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Supplement

Reform or Revolution

Questions of Orientation,

Questions of Morality

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Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from a talk given by Bob Avakian to a group of Party members and supporters in 2005.

Now, when you come up against the great gulf that often, and even generally, exists between the conditions and the suffering of the masses of people, on the one hand, and what you are able to do about that at any given point—when you run up against that repeatedly, everyone feels a definite pull which expresses itself in moral terms: how can you stand by and not do something about what's happening to the masses of people? As I have said a number of times, I have enormous respect for people who do things like volunteer for Doctors Without Borders. But the fact is that while they're doing what they're doing, and even with the good they do, this is being engulfed and overwhelmed by a tsunami of suffering (metaphorically speaking and sometimes literally) that's brought forth by larger objective forces.

When I was younger, I considered being a doctor or a lawyer, not to make money and get on the golf course, but because I knew there were many people who needed good medical care and people who were victimized by the so-called legal system who could use an advocate who really would be an advocate and a fighter for them. But at a certain point I came to understand that, while I would be helping a few people, and even if I threw myself into it, much greater

numbers of people would find themselves in the position of needing these services—far beyond what I, and others, could do to help them—and it would just be perpetuated forever, and the conditions would get worse. And once you understand this, you can't look yourself in the mirror and do anything less than what you understand, if you're going to be consistent and follow through on your own principles.

So, yes, there's a moral dimension here. How can you sit by and watch people die of diseases that are preventable, not just in the Third World, but right down the street from you? How can you "sit by"? How can you not immediately try to do something about that? But moralities are a reflection of class outlooks, ultimately. They are a reflection of your understanding of reality, which takes a class expression in class society, in an ultimate and fundamental sense. And there is a morality that corresponds not to reformism and seeking merely to mitigate the conditions and the suffering of masses of people—not merely to addressing some, and only some, of the symptoms of that suffering—but to uprooting and abolishing the *causes* of that suffering. This morality corresponds to a revolutionary understanding, that we cannot eliminate the suffering of the masses, and in fact it's only going to get worse, as long as this capitalist-imperialist system remains.

This doesn't mean that it is unimportant to address particular abuses, or that mass resistance to particular forms of oppression is not important. Far from it. The basic point that Marx emphasized is profoundly true: If the masses don't fight back and resist their oppression, even short of revolution, they will be crushed and reduced to a broken mass and will be incapable of rising up for any higher thing. But, as a fundamental point of orientation, we have to grasp firmly the truth that, despite the best and most heroic and self-sacrificing efforts, it is not possible, within the framework of this system, even to really alleviate, let alone eliminate, the suffering and the causes of the suffering of the masses of people. And our morality has to flow from that.

Let me give you an analogy. Let's say you went back several centuries, somewhat like *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Let's say in this case you went back to the time of the plagues in Europe that wiped out huge swaths of the population. And the most people knew to do then was to try to quarantine and stay away from people infected with the plague. Then, looking at all these people dying of the plague, if you were a good-hearted person perhaps you would take wet towels and put them on the foreheads of the people who were dying, or take some other steps to try to minimize their suffering to some degree. And maybe you would do what you could to keep the disease from spreading. But let's say that, as a person from the present time, you know that the plague could actually be cured, fairly easily, with antibiotics, if they were administered in time. And, further extending and elaborating the analogy, let's imagine that somehow there were antibiotics back in that time—of course, in reality antibiotics did not exist and the scientific understanding had not been developed to produce antibiotics until more recent times, but let's say that somehow these antibiotics also existed back then: let's put into our scenario some other people who had also gone back in time from the present age and had taken with them a big stash of antibiotics, which could prevent the millions of deaths that were caused by the plague several centuries ago. But these other time-travelers were monopolizing the ownership of these antibiotics and had organized and paid an armed force of thugs to guard this stash of antibiotics, and were refusing

to distribute any of these antibiotics unless they could profit from it, by charging a price that most of the people could not afford.

Now, knowing this, which way would people be better served: by continuing to put towels on the foreheads of the fevered people, or by organizing people to storm the compound where the antibiotics were being hoarded, seize the antibiotics and distribute them among the people?

