

**“In one year of being locked up, I read more books than I had in my whole life”**

# Prisons as Universities of Revolution

Dear Friends,

They said we were “the bottom of the barrel” of those in the prison system.

Out on the yard the debate is heated and intense—as a dozen or so prisoners listen, intently. One prisoner argues that: “...there always have and always will be rich and poor. The rich and powerful will always rule over the poor and powerless...the best that can be done about this situation is what Robin Hood did!” (i.e take from the rich, give to the poor).

I shot back: “...things not changing, being fixed in time and space, just continuously repeating themselves—is a metaphysical view of history and does not conform to facts! You need to study dialectical and historical materialism so that you can understand and see how human history develops and changes—and why it is no longer necessary to live the way you are arguing for!”

Down in the “hole,” the “stripped cells,” the entire tier is quiet listening to a 19-year-old and myself (who was 23 at the time)—as we put Plato’s Republic to a critical analysis. Discussing, dissecting, and demonstrating how the views in the book reflect those of someone who is a defender and philosopher for slavery. We had only recently begun to study some communist theory and we were using what we had learned to break down Plato’s Republic—breakdown why philosophers like him are so loved by the defenders of the capitalist system.

At one point my 19-year-old friend breaks out in roaring laughter. When I asked why was he laughing—he explained and exclaimed: “... here we are the so-called ‘worst of the worst’ (this was said and meant in every sense by those who held us)—they’ve put us in the most extreme conditions in this prison in an attempt to break us down and beat us down—and here we are not only discussing but critiquing Plato—showing how he and Socrates did not represent the interest of the people but the interest of a slave system!”

Now everyone on the tier joined in with laughter at the sharp irony he was pointing to.

This was an important part of my introduction to prison in the early 1970s. There was a lot of revolutionary literature circulating in prison. And there was a lot of revolutionary activity, discussions and debates, sometimes in the most unexpected moments of being locked up.

At times this got expressed in mass revolutionary outburst—uniting Black, Latino, and whites—in what 21-year-old L.D. Barkley described as: “...the sound before the fury of all those who are oppressed...” in Attica Prison, upstate NY in 1971. At other times in mass uprisings in segregation units—for example at San Quentin prison in California in defense of the life of George Jackson, a revolutionary leader, also in 1971.

Things like all the above went on almost regularly in U.S. prisons from the late 1960s to the mid ’70s.

This was also expressed in the numerous revolutionary organizations—including “collectives” that based themselves on communist principles—that were springing up throughout the U.S. prison system.

All kinds of prisoners were studying and discussing revolutionary theory. Some of the “normal” routine of prison life was being transformed—in important ways the prisons were being turned into “universities of revolution.”

The grapevine was full of news of where the revolutionary current was strong and where it was weak. If you got sent to a prison where it was weak you tried to make it strong. If you were sent to a place where it was strong...you did what you could to make it stronger.

I remember writing a friend and telling her that in one year of being locked up, I had read more books than I had in my whole life. For example, during that time, I first read *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* by Frederick Engels and a whole new world opened up to me. It was an entirely new way of understanding human history. At the same time it made more sense than anything I had ever read or heard.



Above: Prisoners at Attica State Prison in Attica, N.Y., raise their hands in clenched fists in a show of unity during an uprising, September 1971.

Before reading this my thinking was similar to that of my friend who argued that we had to take a Robin Hood approach to revolution.

I could not get enough of this “stuff.” These kinds of books. Anytime we would discover a place that would send “free” books—we would swamp them with requests.

That’s how we began to receive *Peking Review* from Mao Tsetung’s socialist China at that time. It was printed in English and would arrive each week. We were very excited about this. It spurred us to study more: just what is socialism? What are the implications of it being a transition between capitalism and communism?

We would discuss these things. We would study and discuss why Mao and the revolutionaries with him were saying that one must continue the revolution under socialism, under the dictatorship of the proletariat or it will be reversed.

He spoke about how this understanding, this orientation, this analysis would lead to adopting policies that would aim to overcome—further transform—further revolutionize—the conditions that make socialism a transition between capitalism and communism.

The other thing that some of us would follow and study closely is the communist movement that was in its early phase of development in this country. Sometimes we would have six or more different newspapers and the *Peking Review* spread out on my bunk.

I would read them all and we would attempt to compare and contrast—trying to determine which group was coming from the same place as Mao—which group was really communist and really revolutionary.

I can still vividly remember sitting in my cell with a close comrade. We were studying some of Mao’s and Lenin’s philosophical writing on dialectical materialism.

I had recently received from RCP Publications a pamphlet titled: *Revolutionary Work in a Non-Revolutionary Situation* by Bob Avakian. I had all this literature spread out on my bunk.

At this point in our political development we were convinced for there to be a revolution in this country we needed a party and that party had to be led by a leader who could apply dialectical materialism and communist theory on the same level as Mao.

I had begun to seek out any and all writings, speeches, or talks by Avakian that I could get my hands on. Trying to determine if he met this criteria that we had set.

This was a life changing experience. I decided right then and there—the first thing I had to do when I got out was to find and hook up with the RCP. That’s what I announced to all my comrades in prison—and that’s what I did.

**I share this with you because I want everyone who is hearing this to give generously to the Prisoners Revolutionary Literature Fund.**

**I want you to understand the transformative power of the Revolutionary Press. I want you to understand the transformative potential of the body of work and the communist leader we have in Bob Avakian—someone who has a critical scientific approach to studying human history and to the communist revolution we need.**

**That’s why I call on all who are within earshot of this letter to donate generously, give all you can, and a bit more, to PRLF—so others can have the same opportunity I had—sisters and brothers who are locked in the hellholes of this rotten system to get their hands on literature to link up with the revolutionary movement.**

**I am always inspired to read letters from prisoners in the pages of *Revolution* newspaper and feel connected to these voices in a million ways. PRLF is crucial to get the hope of revolution behind those walls. I am fully confident many prisoners, like me, will find creative ways to contribute to revolution now and when they get out.**

Joe Veale



Above: Prisoners in a U.S. prison pose with *Revolution* newspaper.

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