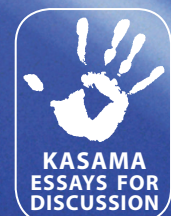


AT A FORK IN THE ROAD

A Debriefing on the RCP

BILL MARTIN



At a Fork in the Road: A Debriefing on the RCP
originally appeared on the Kasama site
in September and October, 2008,
as three serialized blog posts:
“Going Forward from Here (Kasama Post #1)”,
“On Conception and Collectivity (Kasama Post #2)”,
“Elements of Exhaustion, or, Rubber and Glue (Kasama Post #3).”

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fights for the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions.

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At a Fork in the Road

A Debriefing on the RCP

By Bill Martin

Going Forward From Here (Kasama Post #1)

Hello, friends.

Although I have been talking with some of you more directly in the past year, I have remained aloof in some ways from things unfolding around Kasama and around the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). Unfortunately, as someone attempting to be a radical intellectual and to contribute to understanding and changing the world, I have learned this need to take distance from the RCP itself.

As most of you will know, I co-authored the book *Marxism and the Call of the Future* with Bob Avakian. At the time I worked on the book, I thought things were on a different course within the RCP, on the question of working with intellectuals and artists, and on many other questions as well. We can discuss further whether or not things were *really* on a different course or if instead something else was in fact going on. Certainly there were many things happening in the RCP in recent years about which I either didn't know or, apparently, was quite naïve. Clearly people who were actually in the party have a very different perspective on these things than I do.

For me, this whole scene is extraordinarily difficult. Even as I feel some excitement about getting on with things, going forward from here and reconceiving and regrouping, I also feel that in some sense my legs have been kicked out from under me, and I am also feeling the weight of the dissipation of a relationship that, though quite often difficult, problematic, troubled, and

filled with turmoil, was also at key junctures enlivening and inspiring. This relationship goes back roughly twenty-seven or twenty-eight years, to the early 1980s. It is a relationship that involved discreet individuals, with whom at times I developed a good deal of closeness, but where at times I felt I wasn't really dealing with a particular person, but instead an institution or perhaps another person altogether. I realize this is even more true for some who are participating in this effort of reconception and regroupment, and in some ways I have only encountered and begun to grapple with some of the dimensions of this interaction in the past year, and even somewhat only in recent months. As I said, I find it very hard, and there may be some specificities to this difficulty that have to do with being an intellectual. But I also recognize that it is even harder for some others, and you have my sympathy.

For the past year I also thought that I could just hang back, since, after all, my main activity is going to continue to be working with theory (or perhaps it is "academic fluff," as footnote 16* to the recent RCP

* Footnote 16: "During this present period, some communists, former communists, and "fellow travelers" of communism have conjured up an eclectic brew of scholasticism, agnosticism, and relativism, which is in opposition, in some cases consciously and explicitly, to the new synthesis brought forward by Bob Avakian, and in any case to the fundamental outlook, methodology, and objectives of communism. Those who prefer this brew claim that there is no adequate theoretical framework to explain, clarify, and draw the appropriate lessons from the past experience of the communist movement and to guide practice which would avoid the mistakes of the past, as these people (mis)understand them. Therefore, the argument goes, efforts must be spent on what can only amount to endless and

Manifesto* puts it). In the past two years I thought I could just work on my books, including a book on the transition to post-Maoism in Badiou and Avakian. Then I began to think that the book needed to be “post-Avakian” as well. Now I don’t know what it will be, if anything (and I do have the bad habit of saying here or there, maybe in some public talk, that I’m making notes

aimless endeavors to discover, in a realm totally divorced from revolutionary practice guided by communist principles, the necessary theoretical framework. Often this is accompanied by an advocacy, if not an actual carrying out, of practical work and struggle on the most narrow basis and of the most reformist kind—another ingredient in this eclectic brew. All this serves, at least objectively, as a rationalization for withdrawing, retreating, or simply remaining aloof from actual revolutionary struggle—struggle guided by communist theory and principles which in fact can be, have been, and are being developed, in dialectical relation with practice, in the broad and not narrow sense—struggle with a revolutionary not reformist content.

It is hardly surprising, especially in a highly parasitic imperialist country—an imperialism which literally preys on the world and billions of its people—that such a scholasticist, relativist, and agnostic orientation and approach would arise, even with a more or less communist coloration, and would find some receptivity particularly among the more privileged strata, and specifically among the intelligentsia. For, so long as one can continue to maintain that an adequate theoretical framework is lacking, one can continue to convince oneself that there is nothing wrong with refusing to make the commitment to the actual struggle for communism, a commitment and struggle which could compel one to move outside of what is, after all, the not so uncomfortable existence of an academe in the world’s wealthiest and most powerful imperialist citadel. What is being objected to here is definitely not the role of the academic intellectual per se, nor grappling in the realm of theoretical abstraction itself—which can be an important area of endeavor and can in fact make valuable contributions, in various ways, to the cause of communism, even when this does not directly involve the realm of politics and political philosophy. Rather, what is being identified, and sharply criticized, is the phenomenon of making a principle of approaching theory in abstraction from revolutionary practice and in opposition to the scientific communist, dialectical and materialist, understanding of and approach to the relation between theory and practice, as this has been discussed here. And we do feel the need to express our impatience with a certain kind of frankly unintelligible and self-consciously obfuscating fluff that passes itself off as, and all too often passes for, radical thinking in academic circles and which at times even masquerades as Marxism.”

* *Communism: The Beginning Of A New Stage—A Manifesto from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA*, September, 2008. The complete text of this Manifesto can be found at <http://revcom.us/Manifesto/Manifesto.html#text16>.

toward a project, and the next thing I know people are writing to ask if the thing is out yet). However, as I say in the following, I want and need and have a responsibility to go where the interesting conversations are to be had and where the worthwhile work is to be done. I feel that I have a responsibility to contribute to the development of Marxism and to the project of revolutionary communism, even while it is clear that all intellectuals, even those still in the RCP, are being disinclined from making theoretical contributions, and where I am now in the position of going back through the moments when I thought I was not only engaging with the work of the Party but where I also thought the party was engaging with my work.

I have reservations even about Marx—as some of you may know, if you read the *Conversations* book or perhaps some of my other work. But of course there is much in the core of Marx that should be affirmed, and this goes for Lenin and the Soviet Revolution and Mao and the Chinese Revolution and Cultural Revolution as well. It even goes for much of Bob Avakian’s work and the experience of the RCP, even if this is much more one-sided than the work of Marx, Lenin, and Mao. But clearly we are overdue to develop in new directions. Even while the aforementioned work will certainly remain in our “encyclopedia,” as Alain Badiou puts it, we in fact do need some new truth, some new experience, a new synthesis, and we need and await an “event.”

For my first post to Kasama, and at the urging of Mike Ely and others, I would like to share some documents from the past few months. I realize that I tend to be long-winded, which is perhaps an occupational hazard of being a theorist, and also a cultural aspect of being from the South. Of course it would be very interesting and gratifying to receive some comments on this post, but it is also fine with me if my longer posts either recede into the background of a more general discussion (especially of the sort that is emerging with some of the former RCP comrades who are getting in touch with Kasama) or instead go into the more specifically theoretical arena that some of the Kasama people are setting up. While I think much of the discussion at Kasama has been interesting and useful, and an im-

portant part of the work of regroupment, for myself I am a bit wary of spending too much time with internet debate. In any case, I thank you in advance for your patience and I hope something in these documents is of value to you. Here or there I have inserted an additional explanatory note in brackets.

Under the impression that things could possibly return to the opening in the RCP that I perceived (and that many perceived) in the period of roughly 2000 – 2006 (about which, again, I could have been quite mistaken or merely naïve, or possibly even self-deceived to some extent), I communicated many concerns to a leading party member (or who at least I thought was leading; henceforth referred to as “LPM”) over the period since 2006 until spring 2008. For instance, upon reading some of the material that was published in the *Revolution* newspaper leading up to the completion of *Away With All Gods!*, I communicated that I thought there was much in Bob Avakian’s perspective on religion that was wrong-headed and unhelpful. Finally, at the end of May, 2008, I met with this LPM and gave this person the following document. Upon a quick reading of the document in my presence a rather long argument ensued (I made some notes in the aftermath of the argument and may write them up for sharing here at some point), and I have not had any direct contact with anyone from the party since that time. There are three documents:

- ♦ My document of May 24, 2008, which is here almost in full;
- ♦ A letter which I received about a month later, which I will not present in full, but instead will simply characterize and quote from (the language of it will be familiar to many readers);
- ♦ Lastly, a letter I wrote in response a few days later, on June 12, 2008. I have received no response to that letter.



Bill Martin, 5.24.08

Thoughts on the present situation with the RCP, and the Kasama Project [draft]

1. This is not, for me, a matter of breaking with something, since I was never a member of the RCP. I have been, in the past, a supporter, or fellow traveler, or something undefined. I have tried to be a helper and a “conversant.” I have at times taken some serious risks for the sake of this trend; I am not putting this “on the table” as any kind of bargaining point—my goal is to integrate my life and work into the great aim of achieving a future for humankind, a future that I think necessarily involves revolution and the achievement of communism. All I am saying is that I have worked with people who are part of this effort, and even if much of the work I have done has been intellectual and theoretical work, it ought to be clear that I do not come to any of this without the sort of gravity that ought to attend this work.

2. Even so, let’s face it, theoretical work that is done by others than the designated theorists of the ICM is not especially appreciated, and indeed it is generally denigrated. There is a great tradition, from Lukacs to Adorno and Sartre to Derrida and Badiou that has been treated as worse than worthless. (I thought that things in RCP might be changing on this score, but apparently I was wrong.) Even Gramsci is treated as worthless because, after all, he didn’t win. Obviously, this (among other things) makes the recent critique of instrumentalism ring false.

3. So, perhaps it will be taken as “breaking” with the RCP, even if this is not my intention, if I were to have some discussions with some people around the Kasama Project, even if, as an intellectual, that is where some of the more interesting discussions are to be had. I am trying to make my own contributions to the development of a new synthesis, “post-Mao” and “post-Maoism,” and I do not see at this time how interesting conversations with the RCP or BA [Bob Avakian] are going to happen. I recently completed a long book that is aimed at being such a contribution, *Ethical Marxism: the categorical imperative of liberation*

[EM]. It was a long and difficult process to write this book; some of the difficulty included a terrible and ridiculous struggle around the preface written by Slavoj Žižek for the *Conversations* book. [This story will have to be told at another time.] That struggle revealed, to me, that the RCP was not really ready to work with radical intellectuals. In retrospect, it seems to me that the struggle revealed that the opening that was represented by the *Conversations* book was closing up, and now this opening seems all but closed up. Why has this happened?

4. Clearly there is the sense that we do not need further work on the post-Mao synthesis, because this synthesis is now finished, in the form of BA's New Synthesis [NS]. The only "discussion" to be had is aimed at assimilating the NS. Meanwhile, what is profoundly interesting and difficult is that this NS has been issued in dribs and drabs, only in the form of talks (and not systemically developed writing), where there has been little done to deepen the arguments for each of the elements of the so-called synthesis (much of what is done instead is chanting the mantras of science, truth, and the centrality of BA to the revolutionary project of our present time—without, it can be added, much deep insight into the character of this time, for that matter) or, especially, to show the intermotivation of the elements.

5. The declaration of the New Synthesis is premature, and for more than one reason. I would even say, to be fair, that the declaration is desperate, and one can see what is driving this desperation, and it is not simply some egotistical or megalomaniacal impulse coming from BA. We are very late in the day. We are no longer just "coming from behind," we are coming from way, way behind, and we are coming from perhaps more than one stage of things behind.

Furthermore, and I think this is something that is not very well appreciated, in some respects we are too far into the supposed new synthesis without having all of the understanding and assessment that we need of the previous syntheses, even though I think BA has done essential and important work in bringing the Maoist synthesis together. (At the same time, it is also very interesting that there have been several

Maoist syntheses on the table, even in the RIM [Revolutionary Internationalist Movement], not unrelated to each other, but still having significant differences that were not discussed in a way to which some of us, at least, had access. I know there were political considerations at play here, for instance in the way that differences between BA's and Abimael Guzman's sense of Maoism could be discussed, but the overall effect was that (i) people were kept in the dark about how all of this really works, and (ii) the impression is conveyed that the work of creating the new synthesis is only for a couple of major leaders, and indeed it is really only for one particular leader.)

Even so, we still need to understand the qualitative stages of theory that are represented by Marx, Lenin, and Mao, and, in my view, we also need to do two other things:

i) we need to learn from the tradition that I would like to call "philosophical Marxism" (again, Lukacs to Badiou, etc.), and of course others who are outside of the strict MLM (and BA, I guess) canon (in *EM* I propose a distinction between "philosophical Marxism" and "revolutionary movement theory" that I think could be helpful, even though I don't mean it as absolute, and there is also need for "bridging concepts");

ii) we need to retrieve the work of those who were cast by the wayside out of some sense of orthodoxy. Indeed, the fact that neither of these things are happening is yet another indicator of the continuing prevalence of orthodox and otherwise very constrained thinking in the RCP.

The New Synthesis is premature in part because it isn't worked out very well and there are a lot of problems with it, problems that could have been worked out to some extent if the opening of the previous period had continued, and if there had been some sense that "we need a new synthesis," as opposed to the idea that the NS is here and complete, justified by the special role of BA as a leader/theoretician and that "sometimes theory outruns practice."

The desperation of the declaration of the New Synthesis and of BA as a leader of world-historic importance, "on the level of a Lenin or a Mao," is not hard to see or understand, especially when there is

not much in the way of practice to underpin these things in recent decades, but also an unwillingness to go deeply into the reasons for this. I would say the primary reason is that the previous paradigm, Maoism, even while we still need to understand it, learn from it, and build on it, has also played itself out. (And it may be that the previous paradigm is something like a combination of Maoism and “sixties-ism.”) The very idea that we need a new synthesis is a recognition of this point, that an event can be exhausted, played out, “saturated,” it has essentially given us all that it can give us. This is complicated, because this doesn’t mean that we don’t still try to understand the event or phenomenon or sequence, or that what we do later doesn’t “come after” what came before. Our new synthesis will be “post-Mao” and “post-Maoism” (and even post-sixties, and so on).

But it is also the case that the declaration of the NS is premature because a new synthesis awaits an event that is unanticipated (here, by the way, I think Derrida and Badiou are quite close)—otherwise, “theory outruns practice” is just a form of subjectivism.

[Here I am removing a sentence that goes to security questions, though it goes to political line as well.]

