certain at any point of time – and at the same time criticizes Avakian for breaking with established truths inherited from the international communist movement, including the erroneous notion of “class truth” (a point to which we will return).

24. “Marxists recognize that in the absolute and general process of the development of the universe, the development of each particular process is relative, and that hence, in the endless flow of absolute truth, man’s knowledge of a particular process at any given stage of development is only relative truth.”

But what exactly is Mike Ely arguing for here? First, he has a problem that Avakian asserts that relative truth is truth. Then, in seeming to refute Avakian (in reality, a distorted and incomplete version of Avakian's quote), and to take an all-sided view of relative truth – that it “divides into two” – into both truth and falsehood,” he then goes on to assert that “the relationships between our relative truths and reality are... often painfully tenuous.”

The methodology is a classical substitution of eclectics for dialectics. In the name of supposedly refuting Avakian and being all-sided, Mike Ely turns the contradiction on its head, into its opposite. His conclusion is that because, in the future, we may learn that aspects of this relative truth are false, or even the whole thing may be false, we cannot assert today with any degree of certainty that the essential aspects are true, and therefore, that the links of relative truth with reality are painfully tenuous. This undermines the fact that relative truth is truth. This is a completely relativist interpretation of relative truth.

Let's take the example of Darwin's theory of evolution, and the Marxist understanding of the relationship between the economic base of society and the superstructure of politics, culture, ideology, etc. Both are relative truths, by definition. We know that our understanding of both these theories has been deepened over time, with aspects being corrected. For example, the theory of punctuated equilibrium refutes the gradualism in Darwin's original conception of speciation, the formation of new species. Does that mean that the relationship between Darwin's theory of evolution and reality was or is “painfully tenuous”? No!

Similarly, over time, we have learnt that the relationship between the economic base and superstructure is more dialectical and complex, with the superstructure having far greater relative autonomy than first conceived and theorized by Marx and Engels. Does that mean that the essential relationship between base and superstructure, that the base is ultimately and in the final analysis determining, has a “painfully tenuous” link to reality? No!

The point is that just because these theories are relative truths and some aspects have proven to be false does not mean that they are not true, or necessarily have a “painfully tenuous” link to reality. More to the point, the essential aspects are true, and have in fact been strengthened and put on a more thoroughly scientific foundation by correcting and modifying these secondary aspects.

Mike Ely's conception is completely unscientific, and if we “bought” his definition and conception of relative truth, then science, and human knowledge for that matter, would not progress at all – for science progresses by basing ourselves on what we know to be true at any point of time, and on that epistemological basis and foundation, exploring, investigating and understanding and transforming reality further – even while interrogating this basis and foundation itself.

In fact, it is Mike Ely's re-interpretation of relative truth that completely pooh-poohs Mao's point. Some highly relevant questions are: what of the following does Mike Ely find to have a “painfully tenuous” link to reality, and would Mao agree?

- dialectical and historical materialism
- the need for revolution and seizure of state power, or as Lenin sharply proclaimed, “without state power, all is illusion”
- the need for the dictatorship of the proletariat, socialist society as transition to communism
- the continued existence of classes and class struggle under socialism

(With regard to this last point, it is incredibly revealing that Mike Ely in his Nine Letters scarcely addresses his view of socialist society, never discusses what state power in the hands of the proletariat will be good for, and scarcely mentions what communists at this time in history see as our *raison d'être*, our stated and emphatic goal, the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as a transition to communism.)

Methodologically, the Nine Letters are peppered with promotions of agnosticism, and an overall attitude of “let’s not be too certain about anything” and treating the assertion of any truths as dogmatic – a stark contrast to the communist method and approach: “to apply, as consistently and systematically as possible, scientific principles in engaging – in learning about and transforming – reality; and, as I have emphasized, this involves and requires acting on what is understood (through the application of this scientific approach) to be true, at any given time, while ‘being open to the understanding that you may not be right about this or that particular, or even about big questions.’” [MREH, Part 1]

In the political sphere, the epistemological relativism, as advocated by Mike Ely and his Nine Letters, is a recipe and a call to tail the mass movements instead of diverting them, for how could one tell with any degree of certainty that it is correct to divert them, when, after all, the relative truth of the need for revolution, the seizure of state power and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat as transition to communism, have a “painfully tenuous link” to reality? This relativist epistemology is ultimately one of the philosophical bases for the political program of “The Movement Is Everything, the Final Aim Nothing.”

Revolutionary transformation requires a robust epistemological basis, a high degree of scientifically founded certainty in understanding of problem/solution that is grasped, acted upon and deepened by conscious forces, by a revolutionary people – including that without state power, all is illusion. By Mike Ely’s criteria, and what he is arguing for, we will be paralyzed, as these are relative truths with “a tenuous link” to reality, and therefore provide little basis to act on and transform reality – especially in a radically different way. This is nothing but a call to tail spontaneity, to weasel out of radical ruptures and ultimately forsake revolution and communism altogether.

The approach of Mike Ely and his Nine Letters to theory/practice is profoundly pragmatic and empiricist, equating truth with “what works,” and reducing the origin and verification of theory solely to immediate and direct practice – and these have profound implications for his political program. Let’s examine how these philosophical approaches are linked to his economist and revisionist political program.

Let’s start with a point from Marx, paraphrased by Avakian.

