

“BOOMERS” — “X, Y, Z”: THE PROBLEM IS NOT “GENERATIONS,” IT’S THE *SYSTEM*

by Bob Avakian

It is very common these days to hear things posed in terms of generations, and for generations to be pitted against each other. There are the “boomers” and later “lettered” generations (“X, Y, Z”). There is, on the part of some among these later generations, the dismissive taunt “OK Boomer,” accompanied by an indictment blaming the “boomers” for creating the messed-up world that the younger people are inheriting, including the accelerating climate crisis. And there is the tendency among some “boomers” to be dismayed, or even disgusted, by the phenomenon that younger people seem to be cynically self-absorbed, knowing (or caring) little about important history and world events, and failing to act in meaningful ways to oppose the terrible actions of those in power. So it is important to examine how “generations” relate to the very real problems and dangers people are confronting today.

Generations are real societal groupings, and particular generations do have common experiences that differ from other generations. But, first of all, generations are not “homogenous”—they are made up of different classes, nationalities (or “races”), genders, and so on. And, even more fundamentally, everything that is experienced by people, of all different generations, is shaped by the system that people live within—most of all, by the economic system (the *mode of production*) and its basic relations and dynamics, as well as the corresponding social relations (for example, racial and gender relations) and the political system and the dominant culture and ideas that reflect and enforce these economic and social relations.

With regard to the “boomers,” first of all, there is the important reality that is often not recognized (or not even known about by many) these days, and is covered over and distorted by the dominant powers and institutions:

During the 1960s, a whole generation (or a large and defining part of that generation) *broke* with American chauvinism...and, at the cost of real sacrifice, dared to stand up against the atrocities committed, here and throughout the world, by the rulers of this country, and fight for a better world.¹

And:

By 1968 and for several years after, there were large numbers of people in this country, including millions of youth from the middle class as well as masses of poor and oppressed people, who were motivated by a thoroughly justified hatred of this system and aspirations for a radically different and better world—and this reached deeply into the system’s own armed forces—even if the understanding of most was marked by revolutionary sentiment which, while righteous, was lacking in any deep and consistent scientific basis.²

Along with the understanding of the need for—and a real belief in the possibility of—bringing a radically different and better world into being, and the refusal to listen to tired-out arguments about why things have to be the way they are, there was at that time a marked break with the notion of the “self” as the most important thing in the world, a rejection of putting personal concerns and ambitions above what was going on in the larger society and world. To provide a sharp illustration of this, if anyone in those days spoke in terms like “my *career*”—a phrase so commonplace now—they were generally met with expressions of disgust (and forget about any notion of “my *brand!*”).

Of course, while this was definitely true of a “large and *defining* part of that generation,” it was not true of individuals like Donald Trump (or George W. Bush), who were never part of—and in fact were, and have

remained, violently opposed to—everything that was positive about and had overwhelming initiative among that generation as it “came of age” politically and ideologically through the 1960s. And people like Joe Biden were also never part of the powerfully positive radical upsurge of that time.

Since that time, however, as I have also noted:

Unfortunately, all too many (though not all!) of that generation have become disoriented and have allowed themselves to become, as the French say, “*récupéré*”—that is, they have come back under the wing of the ruling class, in particular its “liberal” representatives in the Democratic Party, and have far too much accepted things on the terms of a system they once, very rightly, recognized as viciously criminal.³

As for why so many have become “*récupéré*”—and, in the years since the 1960s, the things they were rising up against, as well as additional outrages and in fact existential threats to humanity itself, have continued or even become more extreme—this is not because people have just “gotten older,” tired out, and more conservative, in some abstract sense. *It is fundamentally because there was no revolution and the same system that people were rising up against has remained in power.* In a number of works, I have spoken to why there was no revolution at that time, and I have examined major changes, largely of a negative kind, that have taken place over the decades since—including the heightening *parasitism* of this country (the fact that its wealth rests ultimately on a vast international network of sweatshop super-exploitation, especially in the Third World of Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, even as that wealth is very unevenly distributed within this country itself).⁴ Accompanying this parasitism is the fact that *individualism* (the nearly single-minded pursuit of personal goals and ambitions, objectively and often aggressively in competition with everyone else) has been promoted to an extreme degree in this country especially.⁵ All of this has affected (and, it might be said, infected) people of all generations.

In short, the reason the world is in the terrible state it is—including the reason why the climate crisis continues to get worse in an accelerating way—is

because the world is still dominated by this system of capitalism-imperialism and this continues to exert a powerful influence in conditioning how people think and specifically how they see what they should be doing in relation to the way things are. The problem is *not* “generations.” The “boomer generation” is not the *cause* of the world’s problems because of the fact that far too many of that generation have become “*récupéré*” (even while many continue to abhor some of this system’s more egregious crimes). Nor is the fact that many of those now presiding over this system are of the “boomer generation” the reason the system is so terrible—it is *the nature of the system itself*, regardless of who occupies its leading positions. So, too, succeeding generations (generations “X,” “Y,” or “Z,” or whatever) are not the *cause of* all this through the failure of so many to break with American chauvinism or their obsessive focus on the *self* (even as many also grumble about the state of the world and blame the “boomers” for the ways things are). The solution will not be found by blaming one generation or another for its—real, or imagined—shortcomings and failures. The answer is to cast off blinders, of all kinds, and come to the necessary recognition of what *is* the fundamental problem—this system—and the fact that no attempt at reforms or electing “better leaders,” within the confines of this system, can deal with the profound ways in which the masses of humanity are subjected to terrible suffering on a daily basis, humanity as a whole is facing very real and growing crises and the very future of humanity is seriously imperiled.

Only an actual revolution, aimed at nothing less than overthrowing this system and bringing a radically different and far better system into being, represents the possibility of dealing with all this in a way that is in accordance with the fundamental interests of the masses of humanity and ultimately humanity as a whole. And, to have a real chance of making this a reality, it is necessary to have a consistently scientific approach to understanding and changing the world—which looks beyond secondary phenomena such as generations to the *fundamental cause* of the problems and to the basis for the solution: an actual revolution and the new society and world for which such a revolution opens the way.⁶

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