6. Yes, I understand that the proletariat and the oppressed will have to be audacious if we are to achieve the aim of a liberated world for humanity, but to convince yourselves that this New Synthesis is really together, and that BA is really the Mao of now, through hyped-up presentations and declarations and whatnot, goes fundamentally against truth—and I think you know this, otherwise you wouldn’t have to declare these things so loudly and with such a jacked-up tone.

The emphasis on truth has a number of problems—I don’t know if I can develop this at length now. The theory of truth that I’m hearing from BA, despite declarations to the contrary, is a rather crude and unsophisticated re-tread of positivism and correspondence theory; in fact, it is barely that, it is more just a repeated mantra of “truth” that is about one step removed from Ayn Rand’s “A is A.” This theory depends on being untruthful about the work people have done for

many decades on epistemology and ontology—as usual, no theory outside the canon even exists, or, if it exists, it is worse than worthless. Second, the emphasis on truth is not backed up with truthfulness about many things in the history of the ICM or the RCP, for that matter. Third, if you believed in truth, then, for example, you would have recognized that much of this recent theoretical work from BA is not very good, and you wouldn’t have to, instead, scream it into being good.

7. In particular, *Away With All Gods!* is just not a very good book, it has some really serious problems, one of which is the continued practice—and this goes to the problem of truth as well—of mainly basing the work around a system of self-quotations. I would add to this the problem of closing a book that supposedly refutes “religion” (whatever that is, one would never know from reading the book) by making a declaration for the “absolute” and for certainty, without having any sense of the modalities under which these terms might operate.

8. You want people to “engage” with BA, even while he doesn’t engage with anyone else (that business about Marx spending ten years in the reading room of the British Museum was truly laughable), but instead just references his own work incessantly (along with superficial engagements with a few texts that are not exactly in the “heavy hitters” category, as with the engagement with Lerner and Armstrong in *AWAG!*), and then, when there is something like a real engagement, the primary approach to this is not in terms of truth, which just goes right out the window on most points, but instead ad hominem attacks. This is nothing but an enforcement of insularity, and it allows you to hold to your “truth” in some pristine and unchallengeable form—I guess that’s why it helps to bolster the absolute at the close of BA’s most recent work, as if there is any notion that is more religious, in a certain sense.

9. The RCP and BA have done some good things, they have kept the flame burning for certain ideas—and I did try to speak to this in my chapter on Maoism in *EM*. That chapter was completed in the fall of 2006, and unfortunately was not

published until the end of March 2008. It may be that all of the work in that book will be meaningless to you, since it is outside of your narrow canon. In the chapter I expressed hope for what I called the “next synthesis,” but I was also trying to forestall the idea that this is already a finished thing. Clearly, it is not a finished thing, even as you conceive it, or else you could put it out there as a developed, systematic work, instead of just as a bunch of scattered talks and self-validating declarations (it’s the new synthesis because BA has conceived it, BA has conceived it, therefore it is the new synthesis). I guess your insularity doesn’t allow you to see how silly a lot of this looks to everyone else, and therefore the way that this sullies even further the reputation of our cause. Marx came out of the reading room with *Capital*, an undeniable work, everyone had to deal with it, such was its intellectual force. (For a group that places such an emphasis on reality, it is very telling that it cannot see how unreal this comparison to Marx in the reading room is.)

I don’t know why it is that BA cannot write, but instead just gives these talks that have such a large amount of self-references, but this is a real problem—again, everyone seems to see this but the people in the RCP, and even they see it, I feel pretty sure, but cannot recognize the truth of the problem. I’m not saying there aren’t some good things in the talks, but still.

As I said to you before, the fact that the phrase “the train has left the station” was used to describe the supposed completeness of the new synthesis is especially galling to me, in light of our conflict over the Žižek foreword*.

* I was asked to ask Slavoj Žižek to write a foreword for the *Conversations* book. I warned the person who asked me to do this that he might not know what he was getting into, but, as usual, this person wanted to press forward. Prof. Žižek was very forthcoming, and then BA didn’t like what Žižek had written. I had some differences with what Žižek had written as well, but I also didn’t see that as the point—and, indeed, the fact that BA and his intermediary (of course I was not dealing with BA directly on any of this) did see this as the main point was once again a demonstration that they had very little sense of the intellectual world that they supposedly wanted to engage with and be engaged by. There ensued a weeklong struggle that was one of the worst weeks of my life, and the publisher of the book also had an interest in having the foreword. There was also very

10. If we really need a new synthesis—I agree that we do—then surely this will also mean a rethinking of the idea of the party, or of organization, as well—and I could develop a number of themes related to this. Wasn’t there a different conception of organization in every previous synthesis? Instead, it seems like the conception now is just an even more narrow version of Lenin’s conception. Maybe that is warranted, but I’d like to see the argument. In any case, I don’t see how I could work within this conception, as an intellectual—but then, I think there is intellectual work to be done, on the new synthesis, and I guess you don’t think that.

There has to be a new conception for two reasons: things are different in the present of our global society, and the previous conception is largely played out. This requires some very creative thinking, and new kinds of engagements, but also real engagements with the people. None of this, in my view, points toward reviving economism (though I think we should also rethink the term, and here is where I have proposed a critique of the whole model based on interests—in some ways not unlike Badiou—even while we might also look at what Žižek says in the *Parallax View* about political economy and the “pure political” theories of Badiou and others).

There has to be a new conception and some new practice, therefore two things follow for me (and maybe not for everyone else): i) perhaps there

little sense that you do not ask a very well-known intellectual to do something for you and then throw it back in their face. At one point I said to BA’s intermediary that the train had left the station on the foreword; that, having asked of it, we had to use it. I was told this was a completely undialectical formulation, and basically reactionary. So, to learn that this was what Mike Ely had been told on the New Synthesis was extremely galling. In the end, Žižek made a couple of changes to the Foreword, on my request, and I added a note to the Introduction responding to a few points that Žižek had made—perhaps the first time that a foreword was accompanied by an author’s response—and I think an interesting and provocative voice was added to the whole discussion. I doubt that BA viewed it this way, and I received a somewhat harsh criticism from him around the whole affair. For his own role in making me so miserable that I seriously considered packing it in altogether, he had no comment or criticism.

is the possibility of a significant morphing of the RCP, into what is needed or something closer to that, and I would say this would first of all involve reconnecting to the opening that occurred in the period of roughly 2000-2006; it would also involve some very significant ruptures—the next synthesis needs to be not only post-Mao, but also post-Avakian, and I mean this latter in both positive and negative ways (perhaps BA himself can become post-Avakian; I do feel a lot of warmth toward BA and wish that this could happen, but I don't know if I can hold out much hope); ii) I want to be where the interesting conversations are that might lead to the next synthesis, and that doesn't seem to be the RCP for the most part. Again, for me it isn't a matter of breaking with anything, unless it is seen that way from your side. As with the treatment of Mike Ely and others associated with the Kasama Project, I think that would be very foolish. We need to rethink Maoism and to think post-Maoism, and no good purpose is served by narrowing this project, or of claiming the revolutionary communist project in some narrow and indeed proprietarian and authoritarian way.

It is very clear that the New Synthesis, as conceived by BA, is not a significant rupture, and that ought to tell you some things.

It is really too bad, even if sometimes understandable—but at other times just plain fucked-up and stupid—that so much has been squandered around this Party, so much of the basis for solidarity and radicality. If the Party just keeps going the way it has, I think it will be even more isolated, though I have no doubt that this will just play into its own self-justification—we're right because everyone is against us. But everyone isn't against you, it is instead that you have not managed to inspire people to be for you—and some of the problems in going forward with the "Engage" project are telling on this point, and works such as *Away With All Gods!* are not helping in the least, on the contrary.

So, I'm going to do my work, which may involve publishing this document with Kasama, so that it can be somewhat clear how I am going to go forward, and which may involve engaging in discussions about the post-Maoism synthesis with

people grouped around Kasama. Of course, I will be happy to engage in such discussion with you or others around the RCP, if it is thoughtful discussion and not simply declarations that the train has left the station. Right now I'm not even sure that we have the train or the station, or at least I think it would be better if we didn't assume that we do. If you have an argument for an alternative, one that somehow leads to dynamic intellectual work and a real contribution to the future of humankind, of course I am open to hearing it.



I gave the preceding document to the LPM on May 25, 2008. If it may seem that I am soft-peddling certain things in the document, I should add that I was rather harsh, and *angry*, in person. On the one side, for instance, I said that I think *AWAG!* is a very bad book, even "a load of crap"; on the other side, the LPM said that it is a "great book." Just lately I was thinking, on a less world-historic scale to be sure, that one might make an analogy to someone who told you that a rather middling album by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers is the greatest piece of music ever recorded. Well, what kind of conversation could follow upon that? With whom or what is one even having an exchange (which could not really be a conversation)?

On about June 10, two and a half weeks later, I received an urgent missive, a one-page (single-spaced) letter, sent by overnight mail (for about \$17), along with a copy of the document, with which I was already well familiar, "Some Crucial Points of Revolutionary Orientation—in Opposition to Infantile Posturing and Distortions of Revolution." This letter came from the LPM, though one suspects that at least parts of it were composed by others. I can hardly bear to look at this letter—it makes me very sad and again, angry.

The letter opens with an expression of extreme disappointment and shock at my level of subjectivity and "the overall unprincipled character of my remarks and attitude." The letter asserts the conclusion that these traits are indicative of my general political direction, and it says that publishing the document I had presented to the LPM, especially with the Kasama Project (in the letter this was put in scare-quotes) would represent

a deepening of that direction. The letter says that, if I am determined to publish the document, I absolutely must not include a particular sentence, the one relating to security concerns, which I have now excised.

The rest of the letter speaks of differences that we have always had, and that appear now to be profound; in conclusion the letter says that, despite these differences, I have a responsibility to act on principle, and that “I [the LPM] will be expecting no less from you.”

Then the letter is signed by the first name of the LPM.



I won't dwell on some of the expressions in this letter, including the last bit; I have already put the letter back in the envelope—as I said, I can't bear to look at it. But I can't help but remark on the directionality of expectations, especially given that, in our contentious meeting, I was especially insistent that the LPM live up to some intellectual expectations, including the expectations of intellectual honesty and truthfulness.

For what reason I'm not entirely sure, but I responded to the letter. I was in deep anguish about the letter for two days and then wrote up my response, which follows.



From Bill Martin, 6.12.08

Dear [first name of the LPM],

We don't have a working printer here, so I'll just write this out longhand and make a copy.

It was disturbing to receive your communication.

First and foremost, I have *not* sought to publish those comments, including the sentence you mentioned, anywhere, nor have I given a copy of those comments to anyone other than you.

Now I wish I had not given the comments to you, either, or had that conversation with you. From the recent communication I see that it is silly to think that the RCP and BA are interested in anything other than strong affirmation. If I thought I was doing anything for the good of the world and the future of humankind, I would still play that game, *your* game based on *your subjectivity* [italics are underlined in original], but I don't see anything good coming of this. I thought that you were breaking with instrumentalism with regard to intellectuals, and some good steps were made, and we even made some steps together, or so I thought, but the way the NS and BA have been put out there, as trains that have left the station, has closed this opening. Now I also wonder why I even gave a copy of my book to you, even though the RCP and BA receive as strong an affirmation there as they will ever receive from any intellectual, and especially from any philosopher. But just throw it on the trash heap with the rest of philosophy. When we were talking about *Away With All Gods!*, I had not read (approximately) the last quarter of the book. It was hard for me to get that far, and even now I have perhaps ten pages to go. I got to the part where BA was explaining the idea of the syllogism, and that effects always come (temporally) after causes. In the latter case, I thought, “read some Aristotle, man!” But I guess the fact that Aristotle's analysis of four categories of causality, even though it was important, very important, to Marx, isn't worth thinking about for BA. But if the notion of final cause, a cause that reaches back from the future, in a sense, is not important to BA, in what sense can the future, or the call of the future, be important, either? What

you're left with is efficient causality, and that always leads to mechanical materialism and dogmatic thinking. Which fits with *AWAG!*, it is mere secular rationalism, not historical materialism, and not really a Marxist book. In my view the book has many other problems, too, but clearly you're not interested in that—just chalk it up to subjectivism. In response to something I said about Badiou, you responded that Badiou is not trying to take responsibility for the ICM. Is that what *AWAG!* is supposed to represent, an act of responsibility? I would say it was very irresponsible to put that out there as representative of vanguard communist thinking. But I'm sure it will stir up something at a track meet, as per that recent *Revolution* article, among people who themselves will probably never read the book. But I'm sure that's fine, too, because who needs people who do read books? Yes, my attitude is very "bad" at this point, because I am angry and sickened at the way things have gone, and maybe I was just naïve to think it ever could have been otherwise. I had written up a bunch of notes after our conversation, but I doubt that it would be worthwhile to send them. I wrote that sentence, which you're censuring me for, because everything else in the last two years or so, and even for me with the argument over the Žižek foreword [to the *Conversations* book], has been so forced. Forced, but also contrived and hyped, with little, very little, of the rigor and science, or any reality to the embracing, that is always being called for. But I can see how it would be very problematic for me to worry in a public way about [the subject of the sentence I excised], even if I also think it is a legitimate worry that I wanted to express to you, at least. So, no, I won't put that sentence out there, or any of the other stuff, for that matter. I'll just try to do my work as best I can, that's all I know to do. However, I would also warn you against drawing certain lines against me, not only because I find it very hurtful in a personal way (I know you find some of what I've said personally hurtful too, but I want that to divide into two: 1) yes, you *personally* need to think about what it means that you can wrap your mind around the NS [New Synthesis] being finished, *AWAG!* being a "great book," etc.; 2) my anger is at this *line*, not you or even BA

"personally," which began to show great promise and now has closed up significantly), without any good coming of it (and really just reinforcing instrumentalism), but also because it is merely self-serving of you (and whomever) to deal with criticisms by putting the critics in the camp of subjectivism or even some kind of enemy.

You said when we were talking that we (you and I) were at an impasse. Perhaps. I think the *world* is at an impasse. Some *elements* of the NS are helpful here, and I will continue to study the documents on this that come out. If you or BA really do see how all of these elements form a synthesis, it is incumbent upon you to demonstrate this systematically, and not to make hyped claims or charge me or others with subjectivism or the rest of the standard litany of insults. I think the hyped or forced claims, and poorly-formulated works such as *AWAG!* can actually contribute to the impasse. Perhaps I have contributed to the impasse as well, though I assure that my subjective aim is otherwise. I do think that, until BA and the RCP recognizes the dimensions of the ways that capitalism and imperialism have become postmodern (which even goes to what BA said about the syllogism, and the category of irrationality by itself just doesn't get it), and the ways that fascism, "Christian fascism" and other forms of the current dynamic (repression, consumerism, low levels of culture, anomie, etc.) work within this postmodern field, and the way that this postmodern capitalism depends on fomenting and deepening the impasse, that it will be too easy to fall into deepening the impasse yourselves, or too shaped by it. Another secular rationalist response to religion is a good example of this, even if *some* of the politics of this response [*AWAG!*] is better than the politics of some of the other secular rationalist critiques out there (on the other hand, as a secular rationalist critique, Daniel Dennett's is better on every level). I can see how a crude sense of "truth" and certainty and rationality (and the attendant sense that others are irrational) would seem like a good response to the present impasse, but it isn't. Ironically, it is a pathway to your own religion, and not a good one, either.