“To paraphrase Marx: The fundamental question is not what the proletarians, and broadly the masses of people, may be thinking or doing at any given time but what they will be compelled to do by the contradictions and dynamics of the system. It is the underlying and driving contradictions of society, and the world, that will continue to confront the masses of people, and those who seek to lead them at any point, with necessity – not static, but dynamic and changing objective necessity – that will compel them to respond to it, in one way or another. And how they respond can be greatly influenced by those who more consciously grasp material reality and its actual motion and development. This is true in an overall sense and especially when contradictions are acutely posed. This underscores why it is so important to have a scientific, materialist and dialectical, as opposed to what amounts to a religious, or some other form of idealist (and metaphysical) outlook, method and approach.” [“Views On Socialism and Communism: A Radically New Kind of State, A Radically Different and Far Greater Vision of Freedom”]

In opposition to dialectical materialism, Mike Ely’s philosophical approaches obscure and prevent a scientific understanding of the underlying and driving contradictions of society and the world. Their reach and domain in his view do not extend beyond the surface level phenomena of the present, of “what is” and of “what works,” to any understanding of the underlying motion and development, and how reality can be transformed in accord with this. As such, “what is must of necessity be.” Another way of saying this is, what’s desirable is what is possible, and what is possible is what is going on at the present moment.

The “fundamental question” then, with a pragmatic and empiricist approach, does become what the proletarians, and broadly the masses of people, are thinking or doing at any given time – and will inevitably lead to just “tailing” the spontaneous thinking, sentiments and struggles of the masses, most of whom do

not yet have a scientific understanding of society's workings, including their own conditions, why things are the way they are and how to change them. This is a surefire recipe for being stuck in "this awful capitalist present."

Moreover, since potential for revolutionary transformations is hardly ever visible on the surface, and requires a scientific approach to reality that can identify underlying contradictions that, if understood correctly applying dialectical materialism and acted upon that basis by conscious forces, could lead to radical fissures and revolutionary openings, Mike Ely's epistemology and philosophy will inevitably lead to being blind to possibilities of radical ruptures, of revolutionary transformations, and ultimately to accepting the status quo. This was part of Lenin's breakthrough that led to the Russian revolution – and deeply informs how we need to understand and approach the current objective situation.

ALL TRUTHS CAN HELP US GET TO COMMUNISM

Mike Ely states, "Step into a room full of geologists or working philosophers, and announce 'Our leader Bob Avakian has made a major epistemological break. He says we have to go for the truth, rather than hiding things.' Would anyone be impressed?" [Letter 4]

Firstly, yes. Academia, as Mike Ely well knows, is awash in relativism, and the notion that there is objective truth and that "we have to go for the truth" is highly controversial and contested in some sections. Many philosophies of science, including those of Karl Popper and others, are fundamentally relativist. So, leaving aside Mike Ely's straw-man caricature of the epistemological breakthrough, yes, there are many who have engaged with this break, and many more who potentially would be and could be engaged with this.

Further, insistence on "going for the truth" within the context of fierce political struggle is exceptional in its own right. Distorting reality to suit political objectives is far more the norm, even if done for "lofty" aims. How often have we heard organizers claim that 100,000 people attended a demonstration, rather than the 50,000 who were actually present? This is often done to further the immediate political objectives of the rally organizers, including, perhaps, the "lofty" goal of boosting the morale of progressive forces. Nevertheless, it is a distortion of reality to suit ones' political objectives – a classic example of "political truth."

But more importantly, this characterization in the Nine Letters of the epistemological rupture being solely Avakian's insistence of "getting to the truth" is not the full content of Avakian's epistemological rupture, as important as that is.

On one hand, what does distinguish this epistemology and those who do thoroughly apply the communist outlook and method from the geologists, philosophers and other intellectuals today is the consistent "going for the truth" on the basis of a systematically and comprehensively materialist and dialectical approach and method. This is different from non-communists in the sciences, etc., who may pursue the truth as a point of general orientation but do not in fact do so in a consistently and systematically materialist and dialectical way, even if they may apply materialism and dialectics in a "spontaneous" and partial way. The reason this matters is because 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.

Beyond this, the heart of Bob Avakian's epistemological insight is the identification of, and the insistence on, the fundamental link between consistently pursuing the truth and the struggle for communism. This recognizes the importance of insisting on pursuing truth in this way – unfettered by narrow, pragmatic and instrumentalist considerations of what seems most convenient at the time, or what appears to be more in line with particular and immediate objectives of communists, of pursuing the truth by applying the scientific outlook and method of dialectical materialism in the most sweeping, comprehensive, and consistent way in order to confront reality as it actually is and, on that basis, transform it in a revolutionary

way toward the goal of communism: this is radically new and represents a key part of the richness of the new synthesis being brought forward by Bob Avakian. This is the full meaning of what is concentrated in the statement that: “Everything that is actually true is good for the proletariat, all truths can help us get to communism.”

One can contrast this statement with “Everything that is in the interests of the proletariat and will help us get to communism is true.” This latter viewpoint – with its pragmatic and instrumentalist content and approach – has, to far too great a degree, held sway in the history of the international communist movement – and, in fact, it is the opposite of what is concentrated in the above statement by Avakian. This is a key part of the radical rupture that his method and approach embodies and of the richness of the epistemology he has been bringing forward and fighting for communists to take up.

Yes, the goal and method of communism correspond to reality, and communist philosophy and methodology is the most comprehensive and thoroughgoing method to get at the truth. But it is not the only method (other people using other methods can discover truths), and it is certainly not true that those who purport to use it always arrive at truths. At the same time, communism does represent the interests of a particular class – but that does not mean that everything that a communist representing that class, or that someone whose social origin is proletarian, says is therefore true.

