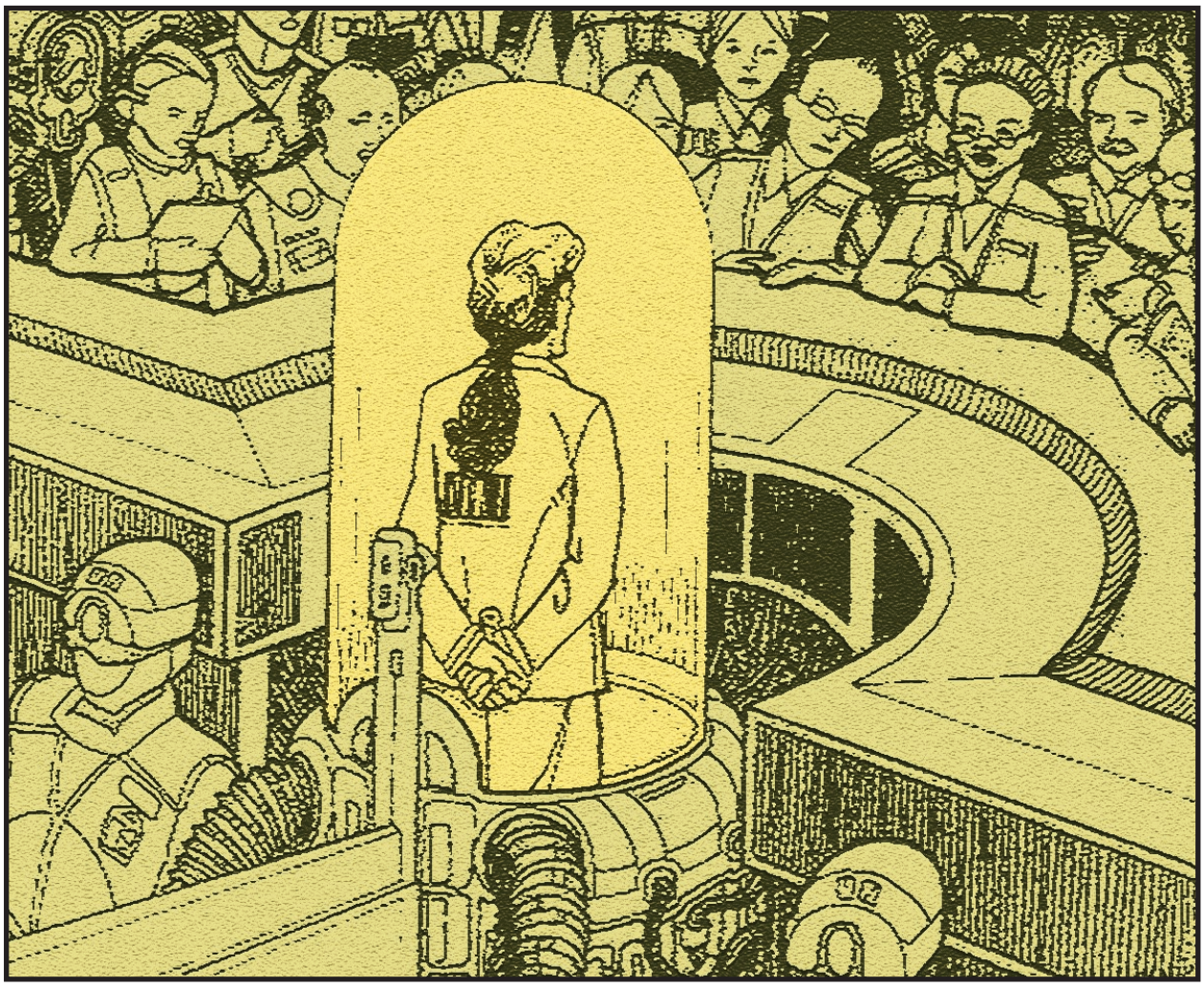
AVAKIAN'S ASSESSMENT OF THOMAS JEFFERSON

A CRITICAL READING



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KASAMA
ESSAYS FOR DISCUSSION

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Avakian on Jefferson: A Critical Reading

by Pavel Andreyev

The Revolutionary Communist Party describes Bob Avakian's latest essay, *Communism and Jeffersonian Democracy*, as an "unsparing critique of the history…of American society" and is promoting it with the same urgency it devoted to the author's *Away With All Gods!* earlier this year. According to the RCP, it

> …needs to get out broadly into many streams of political and academic life: campuses, high schools, progressive movements, the legal community and intellectuals, and among the oppressed people in this country, opening up debate about the real nature of this system and the need for communist revolution.[1]

Engaging Bob Avakian Again

Having "engaged" *Away With All Gods!* six months ago, I'd like to respond to this seriously as well.[2] What follows is a contribution to a critique, addressing approximately the first quarter of the work (dealing with Jefferson, his life and thought) rather than a review of the entirety.[3] I'll raise some questions about how we should relate to historical facts, the issue of "progress" or "directionality" in history, and the evaluation of individuals in historical periods far removed from us. In *AWAG!* Avakian remarks provocatively that if Jesus were alive today we wouldn't and shouldn't like him very much (mainly because he accepted slavery).[4] Similarly he would like us to dislike Thomas Jefferson, whom he depicts as a cynical, demagogic, slave-owning oppressor. But his depiction of the individual (whatever its own merits) is less the issue than the use of this depiction to broadly characterize and explain over two centuries of "Jeffersonian democracy."