Please do not think I take any kind of pleasure in getting into this, I find it ridiculous and tiresome

and intellectually debilitating that all of this has arisen at all. Please do not insult me further by telling me that BA can't be the kind of intellectual I want him to be. Someone who can't be bothered to systematically engage with some range of the more developed, deep, and thoughtful work in his field of inquiry (religion or whatever), and who instead spends an inordinate amount of verbiage quoting himself, is not an intellectual or someone who could have anything to do with intellectual ferment. On the contrary, this approach to a philosophically-heavy subject just makes our whole cause look ridiculous, and it shows contempt for thoughtful people. But go ahead and put your pre-formulated "explanations" on my objections; unfortunately, it is very hard to imagine anymore that you would do anything else. You're right—it's my subjectivism that leads me to think that constant self-references are a problem in theoretical work, especially "scientific" theoretical work; one would think that constant self-reference would be almost the very definition of subjectivism, but I guess that's just a matter of form rather than content [this is something that the LPM said to me, that my challenging of the method of self-reference only goes to form, not content].

Okay, now I'm just getting pissed off thinking about this stuff, so I'll just go back to my work, trying to add to the 2500 years of cant [BA once referred to Kant as "nothing more than cant," a point we discussed in the *Conversations* book]; believe it or not, I wish you and BA the best in your own work.

Bill



Obviously there is a great deal more to discuss, even concerning the material presented here, and let me remind the reader that I knew nothing of the "Cultural Revolution" in the RCP or other aspects of reorganization that are discussed in the recent Manifesto. Neither did I know about the role that the *Conversations* book, including two parts in particular (on Kant and instrumentalism, and on homosexuality), played in internal party matters. It is ironic and very sad that, apparently, the discussion of instrumentalism in the book played a role in reinforcing instrumentalism in

the party and, I can only assume, with people outside of the party (including yours truly). The greatest irony is that, apparently, it was decided for instrumental reasons that it would be good for a period to have a critique of instrumentalism, and now that period has passed and there has been a reassertion of the value of instrumentalizing people. This exchange of documents also occurred before the New Synthesis presentations were made in various parts of the U.S. To say the least it was painful to read the part of the presentation that supposedly stressed the importance of philosophy. Not the history of philosophy from Plato to Badiou—oh, hell no! Who needs that bourgeois crap and academic fluff? Instead what we need is that "truth is correspondence to reality." Okay, I'll quit (for now).

We are faced with a truly difficult task, to take account of Maoism and the attempt to develop and even surpass Maoism, and then to *really* surpass it, which means being open to something new. We have to carry forward Marx and Lenin and Mao and the experience of proletarian revolution, and even the real contributions of Bob Avakian, and there may be a few others we ought to bring forward. More than this, we might think further on the idea that we should not forget that communism is always bigger and deeper than any of the rest. "Human life is limited, but revolution knows no bounds."

On Conception & Collectivity (Kasama Post #2)

I. AT THE FORK IN THE ROAD

Thanks very much to all who commented, to those for their warm welcomes and greetings, and to those for their difficult questions and even sometimes acerbic remarks.

I am going to try to get around to many of the points that were raised in the comments* in what I hope will be a coherent narrative (well, somewhat!); I'll try to address some specific points (e.g. the Žižek stuff) toward the end. I apologize for the length of what follows—I'm trying to make one of the contributions to this project that I feel that I can make, to the development of theory, and I realize that not everyone will see this as where their own efforts are best devoted.

About thin skin and the way people get used

The decision to enter this fray was not taken lightly. I came to this point after many months of turmoil and some discussion with Kasama people. The document I gave to the person I described previously as a "Leading Party Member" [LPM] was meant as a provocation and a way of bringing certain things to a head.

To collapse the whole process of the last year, perhaps the last two years (of developments in the RCP that seemed to me to be shutting down the opening of 2000-2006, and that were going in some basically wrong directions) into a single point: I believed in the end that I owed it to the LPM and the RCP and Bob Avakian to put forward my objections one more time, in a somewhat more developed form.

I want to make it clear that I did express many of the same points that are made in the "Thoughts" document in various forms (discussions in person and on the phone, emails in the period from at least the summer of 2005 — and even before as concerns — to take what seems to me a very significant example, what ap-

* See Appendix for text of the response thread to Bill Martin's "Kasama Post #1"

peared to me as a campaign against Kant and especially the second formulation of the categorical imperative, which is an injunction against using people) until I gave the document to the LPM.

Yes, in the case of the LPM and some others (even BA to some extent) I was also thinking in terms of a personal relationship, and feel free to criticize or even condemn me for the fact that I get caught up in these "personal" things.

It is not only that I do not want to be used myself (and perhaps have a "thin skin" about it), I also do not see that anything good has ever come from the valorization of instrumentalism.

The RCP in particular (though hardly alone among Marxists—and Leninists, Stalinists, Trotskyists, and Maoists, or even Situationists or Anarchists for that matter) has squandered a great deal of energy that could have been marshaled toward the radical transformation of society, and I think it is not just my own sensitivity on the subject that makes me think the RCP has especially squandered the energies of intellectuals and artists.

Certainly all of this goes fundamentally to line, especially the narrowness and short-sightedness of the line as regards work in the intellectual and artistic spheres (and then, of course, as reflected on the other side by what is proposed as a supposed world-historic breakthrough in Marxist thought, the New Synthesis).

If, however, I have at times bristled and gotten a bit prickly, perhaps even whiney and self-pitying (and, just to add to the list, I've thrown a few outright temper tantrums too), or, if at times I have come across as "being above it all" (it is interesting that EME accuses me of both—but she/he is not necessarily wrong), perhaps it would help to understand that this is a very difficult terrain to negotiate.

EME wrote after reading Kasama Post #1:

Certainly plenty to consider, but so infested with self-pitying subjectivism its hard to get to the truth here. Why does he care so much what BA or the RCP think about him? And now he comes here whining for sympathy! Get over it. He may well be right on the need for a new post-maoist and

even post-BA synthesis, but I'm not [clear] what his contribution would be. And having "interesting" conversations is nice, but is that the point here? I could never understand why the RCP was so excited about its relationship with Bill Martin and I am equally unclear as to why Kasama would not be so welcoming to this "intellectual." I guess I'm still a Stalinist at heart!

EME elaborates in a second post::

"I also admit that much of his writings are over my head. That may well be mainly my own shortcomings. But he also brings an "above it all" mentality to the discussion. I find that tiresome...

"Martin is caught up in the status of Žižek in a bourgeois sense. And he was astonished at the idea of going back to him to edit the forward. In his world this is unacceptable. This he describes as a "horrible week." Most of us who spent years working with the RCP probably chuckle at that.

"Sorry to go on, but the line I am getting from Martin is actually one of bourgeois right in regards to the intellectuals and the privilege of "interesting conversation" vs struggle for the truth."

I don't mean to sound as if I am speaking from "on high," but it may very well be that a person who does not work in these fields and who hasn't tried to negotiate this terrain would have very little idea how difficult this can be. Just to respond to one thing that concentrates this difficulty, in response to what I said about the week when the LPM and I were arguing over the Žižek foreword to the *Conversations* (that it was one of the hardest weeks of my life), EME more or less said the equivalent of "well, boo-fucking-hoo."

Okay, fine, on one level, perhaps EME is right and we don't need any of these pesky "intellectuals" anyway. (EME places the term "intellectual" in scare-quotes in his/her first post.) Obviously, I don't really believe that, but clearly that is the standpoint of not only some of our "Stalinists," but also for too much of the ICM, even from the time of Marx.

Rising to Defend Interesting Discussions

However, there is another side that may mean nothing to people who put the term "intellectual" in

scare-quotes. People who are really committed to intellectual or artistic work (regardless of their politics) have to find a way to make a strong connection between that work and their lives, on many levels. If the work gets messed with, so does the life. If someone does destructive things to my work, they are also doing destructive things to my life. I'm not talking about thoughtful criticism directed at my work, I'm very grateful to have that, especially as my politics are communist, and that means that I understand my work to ultimately be part of a collective project that is working toward forging new collectivities.

I won't go on with this point much further here, as I don't know why I should have to justify to a "Stalinist at heart" why, as an intellectual, I want to be part of the interesting discussions. Perhaps the rest of you will understand that "interesting discussion" for a communist intellectual doesn't mean what passes for fascination in the junk-"culture" of capitalism.

I'd like to think that I am trying to understand some things that are important, and I try to engage with others who are similarly disposed. I became an academic with that aim in mind (I say this in part to respond to something from the infamous footnote 16 of the recent RCP Manifesto) where it says (among other things):

"It is hardly surprising, especially in a highly parasitic imperialist country—an imperialism which literally preys on the world and billions of its people—that such a scholasticist, relativist, and agnostic orientation and approach would arise, even with a more or less communist coloration, and would find some receptivity particularly among the more privileged strata, and specifically among the intelligentsia. For, so long as one can continue to maintain that an adequate theoretical framework is lacking, one can continue to convince oneself that there is nothing wrong with refusing to make the commitment to the actual struggle for communism, a commitment and struggle which could compel one to move outside of what is, after all, the not so uncomfortable existence of an academe in the world's wealthiest and most powerful imperialist citadel."

But perhaps the RCP and some other old Stalinists think we need more discussion of the "not uncom-

fortable” lives of radical intellectuals who are also so fortunate as to have university posts?

I could say a lot more about this, but I don't really see where it goes to any constructive point. Perhaps I could be convinced otherwise, though probably not by someone who puts the word “intellectual” in scare-quotes. As for other flaws that I have that some people may want to pick on, I assure you that they are many and varied and deep.

Ethics and believing in things that don't exist

When I speak up for a Kantian, anti-instrumentalist perspective, I want to make it clear that I also disagree with Kant on questions of violence and revolution. There is a lengthy discussion of this topic in my book, which was published at the end of March of this year (2008), *Ethical Marxism: The Categorical Imperative of Liberation*.

The book is meant as an intertwining and intermotivation of Kantian and Marxist themes, with help from others, such as Sartre, Derrida, and Donald Davidson, and of course Lenin and Mao, and with chapters on subjects such as the discourse of good and evil in Marxism, imperialism as the ethical question of our time, and the animal question in Marxism.

Ironically, as I said in my response to the letter from the LPM, there is a chapter on Maoism in the book that gives a strong “endorsement” (for want of a better term) to the RCP and Bob Avakian, including his work toward a new synthesis.

In the conclusion of the book I get into some of the questions of science and religion that are very much in the air right now. One aspect of this discussion that is relevant here is that I address the formulation (from BA):

“Let's stop believing in things that don't exist.”

The problem is there are some things that don't exist that we have to believe in if they ever are to exist, namely a viable future for humankind and (in other words) communism.

This presents an epistemological problem that is not addressable entirely in terms of “science,” or at least certainly not in the mechanical-reductivist terms

of science that some are still pursuing, even some who would vehemently deny this (the problem being that the denial is about all we have, we aren't presented with good examples of non-reductive thinking).

At an earlier stage in my book I use some brilliant passages from William James to demonstrate the dimensions of this problem, which reappears in Sartre as the problem of the human project (that we “project” ourselves into the future, and that having such a project, for humans, is integral to getting there or anywhere). This theme appears in many forms, from Kant (one of his three central philosophical questions, in addition to “what may we know?” and “what ought we to do?”, is “for what may we hope?”) to Ernst Bloch (*The Principle of Hope*) and beyond.

But I went to William James not only because he is brilliant on this point and on many others, but of course also as a provocation against those who always already know they can't learn anything from James and don't need to read him, since he can be dismissed *a priori* as “made-in-the-USA pragmatism.” A certain kind of religious perspective sets an epistemological problem that is well worth studying, and that can't simply be dismissed.

In any case, I mention my book here for three reasons:

First, and unashamedly, I think people ought to get hold of it and read it and grapple with it, it is my own attempt at generating a new synthesis in Marxism. The book has many flaws, I'm sure, and many arguments that might be considered “experimental” and that perhaps do not succeed. It may even be that the whole basic idea of the book, to rethink Marxism on the basis of the idea that ethical questions are real questions and not just epiphenomenal (as in the case where the whole point of talking about ethics is just to get by with some larger instrumentalist scheme) cannot be sustained, maybe it is the case that the ethical really counts for nothing in the grand scheme of things—though in that

case I would say that it doesn't particularly matter what we do about society, if anything, either. But of course I think on the contrary, that it matters tremendously, crucially.

Second, some of the notes I had made for the whole project of an "ethical Marxism" were the initial basis for the *Conversations* book, and I thought Bob Avakian was very gracious in allowing what was essentially the basis for my own project to structure our conversations.

This to me was emblematic of a certain special time for the RCP, and I still think the *Conversations* book is an important achievement of Marxism, and that the discussions we had were very worthwhile. Obviously, after the book was put together, the authors went in different directions, as they say. I was really struck by how, in the period of the book's publication, BA seemed to be making a point of going after Kant.

Incidentally, there is another trend, far more philosophically engaged, that also makes a point of being dismissive of Kant, the "new Spinoza" trend of theorists such as Althusser, Hardt, Negri, to some extent Deleuze and Guattari and some of their acolytes, and even to some extent Badiou, who protests against substituting ethical theory for politics (as with, in his view, figures such as Habermas and Levinas). In the latter case, I don't think he is wrong on the particular point, but, in general, it seems to me that bad things come out of the mere dismissal of Kant.

I don't mean disagreeing with Kant on this or that point, or even proposing alternative schema for some of his larger arguments. (For instance, I think we can have a perfectly good, materialist reading of arguments about intersubjectivity, that don't require us to get into some of the more "theological"-sounding aspects of deontology*; Donald Davidson's work is exemplary on this point, in my view, and I appeal to several of his arguments in *Ethical Marxism*). What I am especially wary of is the impulse that doesn't want to put in the work toward trying to find such a (materialist, even

historical materialist) reading, because such a reaction, besides being intellectually lazy, seems to lead back into a Hobbesian instrumentalizing of persons that can be seen in Spinoza and at times in Marx.