Quoting Mike Ely, “An article from *Peking Review*’s revolutionary days writes, ‘Truth has a class character. There have never been truths commonly regarded as “indisputable” by all classes in the field of social science.’ Why is that wrong?” Quoting Mike Ely again, “Is Lenin so wrong when he writes, ‘It is one of our basic tasks to contrapose our own truth to bourgeois “truth,” and win its recognition.’” [Letter 4]

Yes, Mike Ely, the above statements are, in fact, wrong. Of course, there is fierce class struggle over getting to truth and what is accepted as truth, especially, but not only, in the social sciences. This becomes concentrated sharply in questions that have profound implications for how people understand society, and alternate models for how society can be organized. However, the existence of fierce class struggle over what is accepted as truth does not imply that truth itself has a class character, depending on what class interest is deemed to be served by that truth, or frankly based on what class the person who asserts it belongs to. This constitutes an inverse and incorrect logical leap. Truth itself is objective, and should be assessed by whether it corresponds to objective reality, as can be known and understood in the most scientific and materialist way.

To come at this again with a familiar example, what about Mao’s statement on the existence of classes and the need for continuing class struggle in socialist society, especially against the new bourgeoisie arising out of the material contradictions of socialist society, and often concentrated in its ruling institutions, including the communist party in power. How is this “proletarian truth” untrue for the bourgeoisie? It is in fact objectively true for them as well – even though it does not necessarily benefit their fundamental interests for this truth to be discovered, applied, and acted on – and in fact, this was bitterly opposed, suppressed and distorted by the bourgeoisie in the party and the world-wide bourgeoisie today. That does not make it objectively true for the proletariat and objectively false for the bourgeoisie.

Of course, it is true that the bourgeoisie consistently distorts reality to suit its objectives, serving bourgeois interests. But these distortions of reality are objectively not truths – i.e., they do not correspond to objective reality in the most scientific and materialist sense. Rather, they are instrumentalist distortions of reality that serve bourgeois class interests. Unfortunately, our class has at times also fallen into comparable errors of instrumentalist distortions of reality, even if to serve loftier goals – and breaking with these errors is a critical aspect of Avakian’s epistemology.

ENGAGING THE NEW SYNTHESIS

While these Nine Letters were issued under the umbrella title “Getting Beyond Avakian’s New Synthesis,” there is shockingly little discussion of the substance of this, beyond upholding class truth and insisting that there is no basis or good reason to project how problems in the future socialist society should be approached. In other words, the actual position of Mike Ely seems to be that it does not merit substantial engagement or refutation because there is no practice to verify it.

Well, is he right? No he is not – he is, once again, profoundly wrong.

In fact, with Bob Avakian’s new synthesis, there’s a few things that can be tested and validated, or not, against the “evidence” of practice viewed in the historic and sweeping sense and with the method, stand and viewpoint noted above of Marx, Lenin and Mao.

First, there’s the question of the philosophical and methodological questions. People can, with study, determine whether Avakian has correctly pinpointed and analyzed the problems of philosophical method in the communist movement; whether he has correctly shown the implications of those problems in regard to the ways in which those errors played out in specific policies; and whether the method that he has developed does in fact more correspond to the world as it truly is and provide a better basis to deepen our understanding of the objective world and put it on a more correct and more complete foundation.

Second, in regard to the history of the socialist countries: does Avakian’s criticism and analysis correctly reflect and explain the essence of the socialist experience? Is this experience in fact principally something to be upheld, and are the principles that he, Avakian, has pinpointed as essential the things that actually ARE essential to the transition to communism? And are the shortcomings he has pointed to the main and essential shortcomings in fact? Does the overall model of “solid core with a lot of elasticity” provide the essential direction that could overcome these shortcomings in a future socialist society – even as we know that “practice will be richer” than theory, and differ in many respects?

Clearly there is enough practice for people to debate this out– and people *should* engage these questions on this kind of level. For Mike Ely to huff and puff and label his screed “Getting Beyond Avakian’s New Synthesis” and then fail to engage it is either obtuseness, opportunism or the strange mixture of the two that seems to distinguish Mr. Ely.

Mike Ely criticizes Avakian, saying, “Take the theoretical speculation made on the future transition to communism, and compare it to the glaring *poverty* of theoretical work that has been devoted to many other core problems of the *specific* revolution we need to take responsibility for: on the struggle to create a revolutionary base, on deindustrialization and the situation of African American people, on the entwining of the revolutionary processes across North America, and a dozen other ignored questions. Why does a movement that emerged from the 1960s have such a muffled voice when it comes to society’s raging controversies over ecology and sexuality?” [Letter 4]

To anyone who has been paying attention, this is simply ludicrous! This is, to again quote Lenin in *What Is To Be Done?*, wishing many happy returns of the day to the mourners at a funeral. Here the communist movement is at this juncture, its revolutions having been defeated, and the movement is under incessant ideological attack, and in a situation where real questions on those revolutions have to be addressed in depth, even as they are fundamentally defended – and Mike Ely not only has nothing to say about this work but aims to move the agenda!

But beyond the obvious point that communist leaders should be devoting a great deal of attention to the theory that will guide the future society we are going to – which is very related to what we do today to get

there – Bob Avakian has done a lot of significant work over several decades on all of these questions. To give merely a flavor of just some of the theoretical work that Avakian has done that speaks to “core problems of the specific revolution we need to take responsibility for”:

- why and how a communist revolution is not only necessary but possible in the U.S., and how it is in the interests of the vast majority of people here and around the world²⁵
- internationalism and making revolution in one country as a part of the world-wide struggle for communism²⁶
- the nature of the oppression of Black people and the struggle to end all oppression²⁷
- the question of democracy and can’t we do better than that²⁸
- the problems and dangers posed by religious fundamentalism here and around the world, and the role of religion overall²⁹
- the vanguard party – is it still needed and is it actually the best instrument for consistently unleashing the conscious initiative of the masses of people for transforming society, as well as the danger that such a party can become an oppressive instrument itself³⁰
- recognizing the strengths and contributions as well as limitations of the anarchist perspective³¹
- the principle of “Marxism embraces but does not replace”³²
- is there room for high ideals and dreams and “heart”³³
- methods of leadership; the method and approach of communism in opposition to various other approaches and methods such as empiricism, pragmatism, economism, workerism, apriorism, and dogmatic and stereotypical thinking and methods, including in the communist movement³⁴
- why and how a communist revolution is not only necessary but possible in the U.S., and how it is in the interests of the vast majority of people here and around the world³⁵