It seems to me there are two problems with Avakian's approach. It involves, as we will see, both a one-dimensional portrayal of Jefferson and a crude distortion of the historical record. And it involves a departure from historical materialism that isn't at all helpful as we try to understand such issues as democracy (or what's represented as such) in today's world. A materialist understanding of the particularity of historical moments helps us to better understand the particularity of our own time.

But if you reduce history to a timeless morality tale — pounding home how bad people started this country on a bad basis and so (regardless of the historical process since) we have to "rupture with" those people and that historical heritage — you're really precluding such understanding. We need to examine historical phenomena in their process of development, in their

1. http://rwor.org/a/146/letter_on_comm-jd-en.html. It should be noted that while the publication is promoted as a "major new work" the tapes constituting the almost unaltered text have actually been available online for two years.

2. For my review of *Away With All Gods!* on the Kasama site.

3. This is *not* intended primarily as a contribution to the discussion of bourgeois ("Jeffersonian") and socialist democracy, which Mike Ely has called for on the Kasama site. That's a worthy but separate project, particularly given the Nepalese comrades' assertion that a multi-party democracy is the crucial political mechanism for staying on the socialist road or for avoiding capitalist restoration.

4. Bob Avakian, *Away With All Gods!* (Chicago: Insight Press, 2008), pp. 18, 83

specificity, in their true contradictoriness — not project a kind of "original sin" factor into a country's history and demand a redemptive, shunning process (as opposed to *analysis*) as the means to overcoming oppression.

Avakian's "Scientific" Analysis of Jefferson's Historical Role: A "Fitting Representative" of Slave-owners

Avakian begins with an anecdote about how he was once told (way back in 1979) by an African-American journalist that he was "awfully brave" for criticizing the U.S. system the way he did. She added, "You know, they kill people for saying what you're saying." This comment, according to Avakian, gets "right to the essence of 'American democracy.'" It is "the essence" of U.S. democracy to kill people [*like himself*] for criticizing it.[5] Although Avakian surrounds American democracy with quotation marks, implying that it's not *really* a democracy, he implies that from its historical inception the *principle aspect* of the U.S. political system has been the murderous intolerance of critical challenge.

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), Avakian suggests, represents this vicious essence. Noting that Jefferson is widely admired among progressive people as "the personification" of a "radical and popular democracy" that was never realized, he declares instead that "to put this in… blunt, and scientific—terms, Jefferson stands as a personification and a concentration of many of the illusions of people in the middle strata in particular, and more specifically many in the intelligentsia, who have not ruptured with, and in fact stubbornly cleave to, a bourgeois-democratic view of the world."

Avakian mocks the old Communist Party USA for upholding Jefferson, and the American Revolution of 1776-1783, as progressive in their time.[6] He warns:

> You cannot get rid of this system if you proceed on the basis of upholding and extolling one of the main representatives of that very system, someone who is indeed emblematic of what that system is all about… You cannot change all this while at the same time clinging to the ideas and ideals that characterize this system and dominate this society—ideas and ideals of which Thomas Jefferson is, in fact, a fitting representative.

The RCP chair seems to reject the possibility that one can uphold an historical figure for roles he or she played *in a given period*; that one can distinguish between principal and secondary aspects of historical figures' roles; and that systems "represented" by such figures themselves can evolve from the revolutionary to the reactionary.

But how does upholding Jefferson as a bourgeois revolutionary during a period of rising capitalism, or even critically accepting some of his ideas, prevent us from getting rid of the vicious system under which we live today?

This question merits some discussion, but Avakian seems disinclined to examine it seriously. Rather, he rejects any positive evaluation of Jefferson as a matter of "clinging to" the ideas underpinning the slave system. One is again reminded of how he demands that Christians either literally believe the Bible (including its acceptance of slavery) or not, with no options in between![7]

Avakian wants to fix the terms of discussion: *either/or. Either* you understand that Jefferson represented (indeed personified) the slave system, and is thus a figure to repudiate, *or* you "cling to" old CP-style patriotic opportunism.

This is a highly simplistic approach to history.