So when I say that, after *Conversations*, the authors went in different directions out of the encounter, I would say that it turned out that what was most important in terms of philosophy and politics is that one of us went into a deeper engagement with a Kantian rejection of instrumentalism and the other went in the direction of thinking that this Kantian position cannot be sustained (even though it might also be argued that this position can be found, at least at times, in Marx—and we discussed this in *Conversations* and I have pursued the point in a good deal of my work, not only in *Ethical Marxism*, but also, for example, in an earlier book called *Humanism and Its Aftermath*, in a section where I critique what I call "prudential Marxism"), and therefore into a reassertion of instrumentalism.

Ethics and Internationalism

In *Conversations*, I tried to press the point that one could not get to internationalism purely on the basis of "interests" (again a point I had been pursuing elsewhere).

On the other side, one could say that interests are the *sine qua non* of a certain kind of materialism. I tried to develop this argument more systematically in *Ethical Marxism*; to make a long story short, I argue that, if we don't have an ethical basis for internationalism, we won't find a materialist basis for it, either.

(Some of this has to do with the point, also discussed at some length in *Conversations*, that if one tries to "stretch" the idea of "material interests" to a certain point—for example, to make it an "interest" in a far-flung future, then we aren't really talking about interests any more—and the same thing might be said about a far-flung land. Of course, there are ecological questions that bring all the lands and seas together, or that are bringing them together, in a largely disastrous way, but to be motivated only by that—"I don't want them to build all those factories in China because eventually I'll have to breathe that air, too"—is, at least in my view, the very definition of economism.)

* Deontology is the doctrine that there are acts whose rightness or wrongness is not wholly dependent on the goodness or badness of their consequences. Deontological theories take duty as the basis of morality. The phrase, 'no matter what the consequences,' is often the sign of a deontological view. The opposite of Deontology is *Consequentialism*.

What one might say is that the rejection of the ethical basis of internationalism leads to a backing away from internationalism itself, and this appears to have happened with BA and the RCP (what remains of it), too.

When I first got involved with the RCP, a big part of the appeal—as opposed to the rest of the alphabet soup of groups calling themselves Marxist—was the strength of their internationalism.

In one of those talks or documents in the last few years (I can't remember which one), BA disavows "Third World-ism."

Now, this is one of the many moments in BA's work (I was about to call it "writing," but it rarely is that) where the point is undeveloped, so I don't know exactly where he was going with this. It is certainly the case that there have been transformations in the world in the last twenty to thirty years, such that terms such as "Third World" may have to be reconsidered and rethought. But there is also the history of what the imperialist countries have done to the Third World that has to figure into our politics now and in the future.

I tried to thematize these issues in *Conversations*, though I recognize in retrospect that there were moments in the discussion where I didn't do a very good job, I was straining to find a common language on certain points and I wasn't able to do it. Especially around pp. 230-232, I was really floundering around, both because I was trying to express something about the ethical and a kind of historical redemption that I only barely grasp myself (if at all—and, to be deconstructive about it, I think it is one of those things that one must continually strive to grasp even while realizing that one never entirely will. Why? Because ethics sets an infinite task [Kant]; because human life is limited but revolution knows no bounds [Mao]*) and because I was try-

* As Mao was dying he sent the following prose poem, summation and warning to his wife Jiang Jing (and through her to us all): "You have been wronged. Today we are separating into two worlds. I am old and will soon die. May each keep his peace. These few words may be my last message to you. Human life is limited, but revolution knows no bounds. In the struggle of the past ten years I have tried to reach the peak of revolution, but I was not successful. But you could reach the top. If you fail, you will plunge into a fathomless abyss. Your body will shatter. Your bones will break."

ing to find a common language that would allow us to pursue these themes.

In *Ethical Marxism* I develop these themes at length and (I hope) with a degree of rigor and in a systematic way that could not be done in the *Conversations* book (even if I had had the mental presence to do so on this particular point).

Just to be provocative, but I do actually believe this, let me put it this way: Kant and his general trend of thought (regarding intersubjectivity and ethical-political universalism) is the bulwark against economism, because it is also a bulwark of the tendency of materialism to fall into mechanical and reductivist thinking, and it is the bulwark against a merely calculative "ethical" scheme based on interests. (I realize that "bulwark" is a rather stodgy-sounding word!) And, one sees this bulwark raised in many places in the work of Lenin, Mao, and even Avakian (consider the excellent and famous, to many of us at any rate, page in *Conquer the World?* where Avakian talks about the role of intention in determining whether the Soviet Union under Stalin remained a socialist country), even if these theorists cannot bring themselves to credit Immanuel Kant with this line of understanding.

We need Kant for our internationalism in this age of imperialism (our real internationalism, not simply an interest-driven solidarity, which will never close the gap or begin to address or even recognize the historical debt); readers here who actually want to study and think through the question might look to the chapter on Kant in Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire*.

Recoiling at a Fork in the Road

My third and final reason for bringing *Ethical Marxism* into this discussion is that, when I was writing the book, from about 2002 (when, again, some of the earlier notes for the book became the basis for the discussions that became *Conversations*) until the fall of 2007 (the writing was essentially done the year before, but in the fall of 2007 the manuscript went through an intense editing process; while my editor and I at times had some serious and sharp disagreements, she also saved me from myself many times, as she has before—

and my point is that some books really get edited and benefit greatly from that, if one is so fortunate as to have a great editor, and some “books” are put together in a different way entirely, a way that, in my view, is not very responsible), it was under the strong impression that I would continue to travel a certain road along with the RCP and Bob Avakian, even if we had some differences—some bigger than others.

I have only seen in retrospect (and even that only in recent months and even weeks, and now I am sure there is still a good deal that I do not know) that we were at a fork in the road sometime after the publication of *Conversations*. It was around the time just before the publication of *Conversations*, in spring 2005, specifically around the Foreword to the book by Slavoj Žižek, that it was declared rather forcefully to me by the LPM that Bob Avakian is the man with the new synthesis.

Well, I also believe there needs to be a new synthesis, though, to respond to the issues raised by Ka Frank, I also think we need to be careful in our declarations of the scope of a new synthesis. (I’ll return to this point more specifically.)

In any case, *Ethical Marxism* is my own proposal for a road toward a new synthesis; while I do develop many arguments there at length (and with an attempt to engage with many sources, for example some of the “new agrarians” such as Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson), and while I hope I went a good distance in establishing the central idea that (okay, now I’m going to indulge in self-quotation [!], this is from the final sentence of the book), we need: “a Marxism that recognizes that there are real ethical questions and that, indeed, the questions that ought to be most central to it are, at their core, ethical questions” (p.450), I also wrote the book to try to definitively open something up, rather than to definitively close something down.

I wanted to open up fruitful lines of inquiry (for example, it is as obvious to me as to anyone else that most Marxists or Maoists are not going to immediately jump aboard with the arguments I make about the animal question—and neither are some of my friends among the new agrarians), to generate “interesting discussions” (obviously I’m bristling at that a little bit!), to generate

possibilities for commitment, and, yes, to generate new possibilities for praxis.

Bob Avakian took another road with these inquiries that we had explored in *Conversations*. This may seem a bit speculative and overreaching, but I think there is a real sense in which the road he took was something of a recoil from what we had jointly opened up with that book. There are other levels on which the recoil seems to work, perhaps most especially against some of the other formulations of Maoism that are expressing themselves in practice in the world.

But even there I would allow that there is a basic theory of responsibility and internationalism, which I have associated with Kantian impulses, that BA seems at great pains to counter.

On the level of theory, or, it might be said, on the level of Bob Avakian as theorist, there is a sense in which that is fine. Others react against this Kantian line of thought, too, such as the aforementioned “new Spinoza” theorists, and that can lead to a very fruitful discussion—among theorists talking to other theorists, and even among theorists who are trying to connect with the masses in a way that leads to revolutionary praxis.

There is still plenty of Sartre/Althusser discussion to be had, for instance, and one could say that some of this discussion occurred in important ways on the streets of Paris in May-June of 1968. That’s one of the best “philosophical” discussions anyone ever had!

A Finality Around Personality That Shuts Down Exploration

There is a difference, however, between having an intellectual exchange with a theorist with whom one has some disagreements, where there is also the possibility of sharpening ideas, where there are certain standards of discourse that are upheld, and reading the transcribed talks of a man of destiny.

My sense of Bob Avakian when we had our conversations in the spring of 2002 was not that I was talking with someone who had a messianic sense of himself.

Maybe that is because, when you sit down to actually talk through philosophical or social theoretical or political questions, what matters is what is brought to

the table and the quality of the interaction. I think we accomplished something very good—not great, not a great book, not a great work of philosophy, but a very good dialogue of a sort that is rare and with little precedent. We developed some important questions.

Of course it mattered that I was talking with the leader of an advanced Maoist organization, but it does appear that in the years after we participated in the conversations BA and those around him made the decision to promote BA in hitherto unseen ways. Not that there were not precedents for this in the history of the RCP (and, of course, in the history of the ICM—but on this point it doesn't seem that much has been learned, nor has there been much appreciation for what the promotion of "personalities" might mean in our celebrity-junk culture), but clearly all of this has gone to new and qualitatively different levels in the last few years.

Ironically, given the campaign, the "culture of appreciation and promotion" has placed BA beyond "engagement." Significantly, Gary Leupp called that campaign "suicidal"—a point I didn't see at the time, at the beginning of the "Engage" campaign, when I signed the statement just as I had signed many others.

Clearly there are moments (too many) when I am not too bright!

The RCP has now moved into a realm along with certain interpretations of the main trends of Western monotheism, of being historical but not wanting the attention of actual historians. Avakian wants to be involved in philosophy and other intellectual fields, but not to have to be subject to the scrutiny of philosophers and other intellectuals. BA wants attention, he wants promotion and "appreciation," but not real engagement. And this makes sense: if you are claiming to have made a world-historic breakthrough in Marxist thought, on a level with "a Lenin" or "a Mao," you've got to deliver the goods—you know, like Marx did after he spent ten years in the reading room of the British Museum.

I discuss this sort of formulation, a Lenin, a Mao, in Ethical Marxism, when I take up BA's "engagement" (lack of, in fact) with "the Derridas"—which makes as much sense as "the Beethovens" or "a Beethoven." No specificity at all, no real interest in learning anything—Sophie hit the nail on the head with, "While Avakian

drew from other people's works it was, unfortunately, most often to 'second' his own theory or conclusion. I rarely remember Avakian expressing the delight and excitement of discovering someone else or an approach that surpassed his own." Well, perhaps "delight" is bourgeois, just like "interesting discussions," and clearly there is nothing that surpasses the New Synthesis.

So, yes, EME, maybe you're right when you say "I could never understand why the RCP was so excited about its relationship with Bill Martin."

I certainly see the first part of that, that you could never understand. (Why try?)

But contrary to appearances, I'm not saying this to be personally insulting to you, but more to underline the way that the RCP itself has gone with this—essentially, "What if the Derridas were communists?," but not, "What if a few of the communists—not all or most of them, necessarily, but some of them, read Derrida's (and a few others) works and tried to understand and learn from them?"

II. BURNOUT, OLD TUNES, AND NEED FOR THE NEW

Dealing with philosophical and theoretical issues is just one of many things that we need to do to build and sustain a new communist movement, and probably not the most important thing.

This is different from taking recourse to "well, philosophy isn't for everybody, it's not everyone's cup of tea" (at the dinner party that is not a revolution).

But it is important, and it is a lot more important than what can be seen in the declaration of its importance in the talks that were given around the New Synthesis,* where an allegiance is declared once again to the narrow canon of Marx, Lenin, and Mao, even while disavowing crucial aspects of their philosophical work, and with a very minimal and bogus nod toward Hegel, and then a proclamation of the real deal, that the unsurpassable horizon of our thought in this era is BA's discovery that truth is correspondence to reality.

* For a transcript of that presentation, see http://revcom.us/a/129/New_Synthesis_Speech-en.html.

Maybe we don't need "all this theory" or theorizing. Some of us get carried away with mere verbiage from time to time—I know I do.

(Then again, I remember reading the preface to BA's memoir, where Lenny Wolf writes that Cornell West suggested that BA tell the story of his life, so once again they got out the tape recorder, and I thought, "here we go again." Years ago, back in the 1980s some-time when I would periodically write letters to BA and others in the RCP, I suggested that Derrida might have something interesting to say about the logocentrism of tape-recorder theorizing—but whatever!)

However, we actually need to go even further than Lenin's "without revolutionary theory there won't be a revolutionary movement." It is deep in humanity that we are the kinds of creatures who need both theory and revolution—and we need art, culture, philosophy, and "interesting discussions" too, they aren't just optional add-ons.

To say the opposite is a kind of economism, perhaps definitive of economism.

We all wish things were a little more simple and straightforward, and it doesn't hurt to point out those places where, in the midst of the complexity, something simple and straightforward also needs to be said. Maybe if things were really simple and straightforward we wouldn't have had such a hard time having socialist revolutions and keeping them going. If things worked in as linear and mechanical way as some in the ICM have thought, even at times our most important leader-theorists, then we'd already be in a communist world by now. Except we wouldn't, because humanity is not simple or straightforward or linear.

Reductivist dreams (nightmares, really, but it is not hard to see the very real situations and frustrations that lead to them) of a simplistic "revolution," without all this "tiresome" philosophy (not that it isn't tiresome sometimes, and I'm sure I've contributed to that at times, but it is also tiring, exhausting, and again in ways that people who don't do this kind of work might not understand, especially if one is trying to coordinate this work with revolutionary politics), are in fact a cancellation of human possibility and the human project.

(A side note: we need political line, but we need something like a conception of "line without linearity," and a line that also encounters the critique of the idea of the line, as seen for instance in Derrida and Deleuze. I think Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of chess and Go in *A Thousand Plateaus* is pretty interesting here, and of course the discussion of Go also brings in Mao and guerilla strategies.)

Repackaged Thoughts as New Masterpieces

Dealing with this stuff—flip and unthinking potshots against philosophy and intellectual work—burns a person out, and now there's another layer of burnout, when the recent RCP Manifesto basically says that BA has been the chair of a party that has been mostly composed of revisionists for most of its history.

That is astounding, really, that the "Cultural Revolution" in the RCP is based on the idea that for more than thirty years the party has been mostly revisionist, most of the time. And now to take recourse to the idea that "the party, no matter how small, can lead a revolution, if the line is correct" is also an astounding admission of defeat, after all this time. It's one thing to say that at the beginning of party formation; after thirty-three years it is something like a mere abstraction.

Better of course neither to burn out nor fade away, but clearly that means moving forward from here, toward really finding the new synthesis.

But for perhaps a brief period longer, another few weeks or even months, one of the things that needs to be done is to "remember the good times and the bad times."