25. For example, “Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity” Parts 1 & 2; *7 Talks* available at bobavakian.net

26. For example, “Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism,” available at revcom.us

27. For example, “The Oppression of Black People and the Revolutionary Struggle to End All Oppression” series available at revcom.us

28. For example, *Democracy: Can’t We Do Better Than That?* Banner Press, 1986; “Democracy: More Than Ever We Can and Must Do Better Than That” in *Phony Communism Is Dead...Long Live Real Communism* Second Edition, RCP Publications, 2004; “Communism & Jeffersonian Democracy,” one of the *7 Talks* available at bobavakian.net

29. For example, *Away With All Gods! Unchaining the Mind and Radically Changing the World*, Insight Press 2008; “The Coming Civil War and Repolarization for Revolution in the Present Era” available at revcom.us

30. For example, “Reaching for the Heights and Flying Without a Safety Net” available at revcom.us

31. For example, “Marxism vs. Anarchism” available at revcom.us

32. For example, *Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy*, Insight Press, 2005

33. For example, *Marxism and the Call of the Future: Conversations on Ethics, History and Politics*, Open Court Publishing Co., 2005

34. For example, “On Proletarian Democracy and Proletarian Dictatorship—A Radically Different View of Leading Society,” available at revcom.us

35. For example, “Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity, Parts 1 & 2; “The Basis, the Goals, and the Methods of the Communist Revolution”; available at revcom.us

And this is just a very partial list! If you look at the footnotes above we have literally referenced just a few of Avakian's many works that deal with the "core problems of the specific revolution we need to take responsibility for"! For more go to bobavakian.net and revcom.us.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CULTURE OF APPRECIATION, PROMOTION AND POPULARIZATION OF BOB AVAKIAN FOR COMMUNIST REVOLUTION – COMMUNIST REVOLUTION, COMMUNIST LEADERSHIP

It should be clear by now that Mike Ely's opposition to the new synthesis of Bob Avakian comes from a whole different set of goals and objectives, and corresponding ideology and methodology that he is working toward, which have little to do with the liberating vision of a communist world and the path to achieve that. No wonder he does not appreciate and opposes the promotion and popularization of Bob Avakian as revolutionary communist leader – he is opposed to where Avakian is leading, and the whole method and approach and developments of communist theory that are concentrated in that leadership.

To quote from Chairman Avakian himself on this question, "As Lenin emphasized in *What Is To Be Done?*, one of the key tasks of communists is to *set before all their communist convictions and aims*. And this means presenting what is, at any time, *the most advanced representation* of those convictions and aims. In fundamental terms, the principles involved are the same as in all fields of scientifically-based endeavor (physics, biology, medicine, and so on): breakthroughs are very often associated with a particular individual, and to speak about the most advanced understanding at a given time would be impossible without reference to and, yes, a certain focus on, that individual – and attempting to avoid such reference and focus would be extremely artificial and wrong, and not at all helpful. So, once more, while of course there are particularities to the sphere of political (and ideological) leadership, and more specifically to *communist* leadership, with regard to anyone whose role has a significant influence (or is put forward as something which should have a significant influence), the basic question comes down to: what is the *content* of that role, and in particular the content of the body of work and the method and approach of that person, and what effect would it have, one way or another, if that were to have greater, or lesser, impact and influence?" [MREH, Part 2]

As we have pointed out, Mike Ely has not made a coherent refutation of the essential features of the actual content of Bob Avakian's work, in particular of the new synthesis that has been brought forward and put out into the world. Instead, he attempts throughout his Nine Letters to create the impression that our Party is some kind of cult whose members are kept on an info-diet worshipping a great leader. And to buttress this assertion he resorts to the opportunist method of attributing a stupid and wrong argument to the Party and then setting out to refute that.

Mike Ely first claims that an essential feature of the new synthesis brought forward by Bob Avakian is "a theory of great leaders" [Letter 1] and then later argues: "...we should not adopt any theories of a tiered humanity – with a formal insistence on the specialness of some people. We should not embrace the phrase 'cult of personality' the way Bob Avakian does in his memoir. The word 'cult' means organized worship, and worship is opposed to our social values and materialist outlook." [Letter 8]³⁶

36. Here it also needs to be pointed out that Mike Ely, with his by now familiar and tiresome opportunist method of cutting quotes off in the middle, actually distorts what Bob Avakian says about the "cult" in his memoir – *From Ike to Mao and Beyond from Mainstream America to Revolutionary Communist* – where he explains how he responded, somewhat humorously, when challenged by an interviewer about whether or not there is a "cult of the personality" around Bob Avakian, with: "I certainly hope so, we've been working very hard to create one." And then (cut off, in mid sentence by Ely) he goes on immediately to say, "this was a provocative way of getting to the real point." This whole section pp 392-394 gives a very down to earth explanation of how Bob Avakian understands his role and responsibility as a revolutionary

This quote above from Mike Ely concentrates his wild mischaracterizations of the RCP's line on Bob Avakian – and its work of building what we have characterized as a culture of appreciation, promotion, and popularization around the leadership, the body of work and the method and approach of Bob Avakian.