It's not the same type of simplistic approach one finds in Stalin's writings, which posit a near-universal series of "inevitable" stages corresponding to modes of production and imply that individuals should be evaluated as "progressive" or "reactionary" depending upon how they relate to the interests of the "rising" class.[8] (Bourgeois revolutions are progressive; the American

5. Somehow one recalls Avakian's statement "On the Occasion of the Death of Willie "Mobile" Shaw" in December 2005. Avakian said that Shaw, an African-American communist, had (at some unspecified point in the past) "said to me: 'You are the only hope we have.' I have kept those words in my heart, with a deep sense of responsibility to live up to them." http://rwor.org/a/027/avakian-statement-willie-shaw.htm

6. Avakian notes that the Communist Party, USA maintained "Jefferson Bookstores" outlets through the 1960s (and beyond).

7. Avakian (2008), p. 34

8. See Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (1938; Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976)

Revolution was a bourgeois revolution and Jefferson a bourgeois revolutionary; thus, Jefferson was progressive.)

Avakian has appropriately rejected that crude model.[9]

But he posits something equally crude but less accurate: slavery is horrible; Jefferson owned slaves; hence Jefferson was, in the main, reactionary and deserving of the sharp exposure the self-described scientist Avakian can provide.

Far from the complex figure depicted in biographies by historians, morally torn by the issue of slavery and publicly and privately urging its abolition, Jefferson was in Avakian's portrayal "one of the main representatives" of the slave-owning class *enthusiastically promoting* the slave system.

An Undialectical View of the American (Bourgeois) Revolution

Avakian of course recognizes that Jefferson and the other "founding fathers" were bourgeois revolutionaries; he declares that "Jefferson, and his political philosophy, stand in a real sense as an emblem of what is in fact *bourgeois* democracy—and in reality bourgeois *dictatorship*—in the history of the United States of America."[10] He doesn't however acknowledge the *positive* side of this in world-historical perspective.

Marxist scholars have generally:

(1) viewed the American Revolution as a progressive phenomenon, with profound implications for anti-colonial movements in Latin America and bourgeois revolutionary movements in Europe, especially France;

(2) seen it as "incomplete" in that its rhetoric of equality was irreconcilable with the realities of slavery and other forms of oppression (compatible with capitalism but not integral to it); and

(3) regarded it as a "work in progress" providing a structural framework for broader democratization, particularly in the form of the expanding franchise.[11]

Some basic facts seem beyond dispute. The revolution freed the Northern merchants from the burdens of British governance and allowed for the rapid development of industry. It produced a constitution by 1787 that gave the electorate (a majority of adult white males) greater participation in decision-making than existed in any other major country. This served the interest of the ruling class(es) at the time.[12]

Thus Lenin, in a letter to American workers in 1918, described the American Revolution as "one of those great, really liberating, really revolutionary wars."[13] In 1951 the Communist Party historian Herbert Aptheker noted that as a "fundamentally colonial" revolution it lacked the "profoundly transforming quality" of the English and French revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and "its thorough-going nature was limited …by its compromising with and then acceptance of the pre-feudal form which did characterize American colonial society — namely chattel slavery — something to be undone in a future revolution [the Civil War]."[14]

One detects some historicism here in Aptheker's approach — the idea that bourgeois revolutions are good virtually by definition, representing "progress" in relation to prior "feudalism" and paving the way for subsequent socialist revolutions.

There are problems with that concept, and with any conception of history that posits a necessary se-

9. See *Revolutionary Worker*, no. 1178 (December 8, 2002)

10. By the way, Avakian repeats this expression "in a real sense" seven times in this text, and "in an overall sense" four times. This repetitive, pompous manner of expression, and the inclusion of wholly unnecessary clauses adding padding to his material, is characteristic of his "body of work."

11. For a useful overview of the older Marxist scholarship see Herbert Aptheker, *The American Revolution, 1763-1783* (New York: International Publishers, 1951), p. 19f. Howard Zinn suggests that the "Founding Fathers…kept things as they were" while using the Constitution "to build a broad base of support…" He even states that the Constitution was "perfectly designed to build popular backing for the new government…" See Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 99, 101. But I have not found any Marxist work arguing that the American Revolution represented some sort of social retrogression.

12. Some would divide the bourgeoisie of the time into capitalists and slave-owners (with antagonistic interests), while others see the slave-owners themselves as capitalists of a sort.

13. V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), vol. 28, p. 62

14. Aptheker (1951), p. 22

quence of stages and places the human subject at the mercy of "inevitability." That is not Marxism.

As Marx and Engels point out:

> History does *nothing*, it "possesses *no* immense wealth," it "wages *no* battles." It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; "history" is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve *its own* aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims.[15]

Marx did not posit an inevitable sequence of modes of production, each more liberating than the former, inexorably culminating with classless society. He explicitly denied that his "historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe" in *Capital* constituted "an historico-philosophic theory of the *marche générale* [general path] imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself, in order that it may ultimately arrive at the form of economy which will ensure, together with the greatest expansion of the productive powers of social labor, the most complete development of man."[16]

There are no iron laws of history.

The American Revolution didn't *have* to happen the way that it did, and it certainly didn't produce "the most complete development of man" possible at the time.

Still, Marxists (I think correctly) posit a general directionality in history, acknowledging the prospect of setbacks.[17] And Marxists have properly categorized the American Revolution along with the English Revolution (1640-1660) and the French Revolution of 1789 as one of the key bourgeois revolutions in world history, sweeping away absolute monarchies, hereditary aristocracies and structural barriers to the accumulation of capital by merchant classes.