We still need to bring forward the "good times," including the many contributions that Bob Avakian has made to understanding the experience of socialism and the possibilities of revolution. For my part, I think we need to bring forward that vibrancy that was opened up in the 2000-2006 period of the RCP (and perhaps even periodize the whole thing in a way that I, not being in the party, would be incapable of doing, though I keep hearing very interesting things), a very significant part of which was the change in the line on homosexuality.

With 20/20 hindsight, perhaps that line change was the beginning of the opening that the RCP itself, or its Chair, began to fear. Again, there are others who can speak to this far better than I can, at least in terms of the dynamics inside the RCP (and I appreciate what John Steele said on this subject, regarding different lines in the party), but I think this “recoil” thesis—as always, carried out under the headings of urgency, security, and unique innovation (and not that there is not some truth under each of these headings)—bears further scrutiny.

(“2changetheworld” would be another interesting example.)

Looking for Where They Blew It

In some sense, the party was already closed down when that period of vibrancy and experience closed up, and maybe now it’s a little like those bands that tour every summer but with only one or two original members. It’s essentially a cover band that is still capable of doing a good rendition of the old tunes, but we can’t expect anything really new from it.

We need a new song or a new symphony or concept-album, even, and the old band gave us some good bits, but when they patched those together and claimed to have the new masterwork, they blew it.

This needs to be repeated, even if it perhaps just speaks to my own naiveté (so maybe I need to be reminded repeatedly that I have at times been very naïve): in the 2000-2006 period, I had great hope for the direction of the RCP and what it might mean for larger social transformation in the world, at least as someone looking on from outside of the party, and then they managed to blow it.

It might even be that they could not help but blow it, because they were up against both some of their own limitations and up against a world that is geared toward the prevention of the emergence of real events, a world where history is suppressed, even a world where humanity lacks a world (as Badiou puts it), and Bob Avakian did not find the way to transcend these limitations, or even to confront these limitations in a rigorous, systematic, scientific way.

Instead, in a sense, they reified and valorized the limitations (sometimes in very crude ways, such as going on about “epistemology,” as if no one else had ever pursued the subject, and just using the term “postmodernism”—as it is often used in academia, too—as a way of not having to actually read “the Derridas,” “the Foucaults,” etc.), and that’s where they blew it.

Some of the limitations they were up against are there in the world, and they needed to try to understand these; some of the limitations were internal to their own model, including a simple unwillingness to do some homework. As Mao said, “the important thing is to be good at learning.” Perhaps everything finally turned inward to the point where some qualitative line was finally crossed, propelling BA and what remains of the party into something very close to solipsism.

As I said in my response to my “kiss off”/security-warning letter, I take no pleasure in recognizing any of this, and neither do I think anyone should. It is a real loss, and we need to take account of it and how it happened in order to do better. We also need to take account of the real limitations we are also up against in any attempt to regroup into a new communist movement.

I’ve been thinking more about formulations of the “taking responsibility for everything” (e.g., the whole ICM) sort. On the one hand, from a Kantian and Sartrean standpoint, this formulation is appealing—obviously an irony for Bob Avakian and the RCP, given their efforts to negate Kant. On the other hand, this sort of approach (taking responsibility for the whole world) can be rendered vacuous, a mere “empty formalism.” (This last was Hegel’s charge against Kant’s ethical philosophy, which was taken up by Marx and Engels.) Taking responsibility for everything can be a way toward mere armchair philosophizing and effectively taking responsibility for nothing.

Furthermore, if this perspective is mixed in with the idea that this unending responsibility is “singular,” as it supposedly is in the case of Bob Avakian (no one else is doing what he does, no one else can do what he does), then there are numerous bad results.

There is a denial of the collective nature of the communist project, and therefore it becomes difficult for new collectivities to emerge.

It is hard to see, in this case, why there is a need for the party, and we have seen the results of this approach with the RCP, where it is less and less a party and more a study group based around Bob Avakian's talks. I understand the point that the Bolsheviks weren't really the Bolsheviks without Lenin, and the same dynamic for the Chinese Communists and Mao, but that is again where a leader-theoretician has to deliver the goods. Extraordinary claims for the singularity of a theoretical development and for the singular role of a certain leader have to be backed up. Without that, and without the party, even Lenin and Mao are just theoreticians, and then we have to look at their work according to certain standards.

Another way to put it is that, in my distinction between Revolutionary Movement Theory and Philosophical Marxism, the former is not going to stand up that well without an actual movement that is feeding into the theory and that is able to take up the theory and make it a material force. This never happens all at once or in one single, smooth motion, but if it isn't really happening at all, what is left at the end of the day are some theoretical fragments that may be very insightful but that don't form a "new synthesis."

I did beseech the LPM over the last several years to try to pull together some of the intellectuals in the party, who are at times capable of doing very advanced intellectual work that meets high standards, to themselves write the kind of book that would make Bob Avakian's many important insights into a coherent, rigorously- and systematically-developed whole, a whole that is connected to broad developments in the areas that were important to Marx and Engels: political economy, philosophy, and history.

Why there was such resistance to this idea, basically a book on the social theory of Bob Avakian, is worth investigating, and I would guess that whichever aspects of this are connected to internal developments (or devolutions) in the RCP are also, at deeper levels, connected to line questions—most fundamentally the line question of the singularity of the chair.

The result again is bad: on the one side, a lack of trust and building collectivity, which also seems to have resulted in simple mean-spiritedness; on the other side, this singularity undergirds and interpenetrates with the sense that BA can only rely on himself for work in theory, and therefore he only reads his own work and continuously quotes himself.

To pursue this singular form of theoretical work ends in the solipsism that has been very nearly accomplished at this stage. It is a special kind of valorization of a philosophical monism, the monism of a single mind that is somehow capable of taking responsibility for the whole world. A better Kantian formulation would be that we should all try to take responsibility for the whole world, and that part of our striving is a recognition that this struggle must be waged on a number of fronts, and that sometimes certain people play special roles in this struggle and should be supported in their work.

Again, I tried to develop this argument in a way at least congenial to Marxism and historical materialism in Ethical Marxism, and no doubt from the (strangely existentialist) singular-minded monist perspective I am engaging in the terrible sin of "eclecticism." In fact I do think a good argument can be made for philosophical pluralism (an argument I make, for instance, when confronted by the divide in the institutions of Western philosophy between "analytic" and "continental" philosophy, which then also excludes many other schools of thought that have interesting contributions to make) and for what I call a "team concept" in Marxist theorizing. Of course I also think we should continually aim for a synthesis (that's what Kant said too—all thought aims toward a system), and that we should do this "in accord" with the general aim of understanding the world in order to change it. Especially in response to the forced declaration of a premature, singular monism, however, I think we'd better risk some "eclecticism" and even what will undoubtedly be condemned as "agnosticism."

Of course it is ridiculous to have the very few people who are engaging with Bob Avakian's work dismissed as "parasitic critics." But this is coming from a solipsism in which only one person is authorized to

think. As others have said here (at the Kasama site), why wouldn't this lead to a moronization of the party? Why wouldn't this lead to "whateverism"?

III. OTHER CANS OF WORMS

Now I will try to respond to some specific comments more directly, but still with some interweaving of themes. I won't be able to do full justice to all of these comments—sometimes the shortest comments require the longest answers (e.g., the idea of postmodern capitalism, or my disagreement with *Away With All Gods!*), so some questions will have to be developed in subsequent posts.

Jose, thanks for reading my little book on Sartre (*The Radical Project*) in grad school, there is an essay in that book that takes off from Sartre's "Elections: A Trap for Fools," and perhaps that can be reprinted here.

For the 2005 centennial of Sartre's birth I was asked to write an essay for the Sartre Studies journal, and I returned to the elections topic in the context of the Bush regime and the fascist leanings of our present system of postmodern imperialism. However, in part thanks to the libel laws in the U.K., where the journal is published, the essay was rejected because I refer to vice president Dick Cheney as an "evil fascist scumbag."

This of course is hilarious, and one would love to see the actual trial: "How do you plead, Mr. Cheney, on the charge of evil?" and so on. But perhaps that essay can be placed here in some fashion, as it goes into the questions of fascism and "postmodern capitalism."

Postmodern Capitalism

One of the components of the latter, as I have tried to develop the thesis, is a very active role for capitalism and imperialism in the "consciousness business," under the twin imperatives of creating a massive and overwhelming "culture of distraction" and actively destroying memory and any sense of history. The fact that, in the mainstream of political discourse, John McCain can only be referred to as a "war hero," and not the war criminal that he is, and the larger point that in no way

can the American invasion of Vietnam (and Southeast Asia) generally be acknowledged as a horrendous, immoral, historic crime (the main title of Part 2 of *Ethical Marxism* is "Unforgivable Napalm"), but only, at most, as possibly a "mistaken policy" (perhaps even "tragic," as such, but not for the Vietnamese people, who must never be acknowledged to even exist, except perhaps as evil torturers of John McCain and as still holding the remains of MIAs), is emblematic of the functioning of this postmodern cultural machinery. This machinery is an integral part of the system, not incidental or epiphenomenal to it.

Obviously, this is just a thumbnail sketch, and there is a lot more to the "postmodern capitalism" thesis. I've tried to develop the thesis in other places, including the conclusion to that little book on Sartre, but mainly I am trying to employ some ideas from Fredric Jameson, from a remarkable series of books: *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Capitalism*, *The Seeds of Time*, and *The Cultural Turn*.

I have also been trying to take account of one of Bob Avakian's best ideas, the lopsidedness thesis, which was also developed significantly by Raymond Lotta and others.

Postmodern capitalism is still in the orbit of imperialism, so it is something more like a "half-stage" of development, though there are important qualitative differences between postmodern capitalism and the imperialism that preceded it. Periodization is difficult, but I think we're looking somewhere in the vicinity of 1972-1980.

The postmodern capitalism argument also has implications for theses concerning the emergence or implementation of fascism in the United States, "Christian" or otherwise.

As Pavel Andreyev* and others have argued, one of the central failings of *Away With All Gods!* (and other work that takes up the "Christian fascism" thesis) is that it sheds no light on fascism itself.

Indeed, by punting on this question for the sake of a laugh (the not-overly-funny, "Why do we call them

* For Pavel Andreyev's review of *Away With All Gods!*, see <http://mikeely.wordpress.com/2008/08/23/critiquing-religion-without-understanding-it-a-review-of-bob-avakian%E2%80%99s-away-with-all-gods/>

Christian fascists? Because they are Christians and they are fascists”), we are placed further back from understanding this phenomenon. We are also in the position of abdicating on allowing these fascists to call themselves “Christians,” which I think is also a step back.

Furthermore, it may be the case that there is a social base for “Christian fascism,” as conceived by various political and “moral” leaders (for “traditional values,” etc.) and that they have a good deal of power (as witness the Sarah Palin candidacy and the way it was forced on McCain), but in that case wouldn’t we want to try to see how this works with the idea that, in the end, it is the dictatorship of the imperialist class that calls the shots?

Clearly there are significant differences between the “classical fascists” of the first half of the twentieth century (and beyond in the case of Spain and Portugal), the way that fascist currents have been working in the United States since the Bush regime was installed.

We need to understand these things (or try to understand, and this is one of my issues with BA’s work, I don’t see much effort toward understanding some things that are at present not understood, and this reaches a new level of willful ignorance/arrogance in AWAG!), and we need to understand what crisis could look like in these circumstances. We need to understand where possibilities might open up. If imperialism has morphed to a significant extent into a postmodern phase, this also shapes what sorts of fascist currents might work through present circumstances.

One thing that is very interesting and important here is how well the lopsidedness thesis works with the postmodern capitalism thesis. But perhaps this combination also tells us something about where we need to go with Maoism, and perhaps there is a lopsidedness here, too—where the new synthesis might be one thing in the hyperpower of postmodern capitalism and another thing in the Third World, or even in different parts of it, parts that are as different as India and Nepal for instance. I would be very hesitant to say much about the revolutionary process in Nepal in any case, but it is also the case that I haven’t put in the work that would be the basis for saying much. It does appear to me that the Nepal revolutionaries are on completely

new terrain, and that they will have to create their own new synthesis and not fall back on formulas.

Obviously I’m not saying anything that everyone here doesn’t know already. Clearly, Kasama posters such as Ka Frank are digging deeply into the situation.

I realize that this is a bit of a “punt,” but I don’t see anything wrong with punting sometimes as long as one acknowledges this. What I think is very bad methodology is to do something that amounts to punting but instead to put it out there as if the essentials have been figured out.

Undoubtedly there can be, at least at times, a thin line between going forth boldly and audaciously, and just trying to bullshit everyone, including oneself, and this is probably even more a danger on the terrain of theory and especially in attempting to theorize developments in distant lands. Surely we have to take risks along the places where that line falls, but I suppose that theorists especially need to work with some contradictory combination of audacity and humility.

The Trajectory of Badiou and French Maoists

However, to engage something that Ka Frank and others raised, as to where we really ought to go with the next synthesis, I do think we need to look at the trajectory of Badiou and the Maoists in France, and we need to think more about what Badiou calls the “saturation” of an event and its “truth-procedure,” the point where these have basically given us all they can give us, and that hanging on doggedly to the former paradigm leaves us spinning our wheels at best (and possibly going backwards).

This doesn’t mean that I agree with Badiou on everything, including his understanding of the state, party, party-state, or the development of an “organization of politics, without party.”

To be perfectly honest, I am still trying to understand these things. For that matter, I am still trying to understand some of the trajectories in philosophy that (in some sense) lead to Badiou, for instance, the trajectories from Kant to Derrida and Davidson, and the specifically French trajectory, Sartre-Althusser-Derrida-Badiou. It is not an urgent task, perhaps, that

everyone apply themselves to this, and many will find it “tiresome,” but what is not a very helpful reaction is to dismiss studying these things under the heading of “Badiou is not taking responsibility for the international movement,” etc.

The announcement in this context that there will be a “new online theoretical journal,” as per again footnote 16 is a bit worrisome, the way it is framed there sounds purely reactive, yet another exercise where the writing is done to a pre-established conclusion.

At least with philosophy, if you’re going to criticize a particular figure or text, you have to read some of it first—but what a waste! “Okay, I guess we have to read Badiou now, at least enough to show that he’s wrong.” Certainly it will help that most of the audience for this will be people who aren’t going to read any of this stuff (Badiou, etc.) for themselves.

IV. A LOOK AT AWAY WITH ALL GODS

AWAG! is a “good book,” too, for people who aren’t going to read many (or any) other books on religion, Christianity, or theology. The carefully-written review of *AWAG!* by Pavel covers many of the problems with the book, perhaps most of all the difficulty of what it would even mean to treat this as a serious book on its purported subject.