Mike Ely goes into an extensive refutation of the so-called “genius theory” which he falsely claims is the RCP's line on Bob Avakian. Here we see that Mike Ely's method is exactly that which Lenin criticized and ridiculed when he said: that to attribute a stupid argument to your opponent, and then to refute that stupid argument, is the method of none-too-clever people – and, in our opinion, none too principled people either. The acme of his wit is: “But there is no law of history or biology that creates a *special notch or ‘caliber’* [Emphasis added] within humanity called ‘a Lenin’ or ‘a Mao’ – as if some of us arrive stamped as .50 caliber shells and *the rest* show up as .22s or blanks.” [Letter 6]

First of all it should be noted that the notion of a special category of person (or leader) or of “genius” is entirely Mike Ely's invention – a fabrication that he has cooked up and attributes to Bob Avakian and the RCP. This is decidedly not something that Avakian and the Party have put forward, or believe – and in fact, this way of thinking is something that Avakian has consistently opposed and argued and polemicized against. In speaking of what is represented by a Mao or a Lenin or a Marx, what we are talking about is not some “innate genius” or “special essence” that they have but, above all and in essence, what they have contributed to the scientific theory of communism that represents a qualitative breakthrough in the development of that science. Why and how they were able to do this may be a matter of interest – though, again, it emphatically has nothing to do with “innate genius” or that they were some kind of “special category” of human being – but it is much less important than the objective content of what they have brought forward and what this objectively represents in relation to the revolutionary struggle for the final goal of communism throughout the world. And the same applies with regard to Avakian, what he has brought forward, as embodied in the new synthesis and related questions of theory – of political and ideological (including epistemological as well as methodological) line.

Mike Ely makes the argument that the recognition of Avakian's contributions says that he exists outside and above the collectivity of the party: “But I cannot, for the life of me, see any difference between the PCP's [Communist Party of Peru] disastrous dogma of ‘jefatura’ and the RCP's new refrains that ‘this is the new party of Bob Avakian’ and ‘appreciation of the Chair is the cardinal question.’ Can anyone point out any real difference?” [Letter 7]

First of all, before addressing the substance of this particular point it is necessary to point out that what is involved in the work of communists and the revolutionary struggles they lead are matters of profound importance for the masses of people, not only in the particular country immediately involved but indeed in the world as a whole, and anyone genuinely concerned about this will not treat this as an opportunity for speculation or a matter of “political capital.” While considerations of this nature are clearly of little or no concern to Mike Ely – who has demonstrated that he has no compunction about speculating on and seeking to gain petty advantage out of real or imagined differences among communists who are in fact engaged in serious revolutionary work and struggle in various parts of the world – the airing of differences can easily be of aid to the imperialists and reactionaries who relentlessly seek to crush and annihilate revolutionary struggles and vanguard communist forces. In this case however, given that it is has been some time since there has been a negative resolution (for the time being) of the revolutionary struggle in Peru, and given that the questions of political and ideological line that are involved are in fact of real importance, precisely in relation to the cause of communism and the advance of the struggle toward that goal, we feel it is not

leader as well as showing how shoddy Mike Ely's comparison to the genius theory actually is. In addition, we recommend reading this book to get a very clear picture of how Bob Avakian became who he is today and all the circumstances, events, people, stories and accidents that influenced his life and contributed to who he has become as well as why he has dedicated his life to the emancipation of humanity and will not be deterred in the face of the vexing problems that do need to be solved, but instead approaches this process with a relentlessly scientific method and orientation.

wrong, and could in fact be helpful, to discuss certain aspects of these differences, including those relating to the question of communist leaders.

Mike Ely's statement says (regarding the PCP's "jefatura" line and the RCP's line on leadership and Bob Avakian in particular), "...can anyone point out any real difference?" First, it is hard to know whether this statement by Mike Ely is really genuine and to be taken at face value – in which case it speaks to a remarkable ignorance and obtuseness on his part, given that he is a "veteran communist" who claims to be intimately familiar with the line of the RCP – or whether in fact what is involved is a matter of disingenuousness on Mike Ely's part, pretending not to know what he has a definite basis to know very well – that there is a very real, and decisive, difference between what the RCP is actually saying about the role of Bob Avakian and what is embodied in the PCP's line on "jefatura."

Yes, in response to Mike Ely's question, "Can anyone point out any real difference," we can point to at least two decisive differences: 1) The PCP actually argued that, although Gonzalo might be capable of making minor mistakes, he had developed to the point where it was not possible that he could make a major error that would touch on the course of the whole revolutionary struggle – and specifically that it was impossible that he could be calling for a peace accord to end the people's war in Peru when that would amount to a defeat for the revolution. For the RCP's part, not only have we never argued, or suggested, or believed, anything of the kind with regard to Bob Avakian – that he is incapable of making a major, strategic error, bearing on the whole course of the revolutionary struggle – but, as a matter of basic worldview and principle, we regard this kind of thinking, as applied to anyone, as fundamentally wrong and in fact reflective of a metaphysical and idealist, and in effect a religious, view of leadership. Indeed, one of the distinguishing features of the line of the RCP and the body of work and method and approach of Avakian in particular, is opposition to, and struggle against, this kind of religious tendency, including as this takes shape among communists – as can be readily seen by anyone who engages to any serious degree with the works of Avakian, including "Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity" (Parts 1 and 2) which have been serialized in *Revolution* newspaper and which are available (both parts) in their entirety, at revcom.us.

And 2) The "jefatura" line of the PCP actually articulated as an organizational principle that someone who had reached the stature of Gonzalo occupied a position that was in fact above the collectivity of the rest of the Party and its organizational structure – something which, again, the RCP's line not only does not agree with, and does not apply to Bob Avakian, but which once more Bob Avakian has argued and polemicized against.