Breaking with "Jeffersonian Democracy" and Breaking with Historical Facts

Avakian doesn't see the American Revolution as a step forward towards "the complete development" of humanity but as a big fraud.

He seeks to expose it as such through his talks/transcripts — apparently designed for audiences he thinks will encounter a "scientific" analysis of U.S. history for the first time. Much as he demands a break with religion, Avakian demands a break with "Jeffersonian democracy" as the premise for revolutionary consciousness.

Why should we "rupture with" this icon of "American democracy"?

Here is Avakian's main thesis: not only was he was a slave-owner but,

> *Jefferson consistently acted in the interests of the aristocratic large landowning and slaveholding class in the southern United States*, in opposition to the interests of small farmers—and, of course, this was also in opposition to the interests of that group of individuals who most glaringly did not have independence economically, or in any other way: the slaves, who did not actually count as individuals in the eyes of the slaveholders. [emphasis added]

In other words, Jeffersonian democracy — even as *currently* conceptualized among the progressives Avakian wants to challenge — is rooted in the slave-owning class. How slavery relates logically and concretely (particularly after 1865) to the components of Jeffersonian democracy (republicanism, constitutional government, individual rights, the principle of representative democracy, separation of church and state, opposition to a standing army, doctrine of separation of powers, freedom of speech and press, etc. — some of which we might want to retain after a communist-led revo-

15. Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, eds., *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 385. This is from the 1844 work *The Holy Family*.

16. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, n.d.), p. 377. This was written in 1877, when in response to crude simplifications and distortions of his theories Marx was obliged to occasionally aver "I am not a Marxist."

17. We are, as a species, interacting with our environment in such a way as to better understand it, ourselves, and ways to improve human existence. While "History" is not a wind-up device producing predictable results, stages or outcomes, the application of human reason *does* generally produce "progress," even though anti-rational ideologies such as fascism have in modern times produced widespread disillusionment and despair.

lution) is never really spelled out.[18] Certainly Jefferson expressed a "bourgeois-democratic view of the world," as Avakian states. But was the acceptance of slavery integral to that worldview? Or was it, as Aptheker suggests, a matter of "compromising…to be undone" in the Civil War?[19]

Avakian acknowledges that "you can find statements by Jefferson where he says that slavery is in fact a blight and that it will have negative consequences for some time to come." (I will cite some of them below.) But he adds:

> There have also been misinterpretations of what Jefferson wrote about slavery. To take one important example, there are passages he wrote in drafts of the Declaration of Independence—some of which did not, but some of which did, make it into the final version of that Declaration—where the King of England and the British government were strongly condemned for supposedly imposing the slave trade on the United States. Now, there were, in fact, ways in which Jefferson and the slaveowning class in Virginia generally were opposed to *aspects* of the international slave trade, even while they themselves were involved in selling slaves to other states and to slaveowners in other territories. In this, the essential motivation of these Virginia slaveowners was that *they didn't want the price of a slave being driven down*, since they themselves had become major sellers of slaves within America itself.

In other words, any expression of anti-slavery sentiment was all window-dressing. But to what end? Jefferson's historical legacy? (Obviously his words against slavery don't protect him from the mighty pen of a Bob Avakian, two hundred years down the road!)

The following is the famous passage that Jefferson wrote for inclusion in the Declaration of Indpendence that was cut from the final adopted version:

> [The British king] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce.[20]

To suggest that Jefferson wrote this out of the desire to increase slave prices for Virginia landowners is a stretch. And Avakian does not, in fact, prove that Jefferson intended that passage to be interpreted any way other than literally.

In his *Autobiography*, Jefferson claimed that in 1769, as a 26 year old member of the Virginian colonial legislature, he had proposed "the permission of the emancipation of slaves."[21] (Was this too a mere cynical ruse?) Avakian's "one important example" pertaining to the Declaration draft is hardly damning.

His case rests on something else: the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 that doubled the size of the United States.

Misunderstanding the Louisiana Purchase

"In reality," Avakian declares, "Jefferson's agrarian society turned out to be a society based on slavery and ruled by slaveowners." This overstatement ignores the sections of U.S. society that were in fact based on yeoman agriculture.[22]

But Avakian proceeds undeterred:

18. Avakian merely notes the importance of slave-produced goods for the U.S. economy over time. But the relationship between the slave-based elements of the economy and "Jeffersonian democracy" appears to me a complicated historical issue, and Avakian doesn't seem to grasp this at all.

19. Aptheker (1951), p. 22

20. Thomas Jefferson, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd vol. 1, (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1950) p. 462

21. Thomas Jefferson, ed. Bernard Mayo, *Jefferson Himself: The Personal Narrative of a Many-Sided American* (University of Virginia Press, 1984), p. 46

22. Shouldn't one note that—along with some sections of the south—the largely agrarian society in Massachusetts (including Maine), Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire, New York (including Vermont), and New Jersey was *not* "based on slavery" and "ruled by slaveowners"? Are such details unimportant?