Does it mean anything that no serious scholar or theorist in the field of religion will take this book seriously, or is this simply an indictment of intellectuals who are so fortunate as to have positions in the academic world?

AWAG! is a “good book” in a world where there are “discussions on epistemology” and even an “epistemological break” with no sense that some others might have worked on the problem—it is a world without Wittgenstein or Russell or Carnap or Quine or Davidson or Husserl or Heidegger, and on and on, and without Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, etc., the rest of the bourgeois crap from which we can learn nothing, especially when there are truly great books on religion or epistemology being, um, “written.”

“Religion” is one of those words like “sexuality”—people often get very deeply into discussions about either one without exploring the basic idea in a thoughtful way. Perhaps at some point I can write up some more extended thoughts on *AWAG!* If you read the *Conversations* book, it is probably clear that I am more sympathetic to at least some religious perspectives (and to the epistemological problem captured by a certain kind of religious perspective) than either BA and the RCP or, most likely, many people who are reading this.

I will mention here two things that seem emblematic of the problems of *AWAG!* These might be taken to be small points, and certainly they are passed by very quickly in *AWAG!*, but they demonstrate to me that this book has some big problems.

Methodology in Discussing Liberation Theology

First, it is deeply problematic that BA feels he can treat the entire subject of liberation theology in a footnote (pp.19-20), and even there only refer to one book on the subject.

This particular book sounds quite interesting (M.R. Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit, Liberation Theology by Victims of Untouchability, an Indian Version of Apartheid*), and I don’t mean to be in any way dismissive of it (indeed, BA’s reference makes me want to seek it out), but it is emblematic of *AWAG!* as a whole that most of its references are to either lightweight or somewhat marginal texts.

It would not be overly speculative to guess that the fact that there is a rich and sophisticated discourse of liberation theology would impress BA about as much as the fact that there are many books recommending creationism and “intelligent design.” I would think that a historical materialist, unlike a secular rationalist, would find that there is something to learn from some of the work in liberation theology (and, in order to find out if this is the case, would go to some of the key figures, such as Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutierrez), and even from the existence of this trend in the first place.

So Much for Karma

Second, and this may seem nit-picky, but I don't think it is, there is a phrase at the end of the book that runs, "under the weight of religious notions such as 'sin,' and similar concepts such as 'karma' . ." (p.235).

This is the only reference to Buddhism in the entire book, and so all of it is plopped together in a single word with the Western monotheistic traditions. This is the sort of thing right there that means this book cannot be taken seriously by people who do take the many questions of religion seriously.

Indeed, the very notion of what is a "religion" is called into question by placing "sin" next to "karma," as it could be argued that, if Christianity is a "religion," then Buddhism is not, or vice-versa. Furthermore, Buddhism seems quite consonant with some form of materialism, perhaps even some form of dialectical materialism, but not with historical materialism, and we might think a bit about that in light of the bit of existentialism that BA offers on the question of meaning earlier on that same page ("the meaning there is to human existence is **only the meaning that we human beings give to it**"; boldface in original). In Buddhism, as I understand it (not at all being a scholar of Buddhism, but, on the other hand, having studied a bit, trying to learn from it), the cause of human suffering is the expectation that existence—"human" or otherwise—will supply some meaning in the first place; instead we should give up this yearning for what we will not find in any case, some larger scheme of things in which our suffering (or our happiness, for that matter) makes sense. (In *Ethical Marxism* I deal with this idea in relation to the ideas of Don Cupitt, a "post-Christian experimental religious thinker," as he calls himself, much influenced by Buddhism; see pp.209-210.) Why is this not perfectly good "materialism," even if one that recommends against formulating a "historical materialism"?

Furthermore, what is the relationship between "human-made meaning" and truth? I suppose we await further dispatches from BA's epistemological break on this question, especially as no one else has ever worked on this question.

Interesting Discussions in the Holes of AWAG

Now, we could have some interesting discussions on these questions, if that's your bag.

But maybe it isn't, in which case I would say *Away With All Gods!* is probably a great book for those who don't want to do a lot of reading or thinking. But in that case you don't need to read AWAG! either, just let it stand there in its greatness.

If instead, one were to pursue some of these interesting discussions, including the one about Buddhism, one might come to the realization that it is only against the background of Judaism and Christianity, as transmuted especially through German Idealism and the encounter with political modernity (and, you know, the Enlightenment, which we are supposed to defend, except in the case of its greatest thinker and exponent, Immanuel Kant—it all reminds me too much of the way that Ayn Rand supposedly championed "romanticism," even while dismissing Beethoven), that we would have gotten a thinker such as Karl Marx. And this is because Judaism and Christianity already have a kind of historical materialism built into them (or they are built around it, around some fundamental perceptions about history as an unfolding process with a certain underlying coherence). This can't be seen from a secular rationalist perspective, though it might be added that most of BA's fellow secular rationalists aren't historical materialists either.

Just to restate this point more directly: Marxism is unthinkable without the background of Judaism and Christianity.

Perhaps we have here another instance of the "recoil" phenomenon—don't look in certain directions, don't open up certain kinds of discussions, because they may take you in directions that you won't like.

V. NEW FORMS AFTER AN EXHAUSTED PROJECT

I realize that I opened a whole can of worms with the following:

“If we really need a new synthesis—I agree that we do—then surely this will also mean a rethinking of the idea of the party, or of organization, as well—and I could develop a number of themes related to this. Wasn’t there a different conception of organization in every previous synthesis?”

The points raised by Zerohour in this connection are well taken:

“Obviously, Lenin had more developed views on this than Marx, but was Mao such a departure from Lenin? If the party-form is exhausted as you and Badiou argue, what could the RCP have done anyway?”

Let me make it clear that I am not saying that I agree on Badiou completely on this (and, again, I am still trying to understand his argument), I simply think we need to consider the idea that a politics or a political form can be “saturated,” as he puts it. I think the Marx-Lenin-Mao comparison is instructive here. Lenin’s understanding of the party was more than simply a “development” from Marx, and, at the other end, we could see Mao on the party as the bookend at “the end of a stage” (to coin a phrase!).

I don’t know what the next phase of organization will look like, though I am willing to work with others who believe in a communist future and a revolutionary road toward it to figure this out. In many ways I am at a loss on this point, I want to state this quite clearly.

It can be added that at many points I found it difficult to function in relation to the RCP structure, even from the outside.

On Bus Until...

On the other hand, in my way at least, I stuck with them for a long time—and it is interesting that, from the RCP standpoint, and this goes even much more for the people writing (or reading) here at Kasama who were actually in the party, this seems to count for nothing.

To use an analogy that I’m sure has some limitations, I rode that bus for a long time, and clearly even beyond the point where the driver had decided that it

was time for me to get off, or at least that I didn’t have anything else to add to the journey.

I think it is quite clear that I would be riding that bus (or perhaps it is a train) even now, if I thought it was in any deepgoing way still headed toward revolution, and even if that meant there wasn’t a place for my own work in that journey.

On the other hand, and not to overestimate the value of the work that I do, an argument could be made that the fact that the RCP really does not need the work of any extra-party critical intellectuals (and I would say especially in the field of philosophy, and it doesn’t need anything from the whole history of philosophy) is itself indicative of the exhaustion of this party’s project.

There are many good ideas that came from BA and from the RCP, but often these are undeveloped and, ironically, not taken seriously enough. This idea of “the end of a stage, the beginning of a new stage” is perhaps one such idea. And it could be that the RCP has indeed gone through a qualitative transformation into something “new,” through the development of the Culture of Appreciation and Promotion and the Cultural Revolution, but it’s pretty clear these things aren’t new at all. Just to put it provocatively, there are three levels to this idea that “BA is a leader of the caliber of a Lenin or a Mao.” Yes, on one level, we need a Lenin or a Mao, or someone of that “caliber.”

On another level, what does this mean, exactly, and are the theoretical and practical contributions of BA really on that plane? Perhaps this is a very “academic” sort of thing to say, but I think some of these contributions could have been, if they had been developed more systematically.

BA wants a more “Germanic appreciation” of his ideas, and he wants his theoretical work to be compared to what Marx produced in his ten years in the reading room of the British Museum. Well, again, you have to deliver the goods.

And, yes, even if BA had delivered the goods, recognition among intellectuals might still be slow in coming, even among Marxist and other radical intellectuals; but why contribute to the factors of isolation? Perhaps this is the skewed view of an academic, but when I came up through the tenure and promotion

system, I knew very well that I could not give anyone any excuse to get rid of me on grounds of productivity and quality, and therefore I did a lot more work than many others who have received tenure. I feel that BA often gives excuses to his detractors, and AWAG! is a sterling example.

Again, I stayed by them and tried to warn them; what I was seeing of the material leading up to this book made me very worried, and I expressed this on many occasions—in what I hoped was a helpful, constructive spirit.

When the book came out, it was even far worse than what I had anticipated. I think there are times when the treatment of philosophical topics by Lenin and Mao, and even by Marx, has some problems—but never at any point does one get the sense that they are just “screwing around with ideas.” But often I do get that sense from BA. So, it would be hard to answer the “*caliber*” question affirmatively.

We Need a New Song and a Whole New Style

On a third level, we need something new, something perhaps as yet unforeseen—and yes, this is where it is hard to entirely blame the RCP (as in, “what could the RCP done anyway?”).

It’s a little bit like blaming an artist for his or her failure to make a creative breakthrough beyond one of the reigning paradigms.

And yet, to return to the previous analogy, even if there might still be some good symphonies to be written in the style of Beethoven, and some good blowing to be done in the style of Coltrane, and some good songs written in the style of the Beatles (check out “Sewing the Seeds of Love” by Tears for Fears, for instance—it uses pretty much every late Beatlesism, and it’s a lot of fun), we also need a new song and a new symphony.

However, there is a fourth level, because very few of the RCP’s “songs” were on that plane (and I will add the obligatory disclaimer that neither were the songs of any other group, though a few of them had some worthwhile things to say).

As a provocation, but I think there is something to it, it might be said that we needed “another Lenin or

Mao,” but what we got in some sense was another Stalin. I only want to go so far with that, and I also don’t think everything about that is completely bad, but still I think there is something to it.

It may be that there are some economistic and pragmatic (in a narrow sense—I still think we could stand to learn from William James and others in that tradition) lines of thought running through Kasama, along with many other lines.

We don’t know what Kasama “is” yet, and we are still thinking through what it ought to be.

But I think we have seen enough of the RCP’s instrumentalism, and clearly the RCP has seen enough of those who don’t think it is a good idea anymore to function within those instrumentalist parameters.

In some sense this is also evidenced by the whole, “if you leave the RCP you will eventually leave the revolution itself” line—as if the fact that there are a lot of people who are simply burned out from all of this is some sort of accomplishment. Maybe I’m just too sentimental for this kind of “politics”: yes, there are lines of demarcation, and we shouldn’t follow anyone into an economist or revisionist swamp, but what does it mean if we are actually happy that others are going into the swamp? In the recent Manifesto and Constitution there is no sense at all that this fracturing of the party has a tragic dimension. There’s no sense of loss—just, “you’re going in a different direction now (and we weren’t interested in your criticisms), so piss off!”

There might be a political value to a little bitterness about this from at least some of us. Maybe there is even some political value to a few more sentimental looks at that broken-down bus on the side of the road.

At the same time, for me at least, to give up on revolution and communism is to give up on the future of humankind, and I’m not going to do that, and I hope others don’t either. Where we go from here is difficult; obviously I have some proposals in my work, but what is more important now is the broadest discussion of committed radicals, a discussion that demands every ounce of critical thinking and creativity that we can muster. But again, and I say this not out of consideration for any career issues or a not-uncomfortable academic existence (though I did find that, around the

Finkelstein work, most radical activists still know very little about how to function in the academic world), I would hope that Ethical Marxism could be taken up as part of the discussion of the next synthesis that we need.

Let me clear up one thing. The whole flap over the Žižek foreword did not precipitate any break, even if it deepened a certain wariness in me—and perhaps in BA as well. When the book finally came out, we had a very exciting time promoting it, doing what seemed to me to be some very good book events in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and Berkeley. We had good crowds for all of them and had some good discussions.

No, the break really came, finally, when I made my one last attempt to communicate some things to the LPM, and then the RCP decided that they wanted to break with me. You could say that I pushed things such that they really had no other choice. But again, without wanting to overestimate what value I may have for the RCP or anyone, I did hope they would take it seriously that I was fed up and worn out by their half-baked theoretical work, especially when it was hyped to the stars. In addition to being sentimental and thin-skinned, I tend to be naïve and trusting.

Some of the “recoil” phenomenon may have been at work in the Žižek affair—especially in light of the fact that a number of ex-party members have told me they were not even aware of Žižek until the book came out. Clearly BA and the LPM didn’t know what they were getting into, which didn’t prevent at least the LPM from rushing into it.

Speaking of exhaustion, if you made it this far, thanks and congratulations for your patience!

Hi Chegitz! Amazing! (There’s a funny story there.)

The problem is that this is all too much, and yet there is still a good bit more to cover and there are things to be gotten into more deeply. Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I could imagine that many readers (who probably didn’t make it this far) do not find this sort of discussion helpful. If no readers find my postings worthwhile, don’t worry about hurting my feelings, I can either stop them altogether or move them into some other forum (which will ultimately be prefer-

able anyway). Otherwise, I look forward to developing some of the points raised here further, and revisiting the comments to which I might not have done sufficient justice, and getting into other issues altogether.

For the most part I see my place in the larger Kasama discussion as working in the movement from the “debriefing” of Maoism to the rethinking of Maoism and the forging of the next synthesis.

On the first of these (“debriefment”), I would especially appreciate comments on what I am calling the “recoil thesis”—if it is right, how is it right, and what are some instances of it; or, if this is not a helpful thesis, please help me see how this is the case.

Friendly regards,
Bill

Elements of Exhaustion, or, Rubber and Glue (Kasama Post #3)

I. RECOILING INTO A DEAD END

Hello again, Kasama friends and lurkers. After my last, very long piece, I set myself the task of writing shorter posts—but of course I failed, and I imagine that I will continue to fail in this. So please bear with me, and, as I said before, if this kind of discussion is not your thing, then don't feel any obligation to read on.

One other thing that may appeal to some, and not to others: the main orientation of many of my posts will be to continue what I'm going to call "a debriefment of Maoism," with the aim of generating some terms for the next phase. Here and there I hope to show how Alain Badiou helps us move beyond a revolutionary sequence that has become "saturated," to use his terminology. Ultimately I hope to combine all the posts into a little book, something that would constitute a kind of "workbook" of "post-Maoism."

As I've said before, the fact that I am working on this should not be taken as representing a perspective on my part that either 1) there aren't other people making valuable contributions to this specific project; or 2) there aren't other projects that are just as important, if not more important.