Mike Ely argues that: "The style and content of Avakian's promotion, its formal assertion of specialness, is connected to the reasons his party as a whole does not hear other people and disrespects its own rank-and-file. It is rooted in errors of line." [Letter 8]

The fact is that the orientation of seeking to learn from others – even those with vastly different viewpoints and significant disagreements with us – is one of the main principles of the epistemology and the overall method and approach of Bob Avakian. And even a cursory look at Avakian's works will show very clearly that Bob Avakian not only advocates but consistently applies and "models" this principle. And, as for disrespecting the "rank and file" of the Party, this is yet another assertion that is wildly in conflict with reality, as is often the case with Mike Ely's arguments. Again, in reading Bob Avakian's works, it is clear that he repeatedly learns from and refers to things he has learned from the work of the Party, reports from comrades in various areas of work, discussions with other comrades, and so on. Once more, what is striking is the way in which Mike Ely, while not openly discarding all pretense of being a communist, actually appeals repeatedly to various anti-communist prejudices, as he does here with his rather crude invocation of the image of THE ARROGANT COMMUNIST LEADER lording it over the supposedly lowly members of his own organization.

The accusation by Mike Ely that the leadership of our Party, and Bob Avakian in particular, encourages and promotes slavishness is once again the exact opposite of the truth. The truth is that the leadership of our Party, and Bob Avakian in particular, in his writings and talks, and in his whole method and approach, actively promote an atmosphere and a culture of critical thinking and opposition to any tendency to uncritically accept any ideas, whether those of Avakian or anyone else. At the same time, as is the case with any serious revolutionary communist party, as is spelled out clearly in our Party Constitution, and as anyone who is actually a serious revolutionary and communist should well understand, we do operate on the basis of certain organizational principles that enable the whole Party to both struggle vigorously, through Party channels, over questions of ideological and political line and policy and, at the same time, to unite to carry out what, at any given time, has been determined, through those same Party channels, to be the Party's position on particular questions and its ideological and political line overall. This relation between struggling over line and uniting to carry out line (what is generally referred to as the relation between democracy and centralism within the ranks of the Party) contains very real contradictions, which can become sharp at times. These contradictions, and the correct means for handling them, so that the greatest amount of initiative and critical and creative thinking is fostered, throughout the Party (and in its influence more broadly, outside the ranks of the Party) while at the same time there is the greatest unity of will and purpose, and unity of action, on the part of the Party – all this is something to which Bob Avakian has continued to devote a great deal of attention and around which he has promoted a great deal of wrangling within the Party, while also “opening up” these questions more broadly, through his published writings and talks (see, for example, the book *Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy*, and the pamphlet “Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism”).

As Avakian says, “All notions of that kind [blind worship of leaders] are completely alien and fundamentally opposed to what we *do* believe and set out to put into practice – namely, that it is possible, and necessary, to apply a critical and revolutionary scientific outlook and method to continue learning more about reality and, in dialectical relation with that, to carry forward the struggle to radically change reality, in the direction toward communism.” [MREH, Part 2] The question that you need to be grappling with is not whether or not there will be individual leaders, because at this point of history there will be, but what kind of leadership do people need? What are the methods of leadership and where is it taking you? Does this leadership help people to increasingly consciously confront reality and respond to it, or does it further prevent people from doing that?

Mike Ely states:

“Bob Avakian wrote in 1984: ‘[T]here is also a dialectical relation – unity as well as opposition – between cult(s) of the individual around leading people and on the other hand ease of mind and liveliness, initiative, and creative, critical thinking among party members and the masses following the party. In the future communist society, this need for firmly established revolutionary authority as an “anchor” will no longer exist and would run counter to developing the critical spirit and critical thinking; it too will have to be abolished as an important part of the advance to communism. But to demand its abolition now runs counter to that advance, and to unleashing and developing that critical spirit and critical thinking.’”³⁷

“A decade later, he agrees with himself: ‘This statement (from *A Horrible End, or an End to the Horror?*) puts it right: there is unity and opposition here – between, on the one hand, authority invested or embodied in certain individuals and, on the other hand, ease of mind and liveliness, individual initiative and creativity and critical thinking among party members and the masses broadly.’”³⁸ This only gets it half-right. Meaning:

37. *A Horrible End, or an End to the Horror?*, p. 212

38. “Getting Over the Two Great Humps: Further Thoughts on Conquering the World.” Later published as “On Proletarian Democracy and Proletarian Dictatorship: A Radically Different View of Leading Society: Part 9: Individual Leaders and the Larger Interests of Society and the People,” *Revolutionary Worker* #1222, December 14, 2003, available at revcom.us

he gets it wrong. You can promote revolutionary leadership and authority *in ways* that do *not* unleash critical thinking and initiative. You can promote awe and slavishness. You can unleash a cascade of elitism and disrespect that showers down through your own organization with far-reaching consequences.” [Letter 8]

Once again we find Mike Ely substituting eclectics for the dynamics of dialectics in order to not only distort what Avakian is saying but to denigrate the critical importance of communist leadership in enabling the masses to take up a scientific understanding of the world and transform it. Let’s tease out what’s being said here.

What Avakian is discussing in *A Horrible End, or An End to the Horror?* is that there is an objectively contradictory relationship between promoting and investing authority in individual leaders, on the one hand, and unleashing critical thinking, ease of mind, and initiative on the part of others, on the other. On the one hand, the unity between the two is principal, and this is reflected in the fact that at this stage in history, when there is still a major divide in society between leadership and led, when outstanding leaders emerge who do concentrate important truth – and even more, a communist method – play their leading role in full, that actually serves to unleash the masses of people to know and understand the world more clearly and correctly and in so doing contributes to unleashing their critical thinking and initiative, diversity and so on – and thus to revolutionary advance. Should such leaders be promoted? Yes, they should, as part of promoting the most advanced theory and method. And again, this unity has been and is the overwhelmingly principal aspect of the contradiction. On the other hand, the opposition is reflected in the fact that if this contradiction is not handled correctly, promotion of individual leaders can result in a tendency toward slavishness, passivity and following leadership blindly on the part of the masses. This is harmful and causes setbacks to the revolution.