> One striking example that a number of people have pointed to in this regard is the Louisiana Purchase (the purchase by the United States government of the Louisiana Territory from the French in 1803).

Notice the fuzziness of the wording: "in this regard". Avakian isn't merely noting what all American historians recognize — that parts of the Louisiana Territory became slave states.

Avakian is broadly hinting without having to be too specific that Jefferson purchased the territory with the expansion of slavery in mind. Note too that this is in fact the *only* example he gives to substantiate the allegation that "Jefferson consistently acted in the interests of the…slaveholding class." And note that while he peppers his talk with references to Isaac Kramnick, R. Laurence Moore, Edmund S. Morgan, and David Brion Davis on Jefferson's ideas and questions of race in Virginia, he cites *no* scholar on this topic of the Louisiana Purchase whatsoever.

Avakian continues:

> Having suffered significant military setbacks—and dramatically so in the attempt to put down the armed rebellion of slaves in Haiti which had been initiated under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture—Napoleon Bonaparte, ruler of France, reckoned that he couldn't easily hold on to this territory in the Americas, and so Jefferson, then President of the United States, stepped in to quickly grab up this territory. *In this he acted primarily in the interests of the slaveowners and in order to spread the slaveowning system into the new territories acquired through this act—not* to develop an agrarian society based on a multitude of small farmers. This is just one example of many that could be cited which clearly illustrate that Jefferson consistently acted in the interests of the slaveowning class—in conflict with the interests not only of the slaves but also of the yeoman in the South, as well as the rising capitalist class centered in the North.[23] [emph. added]

23. Avakian earlier notes (accurately) how Jefferson idealized the yeoman or small independent farmer as the bulwark of the Republic. Here he attempts to demonstrate hypocrisy on Jefferson's part and suggest that he was actually more interested in advancing the interests of slave-owners than the yeomen.

Avakian doesn't mention that Jefferson's intention was actually far more limited. He wanted the U.S. to purchase the port of New Orleans, which had recently passed from the Spanish to the French. At the head of the Mississippi River, this port was vital to the provisioning of territories claimed by the U.S. west of the Appalachian Mountains. Since Napoleon's France — overextended militarily in Europe, facing defeat at the hands of slave rebels in its colony of Haiti — was in need of hard cash, it is quite understandable why Jefferson would engage in negotiations for a transfer of sovereignty over New Orleans.

The expansion of slavery was *not* the motive.

The motive indeed was the supply of goods to the yeomen — that class idealized by Jefferson — settling in the expanding frontier. (These small farmers, it must be noted, were expanding at the expense of those already there. We need to always recognize that the U.S. was built on the two pillars of genocidal "Indian removal" and slavery. But the specific issue here is not the nature of white settlement but the historical causality behind the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory, which Avakian simply gets wrong.)

Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause

U.S. negotiators James Monroe and Robert Livingston had been instructed to offer as much as $ 10 million for the port and did not expect that the French would offer the entire Louisiana Territory to the U.S. for $ 15 million. The deal, that is, fell into their lap.

But Jefferson was in fact ambivalent about signing the agreement with France. His Federalist opponents

Avakian calls the contrast between Jefferson's emphasis on the yeoman and his supposed higher loyalty to fellow slaveowners one of three "ironies" in Jefferson's position. The second is his belief that "the yeomen…had to be led" by intellectuals such as himself. Avakian is concerned to distinguish Jefferson's opinion from Lenin's view that the working class requires a party to lead it and bring it revolutionary consciousness "from without" (although he doesn't really develop the point). The "third irony" Avakian posits is that yeoman-based society would have led to emergence of elites anyway, in part due to variations in the productivity of the land they cultivated. But while Jefferson may have been naïve about the historical possibilities of capitalism, it's hard to find "irony" in that naïveté. Rather there is a consistent idealism, and no hint of a secret agenda to advance the cause of slavery.

argued that the purchase was unwise and required Congressional assent, and he himself questioned whether he as president even had the constitutional authority to authorize the transfer. But he did authorize it, and the agreement was ratified by Congress.

Did he do so "primarily…to spread the slaveholding system"? I doubt any historian specializing in this period of U.S. history would suggest that was Jefferson's principal motive. Indeed Howard Zinn, whom the RCP seems to appreciate, emphasizes Jefferson's belief that some Native American tribes could be relocated there.[24] Slavery had been practiced in what became the state of Louisiana in 1812 under the Spanish and French, and continued to be practiced when the region was added to the U.S. The same was the case with Mississippi (made a state in 1817).

But Jefferson, eleven years after leaving office, strongly *opposed* the 1820 "Missouri Compromise" that expanded slavery beyond Louisiana to what became the states of Missouri (1821) and Arkansas (1836) within the territory purchased from France. He wrote that "like a fire bell in the night, [it] awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union."