I am interested in "getting there from here," where "here" is the Maoist current in communism. But this is not only a complicated question (as I hope to demonstrate in these posts, including the present one), it may even be that there are pathways that certain currents of Maoism have taken that are effectively precluded from getting "there" (that is, revolution). It may even be that we simply have to accept a fundamental disconnect between "here" and "there," that seems to be one upshot of Badiou's theory of truth-events, for example as applied directly to the field of politics in the essay, "Politics Unbound":

"In this chapter I shall place philosophy under condition of politics. Not exactly the most contem-

porary of politics, but the one that can be called the 'first cycle' of modern emancipatory politics, the revolutionary and proletarian cycle, the one to which the names of Marx, Lenin, and Mao remain attached. Bear in mind that . . . each one of these names designates a singular sequence of politics, a historical mode of its rare existence, even if philosophy occasionally seeks to bridge this essential discontinuity for its own ends." (*Metapolitics*, p.68)

In other places, for example in the essay on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that has been published as part of the book, *Polemics*, Badiou seems to assimilate Mao to a larger sequence of "Leninism" (where Stalin represents the "lower stage" and Mao the "higher"), so there are some things that need sorting here.

As I said in the "Conception and Collectivity" post, there are many questions in Badiou's philosophy that I am still trying to understand, but there are some things that don't seem to fit together quite as coherently as Badiou might think they do. But this is a matter for further investigation, and I hope to write a post about how Badiou is certainly helpful on at least some key points that will help us move forward with the revolutionary project.

However, let us not close down the idea that some of what we need for the revolutionary project may at least appear to be fundamentally disconnected from what we have previously understood.

Thanks very much for the comments and criticisms on "Conception and Collectivity," I hope to respond to some of them more directly in a subsequent post.

The Recoil Thesis

With fondness I remember Bob Avakian's insight in *Conquer the World?* that sometimes Marxists are the last ones to see some things that are glaringly obvious to everyone else.

One of the most important contributions of that work was to put the understanding and criticism of the Stalin period on a new, radical basis, and certainly Stalin was the exemplar of what can be called extreme "cul-de-sac" thinking. On a lesser scale, but still vying for attention in this regard, we can recall a line from Enver

Hoxha's *With Stalin*, to the effect that "not a single major mistake in either theory or practice was ever made by this brilliant leader"—that is, Stalin. One almost has to admire this level of doggedness.

Undoubtedly it is difficult to take in a friendly spirit the idea that an organization has persisted in an endeavor to the point when it has become exhausted. Perhaps this is especially difficult when it comes after a time when it seems that new life was being breathed into the project.

It is incumbent upon the Revolutionary Communist party (RCP) to look more deeply into this time, roughly from 2000 to 2006, and to be clear on why it wanted to break with the openings of that period. I would again offer the "recoil" thesis, and also even the sense that, when it comes down to it, the wild and woolly vicissitudes of real life are simply too much for Bob Avakian (BA) and the RCP to work with.

I seem to recall a discussion from long ago (in the Revolutionary Worker) concerning two kinds of coach in basketball, the one who sees the players as simply an extension of the coach on the court, and the other who seeks to guide the players in such a way as to unleash their initiative on the court. The best of BA and the RCP was when it tried to be like the latter coach, but the consolidation of the line around the Culture of Appreciation, Promotion and Promotion (AP&P) of the Chair seems to also be a consolidation of the notion of others, whether in the party or not, as simply extensions.

The Exhaustion of a Paradigm

The argument is that the consolidation of this line betokens the exhaustion of a paradigm, or its "saturation." The paradigm is filled up, it has gone as far as it can go. It has come to the end of its road and is in a cul-de-sac.

This happens both for the fact that the elements of any given paradigm can become played out and the fact that objective conditions in the world do not sit still either. The paradigm has given what it has to give (and this is hastened if the paradigm has closed in on itself), and it might be said that the world has drawn out of the paradigm all that it can as well.

It is very hard, however, from the inside, to recognize that this point has been reached. There are a number of reasons for this, including even simply an emotional attachment and sense of "investment" in a cause. One of the harder reasons to deal with is the fact that, even under the exhausted paradigm, some powerful and true criticisms and exposures of the existing social system can be raised.

However, this is also true for previous paradigms in the physical sciences, for instance. The Newtonian paradigm in physics is completely filled out, but, on the other hand, we apply Newton's laws of motion every day, even in just walking down the sidewalk. Some elements of cellular biology are being replaced with models in molecular biology, but the cellular model still works fine for many purposes. Still, no one working in physics today pursues the theoretical study of Newton's laws.

Arguably things are different in the arts, and it is important that philosophy is in some respects more like endeavors in the arts, in that its paradigms and central creative figures may not simply be surpassed. At least for my part, I think that even figures such as Plato and Aristotle or Descartes and Spinoza still have much to give us, though I realize there are many who claim an historical materialist perspective who believe otherwise.

Still, surely it is good Marxism to realize there comes a point when something is played out. After all, BA put forward a provocative thesis about "the end of a stage and the beginning of a new stage," and he also declared at a certain point that it was time for a new synthesis, and then, at a later point, that the new synthesis had been completed.

How did he know when the moment was ripe for the new synthesis, and how did he know that others had not already gone some distance toward creating it?

After all, the "End of a Stage," essentially the time when there were socialist countries in the world, came in 1976. For a party that now claims that its main contribution is the theoretical work of the chair (at least that is how I am reading some of the recent statements from the RCP, especially the Constitution and the Manifesto), this has been a long time in coming,

and though, as I have said repeatedly, it contains some good elements, it is pretty clear that this is not the new synthesis that we need to enter into a new period of struggle to change the world.

There are some (hi, Carl!) who claim that we do not need a “new synthesis” at all, associating the very idea with what Richard Rorty used to call “grand, German-style social theorizing,” or with the idea that the problem with a philosopher such as Sartre was that his “Frenchness” gets in the way. I hope to address this question in a subsequent post.

For a party that now says, in the Manifesto, that it was mostly revisionist most of the time anyway, why should others who want to make a contribution to the revolutionary project of communism be disparaged for seeking new channels for work, including theoretical work? And why should there be disparagement for seeking out some ideas that were foolishly dismissed along the way? That some of this work includes the critique of the “stage” that was the attempt to keep on with Maoism after Mao, with some qualitative developments, but perhaps without a real qualitative leap into something that is really a new stage of Marxism is, I’m sure, irksome to those who want to stay within this paradigm, but so what?

If you can’t present good theoretical arguments to defend continued work within your paradigm, but instead can only rely on the circularity of a special historical role for the Chair that somehow guarantees or underwrites the presumably non-communicable aspects of the new synthesis, can you really blame others for not being ready to swallow the whole package? Can you really blame others for raising criticisms of this path, or for trying to formulate an alternative?

Continuity and Discontinuity

As I understand it, the RCP is claiming that the new synthesis is more on the side of continuity with Maoism than discontinuity. (At the same time, there has been no developed statement on the relationship with “Maoism” or with “Marxism-Leninism-Maoism,” though it appears that the MLM formulation has now

been removed along with the “Three Ours”^{*} at the Revolution newspaper site.)

This might be understood as a separate question, at least analytically, from the assessment of the various elements that have been put out there as making up the new synthesis. Certainly there is one “element” that ties the whole package together, the “caliber” question (that we now have in the world a leader of the “caliber” of “a Lenin or a Mao”), and this can be put on the table as a qualitative discontinuity.

Clearly there is a good deal of frustration on the side of the RCP with the failure to make this claim in any convincing way.

I realize that there is more than simply “theoretical debate” at stake here, but imagine (or pretend) for a moment that theoretical debate is the core of it. Some of us are trying to develop a better theory, and one of the reasons we have to do this is that Avakian’s New Synthesis is seriously deficient in a number of respects. This in itself wouldn’t be as big a problem if the opening of 2000-2006 had kept going, and if the new synthesis had been understood as a still-developing, collective, and engaged project—and not as essentially finished and tied together by the “caliber” claim. At least that is how I look at it—I realize that not everyone posting at Kasama does think this, and some of this has to do with whether Maoism is even in everyone’s “encyclopedia,” to use Badiou’s term; it is definitely in mine.

Truly being in a new stage, however, might mean not making this a cardinal question—I really don’t know the answer to this, I think it needs more debate.

Coming Through Maoism or Through Other Trends

On this point, let us digress for a moment on two issues:

First, I know that it is difficult for many of us who came in one way or another through Maoism to now engage in regroupment and reconception with people

^{*} The “Three Ours” was a formulation that ran for years in *Revolution* newspaper and on the revcom.us website: “Our Ideology is Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, Our Vanguard is the Revolutionary Communist Party; Our Leader is Chairman Avakian”.

who came through other Marxist or otherwise radical trends (even other trends of Maoism, but obviously I especially have in mind the various Trotskyist trends). I do think there is something to the fact that, for a long time, among trends within Marxism, only the RCP and Bob Avakian were really willing to put the possibility and necessity of revolution out there and to try in various ways to pursue revolution. That has to count for something, but what exactly in our attempt to forge a new paradigm? It might not be a matter of Trotskyism itself having something to contribute (on the other hand, why rule this out per se?—again, I ask this not because I know the answer, I’m just trying to understand), but why not some people who came through that experience and who themselves were looking for ways to radically change the world?

There is one thing I do know, however, and I don’t hesitate to say it is a basic article of faith: no form of economism is revolutionary, no matter how militant its expression. Obviously we can put a group such as the Spartacist League on a special pedestal as a brilliant example of militant economism—and we can ask what it would mean to not be anything like what they are exemplifying. This is where once again I would want to pursue the question of what might be called “Kant for communists,” and the key to it (as I explore at abundant length in *Ethical Marxism*) is to ask what it would mean, from an historical materialist perspective, to take ethical questions to be fundamentally real. I would say that the alternative to this is economism and instrumentalism, but this argument has to somehow work with the reality that a revolution against imperialism and toward communism is the most ethical thing we can imagine. But I will pursue this further in an additional posting.

As a bridging comment from this affirmation of faith to my second point, I might mention something from my experience in England. As many readers will know, the Marxist scene in England (and the U.K. generally) is dominated by economism and Trotskyism (which, to me, is basically a redundant way of putting it).

When I spent two terms at the University of Sheffield, in 1998 and 2003, the main internationalist cur-

rents I found were either anarchist or progressive or radical Christian. A couple of years ago I spoke at a conference on Maoism at Goldsmiths College (part of the University of London), and as a provocation, in attempting to address the question of why there has not been much Maoism in the U.K., I said that Rowan Williams is generally a better internationalist than most of the groups in the U.K. calling themselves “Marxist.” (Rowan Williams is the Archbishop of Canterbury and hence the leader of the Church of England and the Worldwide Anglican Communion.) For what it is worth, no one took issue with this, though I don’t mean to erect a “theory” on this anecdotal experience.

Keeping with the U.K. for the moment, and this question of Trotskyism, the work of Alex Callinicos is very much worth considering. Callinicos is the author of many books, most of them working with figures in social theory and philosophy, from Lukacs and Benjamin to Sartre, Althusser, Derrida, and Badiou (much of the terrain in which I also have a deep interest), and he is also a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party (UK).

Most readers here will know that this is a neo-Trotskyist group that supports the thesis that Stalin led the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, and that the Chinese Revolution, being fundamentally “Stalinist,” was never more than a nationalist revolution. The SWP reached its moment of greatest influence during the 1980s, in the period of Thatcherism and the protracted miners’ strike. More recently, some in the U.S. left movements may know of the SWP as the group that played the leading role in having the International Socialist Organization ejected from their international grouping of organizations, supposedly for the failure of the ISO to make much of an appearance in the “Battle of Seattle,” and for the ISO’s being overly “campus-based.”

On the whole I have deep disagreements with Callinicos, especially the way that he always finds a solution to intellectual questions in a return to “classical Marxism” (which is the program of the SWP in general, also expressed as connecting with the “genuine Marxist tradition”). Of course I disagree quite a bit with Callinicos’s critique of “postmodernism,” and especially of

Derrida, and I agree with the idea that, even here, line is decisive. However, there is much to learn from Callinicos's work, and there has to be something to be said for the fact that he actually puts in the time and follows out the arguments of whomever he is discussing (for example in his recent book, *Resources of Critique*, where he works through some ideas from Negri, Žižek, and Badiou, among others).

Callinicos's intellectual work is to a high standard. I suppose what I am saying is that it is not clear to me what the decisiveness of line means if instead there seems to be no standard beyond what essentially comes down to "whateverism."

It doesn't help to say, Sartre's "Frenchness" gets in the way or "I'm an American pragmatist," any more than it helps for Avakian to ponder what if "the Derridas" were communists, especially if this is not really a question. Perhaps the point is to deepen our conception of line—and to recognize that the line cannot be so narrow, linear, or univocal.

Another way to come at this question is in terms of the old "red-expert" debate since the Cultural Revolution.

The Sixties Are Over, But Still Valuable

My second point, finally, is that I once raised to the person I call a "Leading Party Member" (LPM), back around the time when the book was coming together, the idea that there ought to be a "homecoming" of sorts for "sixties people," a gathering of what remains of the radical and revolutionary spirit from the time before people broke up into different groups and trends. I called this a kind of political "allee-allee-in-free," as they say in the game of hide-and-seek. The LPM seemed open to the idea, or perhaps he was just humoring me (or both—this was a time when these two lines were contending in the party, so to speak, the broad and the narrow).

My intention with this is not that we ought to get back to the sixties, which isn't even remotely possible, but that there is still some energy to be gathered from that experience, and that we ought to be interested in why people wanted to be radical and revolutionary in the first place.

Clearly this is a subject for a more extended engagement, but my point here is that the exhaustion of a paradigm does not mean that all of the energy (or even "energies") that went into the paradigm is itself exhausted. And so one way to combine these two points is that there is a sense in which those of us who are looking for the "post-Maoist" synthesis will certainly want to both "debrief" from Maoism and to see what energies can be carried forward into the new synthesis. On the other hand, there are those who never believed in the Maoist project in the first place, and didn't take part in it, and sometimes took part in other projects that we might call economist, and yet we need to look at this both in terms of their striving to find ways to fight capitalism and in terms of the new day that is in front of us.

Richard Rorty liked to say that we need to have open minds, but not so open that our brains fall out.

II. DRAWING THE LINE ON ECONOMISM

Let me propose the following as a way of drawing the line on economism.

Max Horkheimer, one of the founding members of the Frankfurt School (also known as Critical Theory), had a very good line with, "if you're not going to talk about capitalism, shut up about fascism."

On economism, I propose, "if you're not going to talk about imperialism, shut up about capitalism."