Bob Avakian has put a great deal of attention to the very real tension concentrated in this contradiction and to the correct handling of it (including speaking to it very provocatively in “Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism”), proceeding from the understanding that the principal aspect is the unity, the fact that the more leaders can enable others in the party, as well as the masses, to understand the world, the better able the party and the masses will be able to step forward and play their role, and indeed that such leadership should be cherished and defended, on the basis of a deep appreciation.

Mike Ely on the other hand sees this contradiction in flat and one-dimensional terms, seeing only the secondary aspect of the contradiction, the fact that promotion of individual leaders can give rise to slavishness and passivity and thus liquidate the very vital role that revolutionary leadership can and has to play in the whole process of revolution.

In 1995 the Central Committee of our Party issued two resolutions which provide a thorough presentation of our Party’s line and understanding of these important questions of revolutionary leadership.³⁹ Here we quote from “Some Points on the Question of Revolutionary Leadership and Individual Leaders” where it makes the point that “the fact that certain individual revolutionaries emerge as a concentration of this process [the process through which formalized division of labor, structure and leadership are forged in order to carry out revolutionary transformation] and themselves become a concentrated expression of the best qualities of revolutionary leadership – including a selfless dedication to the revolutionary cause and deep love of the masses, as well as a strong grasp of the scientific methodology needed to unleash the masses and chart the path of revolution in line with their objective interests – then the existence of such an individual leader or leaders is not something to lament but something to welcome and celebrate! It is part of the people’s strength.” By the way, Mike Ely should be very familiar with these resolutions but does not

39. See revcom.us for “1995 Leadership Resolutions On Leaders and Leadership”: “Part I: The Party Exists for No Other Reason than to Serve the Masses, to Make Revolution” and “Part II: Some Points on the Question of Revolutionary Leadership and Individual Leaders”

include them or their content in his Letters, for citing them would stand in the way of his attempts to distort the Party's line and approach on this question and instead make up his own version.

Putting Marxism itself on a far more scientific foundation, Avakian has repeatedly argued for and made the case that we are like a team of scientists, "straining to solve vexing problems – making mistakes, yes, and doing our best to learn from our mistakes, doing our best to learn from others, including those who have different outlooks and objectives than we do – approaching all this in a systematically and comprehensively scientific way." [MREH, Part 2] This is reflected in his epistemology and his method (so denigrated by Mike Ely) where he poses questions – yes, "important questions in revolutionary theory" – to be grappled with collectively and by others, urges and fights for others to do this kind of work, learns from others (witness numerous references and quotes from reports, conversations, etc.) from within and outside the party, and in sum, is the complete opposite of the leader of a religious cult, promoting blind obedience and slavishness.

The line of the RCP is that masses can and need to be brought forward as emancipators of humanity, consciously and voluntarily transforming the world and themselves in the process – this is in complete antagonism with a notion of religiosity toward leaders, or awe and slavishness.

Such notions stand in the way of the search for truth, masses increasingly gaining a scientific understanding of why things are the way they are and what is to be done about it, masses increasingly grappling with how to get to communism, grappling with "the important questions in revolutionary theory" – and through this process and with struggle, becoming communists.

The point is that Avakian has provided a new framework in which that search for truth can go on in a qualitatively more fruitful way – and it is a framework that builds upon the foundation and further develops the science of Marxism. With the new synthesis, every communist has to really confront – and bring the masses in on – the vexing problems of the revolution, the transition to communism, etc. – including the truths that make us cringe. Without doing that, where are you going?

This is precisely the rub. Mike Ely's framework and logic of economism and revisionism clash with this new synthesis – scientific communism is a burden and anathema to the road he wants to travel. Mike Ely would rather embark on and traverse this trajectory with "creative practice" that guts the soul of revolution and communism, even while he may be rationalizing and doing this in the name of and even at times with a religious-dogmatic upholding of the past, at least for the short term. Living vibrant communism and revolution – concentrated in the new synthesis – is enormously inconvenient for his economism, and this is the essence of the Nine Letters. Mike Ely will fight to the finish for the new synthesis not to be engaged – and definitely not to become a living, material and guiding force among the advanced in society – for this exposes his pathetic and puny revisionism and economism, demolishes and devastates any intellectual and theoretical justifications for his capitulationism. The new synthesis puts the question of REAL revolution and communism back on the scene with its vision of a radically different future – that is both visionary and viable.

And as for his question, "Should we accept proposals from *living* revolutionary leaders that their 'packages' of ideas and method be accepted whole, as comprehensive new overhauls of Marxism" [Letter 6] (Emphasis added) – well, the question should not be whether revolutionary leaders are living but whether what they argue for is true and contributes to the overall living science and developing synthesis of communism – which Bob Avakian's contributions clearly do. But it is definitely a very good thing that Bob Avakian *is* still living and doing the quality of communist work that he is, and everyone who yearns for revolutionary change should engage and wrangle deeply with that work, and make it available broadly, and defend his ability to keep doing it – we owe it to the people of the world.

CONCLUSION

We have focused here on the key questions of line that are concentrated in the Nine Letters and their “presumptuous work” of attacking Bob Avakian and the RCP, and their attempts to confuse the public about the line and practice of the only force in this country that is dedicated to bringing communist revolution to the masses. We have not addressed all the mischaracterizations and distortions of the Party’s line and practice, nor all the wrong thinking advocated by Mike Ely – that would take a book that no one wants to waste their time to write, or read! (We do however recommend that people dig deeply into the work of Bob Avakian, and engage with that.)