Jefferson didn't in fact, Avakian's claim notwithstanding, *want* to see "the slaveholding system" expanded in the U.S. and indeed thought its expansion likely to tear the republic apart.

In a footnote, Avakian cites Roger G. Kennedy's *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause* as evidence that Jefferson wasn't really serious about promoting the interests of yeomen but rather furthering the interests of slave-owners. Actually, what Kennedy concludes is that Jefferson as president *didn't fight hard enough* against slave-owners' interests, although it's questionable given the powers of the chief executive in the political framework of the time he could have possibly prevailed. He portrays Jefferson sympathetically as a "Hamlet" guilty of "timidity" rather than an eager proponent of slave-owners' interests.[25]

Slavery the Key to Jefferson's Political Fortunes?

Avakian continues:

> [W]ith regard to Jefferson himself, not only his economic status but also his political fortunes, including his election to the presidency, depended on slavery, and in particular the 'three-fifths' provision in the Constitution of the United States…"

This refers to the three-fifths provision of disproportionate electoral representation adopted in 1787: Article I, Section. 2: Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons. "Other persons" here plainly refers to slaves. Leaders of the Southern states wanted all their slaves counted in order to boost their number of Congressional seats, while the Northerners wished to keep the South's representation at a minimum. By a political compromise (that Jefferson actually didn't have much to do with), the Southern states (more specifically, the wealthy whites within them) wound up with less representation in the Congress than they would have liked and more than the Northern states would have liked by virtue of the fact that three-fifths the number of slaves were counted for tax and representation purposes.

Historian Garry Wills whom Avakian cites argues Jefferson might have lost the presidential election of 1800 if the slave states hadn't been given disproportionate representation as a result of this provision.[26] But UCLA historian Joyce Appleby argues:

24. Zinn, p. 126

25. Roger G. Kennedy, *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery and the Louisiana Purchase* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. pp. 239-41. (The title of the book itself indicates Kennedy's sense of Jefferson's motives.) One might also note the comment of one reviewer that "Jefferson did not see, as Kennedy does, that the interests of the small freeholders he claimed to champion and the great planters were inimical to one another." Leonard J. Sadosky, in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 3 (July 2004)

26. Garry Wills, *Negro President: Jefferson and the Slave Power* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2003), pp. 62-72. It should by the way be noted that Wills, as Avakian noted many years ago, is a big admirer of Jefferson. See Avakian, *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986), p. 105, note 18

> The three-fifths provision was not the only compromise affecting the democratic vote. The most enduring gives every state a two vote bonus in the Electoral College for their senators. Had the two vote bonus been eliminated and slaves not counted at all, the outcome would probably have been a one vote victory for Jefferson.[27]

To say that Jefferson's election "depended upon slavery" and insinuate that he was personally happy about slavery is (again) a stretch. But Avakian, more bent upon iconoclasm than cautious weighing of evidence and historical objectivity, doesn't seem to mind.

So how did Jefferson, father of the "Jeffersonian democracy" that Avakian contemptuously dismisses, relate to the phenomenon of slavery so central to Virginian realities from his childhood?

He was, as we all know, a slave-owner. (Avakian's tone of moral outrage at this fact would be more appropriate if he were addressing people learning this for the first time. As it is, he seems to almost be "talking down" to his audience.) Jefferson owned about 200 slaves and probably had children by one of them, Sarah Hemings. He inherited 52 slaves from his father, and 135 more in 1774 from his father-in-law. Although he didn't engage in commercial slave trading for profit, he sold many to wipe out inherited debt.

On occasion Jefferson purchased slaves from other owners to keep them united with spouses that he owned. "Nobody feels more strongly than I do," he wrote in 1807, "the desire to make all practicable sacrifices to keep man and wife together who have imprudently married out of their respective families." ("Families" here refers to plantations, and "those marrying out" to slaves who'd partnered with those owned by other masters who might relocate them arbitrarily.) In that year he purchased the wife of his blacksmith Moses so that the two might remain together. It is well known that Jefferson was deeply conflicted in his own mind about the institution of slavery. He questioned it, the way he questioned a lot of things, including religion.[28]

As mentioned above, as a member of the Virginian legislature Jefferson proposed slavery's abolition. He attacked slavery not only in his draft of the Declaration of Independence but in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781) and many other writings.

In the *Notes* he suggests that "the spirit…of the slave [is] rising from the dust…I hope preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation…" He expressed hope that this would take place "with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation." He of course wrote as a master who could imagine his own class's "extirpation" at the hands of those seeking "total emancipation."

Jefferson proposed the Ordinance of 1784, including a clause that slavery be prohibited in the land between the Appalachians and the Mississippi River (Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee and Kentucky). When a single vote in Congress defeated the ordinance, Jefferson declared in a letter to Jean Nicholas de Meunier in 1786, "The voice of a single individual … would have prevented this abominable crime from spreading itself over the new country. Thus we see the fate of millions unborn hanging on the tongue of one man, and Heaven was silent in that awful moment!"[29]

Slavery: A Hideous Blot

Jefferson's personal letters meanwhile indicate a genuine sense of guilt and unease about the existence of slavery in the new republic.