This is, by analogy, the essential difference between reform and revolution. And our morality flows from our understanding of this. Yes, it's very hard to see masses of people suffer and not be able to put a stop to this suffering, right at the time; and, yes, we should organize the masses to fight back against their oppression and the ways in which this system causes them to suffer; but if we really understand where "the antibiotics" are and who's hoarding and monopolizing them and turning them into machinery for profit, into capital, and what it is that's preventing the masses of people from getting to those antibiotics, then our responsibility is to lead the masses to rise up and seize those things and distribute them among themselves.

Now, let me emphasize again: I can and do admire the morality of people who want to alleviate suffering (and who may not see beyond that). We should in no way denigrate or put down these people—people who do things like put water in the desert for immigrants crossing from Mexico—we should admire them and we should unite with them. But that cannot provide the fundamental solution to that particular problem, of the suffering of these immigrants and what drives them to leave their homelands in the first place, nor can it eliminate all the other ways in which masses of people, throughout the world, are oppressed and caused to suffer. Or, again, while I admire the people who volunteer with things like Doctors Without Borders, if they were to say, "this is the most anybody can do, there's nothing more you can do," we would have to engage in principled but very sharp struggle with them, even while uniting with them and admiring their spirit, because it is objectively *not* true that this is all that can, or should, be done—and it is *harmful* to the masses of people to say that this is all that can be done.

In fundamental and strategic terms, it is necessary to choose where the weight and the essence of your efforts is going to go: into fighting the effects and the symptoms, or getting to the cause and uprooting and getting rid of that cause? And that's why you become a revolutionary—when you realize that you have to seek the full solution to this, or else the suffering is going to continue, and get worse. That's one of the main things that impels people toward revolution, even before they understand, scientifically, all the complexity of what revolution means and what it requires. And, as you become a communist and you increasingly look at the whole world, and not just the part of the world that you are immediately situated in, you see that the whole world has to change, that all oppression and exploitation has to be uprooted, everywhere, so that it can no longer exist anywhere.

So we have to be on a mission to liberate those antibiotics, and not get diverted into thinking that the most and the highest good we can do is trying to lessen the misery, to mitigate the symptoms, rather than getting to the cause and bringing about a real and lasting cure. The question of reform vs. revolution is not some petty notion of "our thing" vs. somebody else's "thing"—it is a matter of what is really required to eliminate the horrendous suffering to which the great majority of humanity is subjected, day after day, and what kind of world is possible.

Nor are we revolutionaries because it's a "fashionable" thing to do—right now, in fact, it's not very fashionable at all. Back in the '60s, among certain sections of the people, Black people and others, being a revolutionary was a "legitimate avocation": *What do you do? I'm a doctor. What do you do? I'm a basketball player. What do you do? I'm a revolutionary.* Legitimate avocation. I was talking to another veteran comrade about this, and they pointed out that, in a certain sense, it was easier in those days to be a revolutionary because you had a lot of "social approbation"—there was a lot of approval coming from significant sections of society for being a revolutionary. Right now you don't get that much "social approbation" for being a revolutionary, and in particular a revolutionary *communist*. [laughter] "What the fuck, you crazy?!" [laughter] That's a lot of what you get, as you know. Or you get more theoretically developed arguments about why it's hopeless or a bad idea, or a disaster, or a nightmare. Well, we aren't doing this because we're seeking social approbation. It's good in one sense if you have that—in the sense that it reflects favorable elements in society, in terms of how people are viewing the question of radical change—but we're not doing what we're doing in order to get "social approbation," and we're not relying on such "social approbation" for what we're doing. If there isn't "social approbation," we have to create it—not so people will "approve" of what we're doing, in some more narrow or personal sense, but because we need to transform people's understanding of reality and therefore the way they act in terms of transforming reality.

So this is a fundamental question of orientation, but that orientation is not just: revolution, it's more righteous. "Reform, that sounds kind of paltry; revolutionary, that's more righteous." [laughter] No, that's not the heart of the matter. It's very righteous to be in Doctors Without Borders. But the essential thing is that revolution corresponds to reality, it corresponds to what's needed to resolve the contradictions that have been spoken to repeatedly in this talk—the fundamental contradiction of capitalism and other contradictions bound up with that, and all the effects of this in the world—to resolve these contradictions in the interests of the masses of people. That's why we're revolutionaries—and a certain kind of revolutionaries—*communist* revolutionaries. Because that's the only kind of revolution that can do what needs to be done, what cries out to be done. So what we do has to proceed from that, in terms of our fundamental orientation.