But before closing we want to reiterate that Mike Ely’s publishing of his “relative truth” of the history of the RCP – containing “part truths and part falsehoods” – is exactly the kind of unprincipled activity that we have criticized: “Anyone who is not authorized by the RCP to do so but who claims to be revealing ‘inside information’ about the RCP establishes himself or herself, by that very act, as someone who, at a minimum, is acting very irresponsibly. Beyond that, spreading gossip, rumors, and distortions about the RCP, and/or others in the communist movement, marks anyone who does so as thoroughly dishonest and highly unprincipled. The more that life unfolds, the more the opportunist character of people who do such things will be revealed.” [“Matters of Principle and Standards”]

Those of us who have not given up on revolution – and in fact people who have a commitment to principle – are, and should be, outraged by this Nine Letters project. His method in turn reflects his line, and it almost certainly won’t be long before he casts aside – as flawed or outmoded – principles such as the fact that the fundamental contradiction of capitalism/imperialism requires proletarian revolution; the Leninist understanding of the state and the need for the dictatorship of the proletariat; the need for a vanguard party; Mao’s understanding of the class struggle under socialism; the need to get beyond the narrow horizon of bourgeois right; and even the view of Marxism as the science that is needed to advance humanity toward the goal of communism. In fact even now, as we have noted, there is close to zero discussion of any of these principles in all of these Nine Letters. In opposition to that, we learn that “[with regard to] our theoretical moment: we need to discard ruthlessly, but cunningly, in order to fight under difficult conditions. We will be travelling light, without baggage and clutter from earlier modes of existence. We need to preserve precisely those implements that serve the advance, against fierce opposition, toward our end goal. We need to integrate them into a vibrant communist coherency –as we thrive on the run.” And then...”we need to take up a great new project of practice–while applying and developing our theory.” [Letter 9]

One does not have to wonder what kind of new and creative “communist coherency” will emerge on the basis of no communism!!! Or does Mike Ely get to redefine communism as whatever works, according, evidently, to his sense of “ruthlessness and cunning[!],” and discard whatever principles get in the way of immediate objectives?

No thank you!! In a moment in the history of humanity where there has emerged a great need to bring forward a new wave of proletarian revolution and for communist ideology to develop and connect, it is most fortunate that Bob Avakian took up that challenge and assumed the responsibility to bring a great deal of science to the vexing problems of how to do better – as he puts it, “a synthesis of the previous experience of socialist society and of the international communist movement more broadly, on the one hand, and of the criticisms, of various kinds and from various standpoints, of that experience, on the other hand” [MREH, Part 1] recasting and recombining all that into a new, and more scientific framework that can undergird the new stage of proletarian revolution we have now embarked on. There is plenty of work to be done, plenty of room for initiative and leading the masses to scale new heights. And the more we take this up and act like a team of scientists tackling the problems of the revolution, involving increasingly more masses in that project, the more we are liberated to go out and change the world.

Anyone who is serious about making revolution should engage with this work, and work together with our Party to bring communism and revolution out into the world, and build up the strength of revolution, together with comrades in other parts of the world.

Humanity needs revolution and communism, and humanity needs the leadership that is bringing that forward here in this country, as part of the international struggle – this needs to be made known to the masses, and ways found for the people to get in on the process of making revolution, which is what our Party is dedicated to and will continue to work for.

In response to Mike Ely and those who have taken up his opportunist project, the following words from Lenin resonate with great relevance:

“We are marching in a compact group along a precipitous and difficult path, firmly holding each other by the hand. We are surrounded on all sides by enemies, and we have to advance under their almost constant fire. We have combined voluntarily, precisely for the purpose of fighting the enemy, and not to retreat into the adjacent marsh, the inhabitants of which, from the very outset, have reproached us with having separated ourselves into an exclusive group and with having chosen the path of struggle instead of the path of conciliation. And now several among us begin to cry out: let us go into this marsh! And when we begin to shame them, they retort: how conservative you are! Are you not ashamed to deny us the liberty to invite you to take a better road! Oh, yes, gentlemen! You are free not only to invite us, but to go yourselves wherever you will, even into the marsh. In fact, we think that the marsh is your proper place, and we are prepared to render you every assistance to get there. Only let go of our hands, don't clutch at us and don't besmirch the grand word 'freedom,' for we too are 'free' to go where we please, free to fight not only against the marsh, but also against those who are turning towards the marsh!” [*What is to Be Done?*]

Suggested Readings

By Bob Avakian:

“Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity,” available at revcom.us

“Views on Socialism and Communism: A Radically New Kind Of State,
A Radically Different And Far Greater Vision Of Freedom,” available at revcom.us

“The Basis, The Goals, And The Methods Of The Communist Revolution,” available at revcom.us

“Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism,” available at revcom.us

“Bringing Forward Another Way,” available at revcom.us

Away With All Gods! Unchaining the Mind and Radically Changing the World

Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy

Phony Communism Is Dead ...Long Live Real Communism! [second edition includes Appendix:
Democracy: More Than Ever We Can and Must Do Better Than That]

From Ike to Mao and Beyond: My Journey from Mainstream America to Revolutionary Communism

Marxism and the Call of the Future: Conversations on Ethics, History, and Politics [co-authored with Bill Martin]

Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?

A Horrible End, or an End to the Horror?

Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will, available at revcom.us

Other Relevant Works:

What Is To Be Done? by Lenin, *Collected Works Vol. 5*

The State and Revolution by Lenin, *Collected Works Vol. 25*

The Collapse of the Second International by Lenin, *Collected Works Vol. 21*