At various points Jefferson called slavery an "abominable crime," "moral depravity," and a "hideous blot." In a letter to de Meunier he wonders whether the "God of justice" will end slavery "by diffusing light and liberality among [the slaves'] oppressors," or by "His exterminating thunder" (*i.e.*, the annihilation of the slave-owners by the oppressed). All this implies that, had his fellow-slave-owners agreed to end the "peculiar institution,"

27. http://www.hoover.org/multimedia/uk/2993311.html

28. Jefferson is the only president out of 43 who was not, and did not claim to be, a Christian. In a famous letter to his nephew, he urged him to "question with boldness even the existence of God." He dismissed much of the Bible as myth, describing the ethical content of Jesus' sayings as a "diamond" in a "dunghill" of unbelievable narrative. One wonders why Avakian, given his campaign against "Christian fascism" and religion in general, doesn't factor this into an historical analysis of Jefferson.

29. Boyd, Julian P., Charles T. Cullen, John Catanzariti, Barbara B. Oberg, et al, eds. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950-), vol. 10, p. 58

Jefferson would have gladly let go of it as well. But they didn't, and he didn't. Well this is *indeed* a "hideous blot" on Jefferson's own historical reputation! Moral qualms don't absolve Jefferson from the guilt applying to his entire class.

But can we not say further that slave ownership is a blot on *any* slaveowner, anytime and anywhere in world history since slavery began some 6000 years ago or so? This includes not just some of the leading figures in societies where slavery was the dominant form of class exploitation, like ancient Greece and Rome, but figures in medieval Europe (where Carolingian kings, Viking chieftains, and Venetian doges owned slaves) and in the early modern and modern periods as well.

Within that historical category of slave-owners, there are some who, to borrow the language of Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* "played a most revolutionary part." We need to distinguish between someone like Julius Caesar, head of the "populares" faction in ancient Rome, and his opponent Cicero (whom Engels called "the most contemptible scoundrel in history").[30] And we need to distinguish between Jefferson and fellow Virginian George Fitzhugh, a genuine propagandist for slavery.

We can't end the discussion of a historical figure's significance by noting that he or she owned slaves, or owned estates worked by serfs bound to the soil, or profited from the labor-power of wage-workers. We need, that is, to try to be dispassionate, objective historical materialists.

We can condemn Jefferson for his hypocrisy, and his moral weakness. He placed his personal financial situation ahead of his (all too abstract and passive) stand against slavery, once it was clear that slavery would remain pervasive in his state. But details — such as the fact that he sometimes declined to emancipate slaves due to the fact that Virginian law required that such people be evicted from the state — are not unimportant. Avakian does not make a convincing case that Jefferson acted "consistently" and "primarily" to serve slave-owners' interests but rather offers a good example of the instrumentalist distortion of history (if not indignant posturing).

30. Quoted by Michael Parenti, *The Assassination of Julius Caesar: A People's History of Ancient Rome* (New York: The New Press, 2003)

Jefferson as (Eighteenth-Century, Bourgeois) Rebel

One can observe with Aptheker that the American Revolution did *not* transform the new country's society. But the model of government established with the Constitution of 1787 was a significant advance in the construction of bourgeois democracy and influenced the French constitutions of 1789 and 1791, among many others.

Isn't it important to recall that more than any U.S. leader, Jefferson embraced the French Revolution, the greatest and most influential of bourgeois-democratic revolutions? Even as his colleagues' enthusiasm waned after the public executions of the French king and queen, Jefferson maintained a revolutionary perspective. He asked in 1793, has "ever such a prize [been] won with so little innocent blood?" He declared that while he regretted the deaths of innocents, "rather than it [the French Revolution] should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated. Were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than as it now is."

We can roll our eyes at this statement, which seems, in fact, excessive. But how many other North Americans in positions of influence, or persons of influence anywhere in the world, would have expressed that kind of passionate revolutionary sentiment in 1793? In 1776 Jefferson wrote,

> The oppressed should rebel, and they will continue to rebel and raise disturbance until their civil rights are fully restored to them and all partial distinctions, exclusions and incapacitations are removed.

In January 1787, while ambassador to France, he responded from Paris to reports about Shays' Rebellion in western Massachusetts. This was in its principal aspect a revolt of poor yeomen against high debt, high taxes, and property qualifications for voting.[31]

31. See the discussion in Zinn, pp. 91-95

Jefferson wrote:

> I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical. Unsuccessful rebellions, indeed, generally establish the encroachments on the rights of the people which have produced them. An observation of this truth should render honest republican governors so mild in their punishment of rebellions as not to discourage them too much. It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government… God forbid that there should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion… The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.

This is significant. Is he not saying "It's right to rebel" — at least for whites of his class, and maybe some others?

Jefferson didn't concede that right to slaves, although in a letter to James Monroe in 1800 (when Jefferson was vice president) he seemed to waffle on the point. He referred to the slaves involved in the Gabriel Prosser Revolt in Virginia as being one "of the two parties" involved in a conflict, having "rights" like the other party (the slave-owners) and having been "unsuccessful" in obtaining their ends.[32] (One thinks of Marx's famous dictum, "Between equal rights, force decides.")[33] Jefferson recommended against "a policy of revenge" against captured slave leaders, ten of whom having been condemned to death were reprieved and banished from the state.[34]

Jefferson undoubtedly believed in Black inferiority, at a time when the leading scholars of his world expressed that belief.[35] And if there were paternalistic aspects to his treatment of his domestic slaves, he employed brutal overseers of his field slaves, dozens of whom attempted to escape.[36]

There are contradictions between and within his words and deeds.

This is the case with his relationship to Native Americans as well: on the one hand, an apparent genuine respect for the indigenous people that extended into an academic study of native vocabularies; on the other, a determined policy to remove Native Americans to the west of the Mississippi. All that needs to be honestly assessed. But the assessment of the historical actor shouldn't end there, and there's no good reason to demand a "rupture" with a figure whom Howard Zinn calls "an enlightened, thoughtful individual."[37]

Upholding Bourgeois Revolutionaries as Historical Figures

One can to an extent "uphold" and "extol" a bourgeois revolutionary for the principal aspects of the historical role he or she played.[38] We can note that Jefferson wasn't as forward-looking as a Tom Paine or a Maximilien Robespierre, although he was arguably more progressive than, say, the early bourgeois revolutionary Oliver Cromwell.[39]

How should twenty-first century revolutionaries relate to *any* of these people? We can't just say they were members of a ruling class in some historically constructed class system and leave it at that. In the 1640s Cromwell led a revolution that, in Engels' words, "provides the exact model for the French one of 1789." Engels thought he was "Robespierre and Napoleon rolled into one." Yet Cromwell was guilty, as Engels notes, of "barbarities" in Ireland on a horrific scale.[40] That said, it wouldn't make sense to reject and condemn him (or Jefferson) for NOT being what he couldn't have been — a

32. Quoted in Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1974), p. 224

33. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 225

34. Aptheker (1974), p. 219

35. It's interesting, though, that he read and respected the German physician Johann Friedrich Blumenbach who had written that Africans were the equals of whites "concerning healthy faculties of understanding, excellent natural talents and mental capacities."

36. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/interviews/stanton.html

37. Zinn, p. 89

38. Abigail Adams for example was arguably a female bourgeois revolutionary.

39. For an appraisal of Cromwell by the important British Marxist historian Christopher Hill, see *God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990)

40. *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), vol. 3, p. 469 (from *Vorwärts*, vol. 70, 1844)

proletarian revolutionary and internationalist — and for living in the period and class society that he did.[41]

We can approach the American Revolution and Jeffersonian Democracy reproachfully, emphasizing what they weren't and what they didn't do. Or we can assess them (maybe even respect them) for what they were: a limited bourgeois-democratic revolution and ideology corresponding to a still nascent, dynamic capitalism that had (for a time) an ongoing and largely positive influence in the Americas and world.

As late as January 1865 Karl Marx wrote to Abraham Lincoln on behalf of the International Workingmen's Association, "From the commencement of the titanic American strife [outbreak of the Civil War] the workingmen of Europe felt instinctively that the star-spangled banner carried the destiny of their class."[42]

(It might be relevant to mention here that when, in the 1989 epic Civil War film *Glory* — about the all-Black 54 Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry — director Edward Zwick depicted a Black soldier hoisting the U.S. flag over Ft. Wagner, the *Revolutionary Worker* defended this. *At that time* [1863], the writer argued, the U.S. flag meant something *different* than it means today!) What should we make of this? That Marx (and Lenin, quoted above) was confused about U.S. history? That they were unaware that, steeped in the slavery-tainted Jeffersonian democracy from the outset, that star-spangled banner could in no way ever represent any kind of historical progress? Was Marx stubbornly clinging to a bourgeois-democratic outlook?

Avakian's "unsparing critique" would seem to indicate so. But such a critique makes no sense.

The RCP maintains that its chair is "one of those special leaders who transformed the world in which he lived." Forgive me if I don't see that great-leader quality in his recent talks. And I don't see the dialectics. Lenin while reading and delightedly engaging the long dead thinker Hegel (a contemporary of Jefferson) once wrote, "Dialectical idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than metaphysical, undeveloped, dead, crude, rigid materialism."[43] Lenin's words were aimed at some of the Marxists of his time.

Give me the clear, nuanced, radical mind and eloquent pen of a Jefferson any day — over the affectations of "science" found in the transcribed sermons of Bob Avakian.

41. Might we not as well criticize pre-Neolithic humans for failing to develop agriculture? History is all about the evolution of forces and relations of production and the roles individuals play within constraining matrices.

42. http://marxists.anu.edu.au/history/international/iwma/documents/1864/lincoln-letter.htm

43. V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), vol. 38, p. 277