The problem with Trotskyism is not that Trotsky was not a smart or radical guy, or the same with many Trotskyists, many of them are smart and radical, but instead that they fundamentally reject Lenin's conception of imperialism. (At root they reject Lenin's conception of the party as well—thinking of it as an argument about a form of organization, rather than at base an argument about epistemology and vision, but that will have to remain a topic for another day.)

Significantly, there are versions of the "globalization" idea (many of them taken up by neo-Trotskyist groups such as the British SWP, even under headings such as "the new imperialism"), that run past the history of imperialism as well.

I would say that it is a matter of recognizing that the current waves of globalization, even though they have all sorts of homogenizing elements (perhaps most significantly, a homogenization of the division in the working class in imperialist countries, to the point where, to put it simplistically, the labor aristocracy isn't what it used to be; to come at it from the other side, the Third World has gone through major transformations as well), are still embedded in the history of imperialism, and that history continues to "mean something."

What does it mean?

Well, that is a very large discussion. (I did try to develop this discussion in Part 2 of *Ethical Marxism: "Unforgivable Napalm: Imperialism is the Ethical Question of Our Time."*) But part of what I am saying is that I am wary of contributions to the reconception of the Marxist project that do not recognize this history and its ramifications for the transformation of society.

And yet there are various threads of Marxism that make all sorts of contributions, and I don't see robbing the revolutionary project of these contributions. That's just cutting off the nose to spite the face.

On the other side, post-Mao Maoism and post-Maoism both have a difficulty in accepting an ethic of internationalism as real (which also means recognizing historical debts incurred by colonialism and imperialism as real) and as making real demands as such (ethical demands, as opposed to merely calculative demands based in political economy).

Quite arguably this was not the case with Mao himself, as captured in his encapsulation of Marxism as a kind of categorical imperative:

"Marxism consists in thousands of truths, but they all come down to one thing: It is right to rebel against reactionaries."

There is a lesson to be drawn from the fact that most Marxists, of whatever stripe, tend to get themselves into the sorts of cul-de-sacs where they wouldn't know a new synthesis if they saw it. Perhaps this is a feature of all paradigms, and perhaps Lenin's general scheme concerning proletarian consciousness (in *What Is To Be Done?*) applies more generally—the new syn-

thesis will come from "outside," a "certain outside" (as Derrida used to say).

A Truly New Synthesis Would Light Up the Sky

The fact that the RCP itself, even its chief theoretician, cannot really develop the new synthesis in a rigorous, systematic way (even while chanting the mantra of "science" at every turn, and even declaring the party to be a "team of scientists"), makes one wonder if they are even in a place to know what a new synthesis would be.

This again takes us into the question of continuity and discontinuity, and I've never had a problem recognizing that Bob Avakian has done a good job on certain parts of the continuity and then the discontinuities within that. This "Maoism beyond Mao" ought to remain in the encyclopedia of further, qualitative developments—but it is not enough to respond to the demands of the world.

If BA's New Synthesis was truly a new stage, it would be a lot more exciting, for one thing, and not just in its undeveloped claims (e.g., in the claim that, in communism there will be government but not a state; okay, fine, that's interesting, but tell us your theory of the state and government in which this makes sense). Such a new synthesis would not just "be there for the taking," it would light up the sky.

But then, most of the training in the RCP, the whole system of habit formation, as far as I can tell, has been focused on looking away from the sky.

Working under certain constraints—and everyone always does, all pathways of thought and activism work within certain constraints that can both enable and restrain (and not all restraint is bad, necessarily)—can lead to discoveries, as long as the paradigm is not played out. After this point, the paradigm can still yield some insights into the way things work, but these insights are essentially repetitions and not real discoveries or breakthroughs.

There is the question whether we can at some point back up from all of our paradigms and ask a more general question about truth or what is right. In Badiou this goes to the question of "model" in his earlier work,

and the event and its truth-procedures (and subjectivities) in his later work. It is fascinating and significant that, in the interview that is appended to the recent English translation of *The Concept of Model* (2007), the final question is, “Is there a Maoist theme here?” Badiou responds, “Yes, Maoist in a very deep sense,” and goes on to discuss the models of Stalin, Mao, the party, and the Cultural Revolution.

Are We Doing the Right Thing?

And yet I also think there is a point, at key junctures, and in what for me is a Kantian spirit, to attempting to back up, or at least pretending as if one could back up, and ask a general question about what is true and what is right.

Years ago, when I was a graduate student, I was for a time the student representative on the faculty committee that decided on assistantships for other graduate students. At the end of one of our meetings, one of my professors (who passed on ten years or so ago) said,

“Have we done the right thing? Or have we only helped our friends and hurt our enemies?”

This manages to refer to both Plato and Kant; at the time I was impressed by the way these questions were posed, even if at the time I had a general “Marxist” skepticism toward such questions. Since then I have tried to understand how such questions might make sense in an historical materialist context—and also what the ramifications are for a kind of Marxism that is simply dismissive of such questions. (That’s the project of *Ethical Marxism* in a nutshell.)

So, certainly, it might be a gross oversimplification (indeed, it is) to say, “What if Stalin had said at certain junctures, ‘Yes, all right, communist revolution is the best thing we can do, but are we doing the right thing right now?’” Yes, more is needed to show that this sort of thing would help, but I’d like to see the argument that shows that it would hurt—which seems to be implicit in the usual dismissal of ethical claims by supposed Marxists.

What Economism Is

We need to not only oppose and transcend economism, we also need to understand what economism is.

One definition, which we get from *What Is To Be Done?*, is to operate within the narrow demands at any given time of the worker’s movement.

We ought to deepen our sense that this has to be tied to Marx’s analysis in *Critique of the Gotha Programme* of the “narrow horizons of bourgeois right.”

But it might be said that economism also takes the form of conceiving the horizons of struggle and social transformation in terms of “interests” or in the form of formulas that allow for mere “machine-like” or even “catechismic” thinking, as well exemplified by Stalin’s methodology. (*Foundations of Leninism*, to take an important example, has much to offer on many points, but it is not a creative work, it is instead like a catechism of Leninism.)

In these respects, in terms of being able to contribute to the new discoveries that are needed in order to form the new synthesis, it could be that our Maoists and our Trotskyists are coming from similar places (I think this is the point of Badiou’s remarking on both Maoists and Trotskyists at the end of his short piece, “The Communist Hypothesis”), and therefore the latter are not so much more precluded from helping with the process of seeing where we need to go with “breaking the world into two” than the former.

III. THE SYMPTOMS OF EXHAUSTION

In any case, let us turn more directly to the elements that tend to lead us into exhaustion and dead-ends, and what might be called significant bellwethers of that exhaustion.

Some of these elements are almost too easy to pick out, and though I will pass by these rather quickly, it still bears consideration that there are elements of the critique of the RCP’s theory and practice of recent years (all of them present as at least major undercurrents for many years) that are so obvious.

It is on these points that no good response is forthcoming (as I said in my second post, many people, myself included, have been raising these issues for a long time; in my case, at least, many people have of course raised these same issues to me), and it is clear that the reason for this is that no good response is possible. For instance, there is no good response to the concern with massive self-referencing in BA's works, and therefore the response that is given is just bullshit.

It should come as no surprise that, when you need to go forward, but you can't, then there is a falling back into dogmatism. Dogmatism runs not only to content, but to form as well, and this latter aspect seems as if it has to be related to what can be called "cul-de-sac thinking." These problems are connected, as well, with a simple unwillingness to do some homework and an unwillingness to be open to others who have pursued these issues.

Engagement and Adventurous Discovery

Unfortunately, I find myself reexamining those moments when it was claimed that BA engaged figures such as Sartre and Derrida simply because we discussed them to some extent in our book of conversations. But there is also a question of methodology here, and perhaps again the question of the relationship of philosophy to political economy in the Marxist project. My experience is that the leading thinkers in the RCP take political economy to have priority.

This is a whole other discussion, which might be carried out on at least two levels:

First, we might ask if it is part of the work of philosophy to be creative, and not merely descriptive. (The same question might be asked in the context of the sciences, which adds another layer of complication.) I think of all of those places where BA announces that Marxist methodology is "exhilarating," and then he goes on to say things that are hardly such—perhaps occasionally tantalizing, but that is almost always in those instances where the hard work and the homework is not forthcoming.

Second, we might think here about Badiou's idea that there are "conditions" for philosophy, politics being one of them; under this conception, philosophy

"records the political condition in conformity with the parameters of ontology" (*Metapolitics*, p.72). Even under this perspective, however, philosophy has its role to play in an adventure of discovery, and one has to wonder if the job of political economy, understood as the scientific core of a Marxist science (and where the rubber really hits the road, so to speak), is to shut down and shut out any sense of adventurous philosophy.

A whole other discussion could be had regarding adventure, advent, discovery, invention, and what it means for philosophy to "record" (a political condition, or some other condition in some other domain where events may occur), but this would be an argument between, say, Badiou and Derrida, and clearly not an argument of which a closed-off "Marxism" would want to have any part. And yet it is a politically and philosophically valuable argument to have; it is an argument that will help us break with the methodologies that lead us into instrumentalism and economism.

If BA and the RCP had done their work better, in terms of both form and content, they might have arrived at a better sense of the cul-de-sac and what it might take to get out of it. If they had done their work better, they wouldn't be able to get over with a part of their membership (and especially their intellectual core, in whom I am so disappointed, and who ought to be held accountable for their ugliness toward those who are pointing out the deficiencies in their intellectual work—their reaction, especially in footnotes 16 and 17 of the Manifesto is hardly that of a "team of scientists") with this theoretical enterprise that results in a half-baked new synthesis, a less than half-baked critique of religion, and a level of emphasis on a "special, unique, precious, and irreplaceable individual" that cannot help but be a form of messianism. The membership of the RCP wouldn't have to pledge loyalty to a New Testament that they themselves do not understand, on the basis of a fundamentalist faith in revealed truth—as revealed by someone who only recently discovered truth, no less.

We need to draw the lessons of how and why the inverse happened.

For myself, I am probably less hostile to messianism than most who are reading this, and I think the

idea that an individual might be the gateway through which a true event (or, in Badiou's terminology, a "truth-event") might become manifest has to be taken seriously. I will return to this question.

While things could be the other way around, and in retrospect there is always the temptation to say this, I still think the objective factors outweigh the subjective ones.

In other words, there is an objective need for a corner to be turned, but it is very difficult, and part of the RCP's inability to turn this corner is encapsulated in these problems of dogmatism, intellectual narrowness and even laziness, and a sense of things still too much guided by continuity. It is the objective discontinuity itself that has proven too difficult to engage.

Now, it may be that no one else has really engaged this discontinuity, this "new stage," either, at least not fully—it may even be that we are not going to know what such engagement would mean for the time being or for some time to come. Still, there are some people out there with some good ideas, and even some practice that needs to be investigated and sorted, and the RCP has put itself in a place where it cannot engage with these ideas and practices.

So, again, let me emphasize the difficulty of recognizing the moment when a paradigm is exhausted. When this moment is passed and the previous paradigm is held onto doggedly, the dynamic becomes something like just digging deeper and deeper into a hole. It then becomes harder and harder to dig out, especially as what is also reinforced is largely training in only digging that particular hole.

In this connection the work of the philosopher of science and mathematics Imre Lakatos is helpful, in particular his notion of the "scientific research programme." (Alex Callinicos develops this idea in the context of Marxism in *Marxism and Philosophy* and *Is There a Future for Marxism?*)

Put very simply, there are some research programs in the sciences that are ongoing and still going forward, some that are running out of steam, some that are at a dead end, and some that have even turned into their opposite, generating false results. We can apply these categories to Marx's project as a whole and the vari-

ous streams of Marxism, and of course we should be fair and look not only at the contents of the various research programs, but also their methodology and even the overall aim in each case. Not all developments of Marxism have revolutionary aims; on the other hand, it is not enough to simply say that some versions of Marxism that do aim toward revolution have not gotten there yet—though perhaps after a sufficiently long time we might wonder where the whole thing is going, and Bob Avakian raised this issue himself back in the early 1980s [see the first quote in Letter 9]*. Still, the point is that determining whether a research program is expanding, developing, declining, closing down, or at a complete dead end, is not always such a simple thing.

Be that as it may, there seem clear signs that the research program of BA and the RCP has run its course, and now the point is to take a lesson from this.

Again on the Value of Maoism

Of course we have to be careful in what we understand as the program that has run its course. There is an argument that, with the "Party of Bob Avakian," we are not talking about Maoism, or some branch of it; therefore, it might be said, the status of Avakianism as a research program has to be considered separately from that of some branch or other of Maoism (or Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-Tung Thought, as some comrades in India still understand it).

Even as someone who has some sympathies for the "sixties old home gathering" idea, or of pressing the "reset" button on Marxism, I do not think sorting these issues in Maoism is an unimportant question. At the heart of this for me is the continuing commitment to the idea that the Chinese Revolution and Cultural Revolution made great contributions to the forward

* "...if, owing to objective and subjective conditions, this party exists and carries on for 40 or 50 years like the CPUSA before it and never leads a revolution, what's so great about that? Really why would it be so terrible if somebody got together and formed another party and tried to learn from the positive and negative and went ahead and tried to make revolution?" (Bob Avakian, "A Party is Not a Holy Thing – It's Got to be A Vanguard," published as a chapter in *If There is to be Revolution, There Must be a Revolutionary Party*, RCP Publications, June 1982)

progress of humankind, and that there is still a fundamental difference, and I would say an ethical difference, between, on the one hand, retaining fidelity to revolutionary events that may now be saturated (filled out), and either being dismissive of this revolutionary “sequence” (as Badiou puts it) or not caring about it in the first place. (One sees this especially with people who raise some sort of condemnatory critique of the Chinese Revolution and Mao but really can’t tell you much about the whole scene in the first place, except for perhaps some impression they gained from a film such as *The Red Violin*; this sort of thing makes me very angry, and I did address this perspective to some extent in *Ethical Marxism*, pp.325-343.)

However, even to the extent that these things should still be sorted further, and this includes the extent to which the Maoist groups in the West were a part of the sequence of the Chinese Revolution, there comes a point where the sequence is saturated.

The Art of the Endgame

I wonder if, at the other end, what Lenin said about revolution and insurrection also applies to the point of saturation. Lenin said that revolution is a science, but insurrection is an art. Perhaps there is more of an art than a science to recognizing the point of saturation; the problem is that the very factors that are bringing about the saturation (the “endgame,” as it has been called by Mike Ely) seem themselves to call forth a good deal of artlessness, in the form of ham-fisted and boneheaded gestures. These are elements and intimations of exhaustion.

In chess, seventy-five percent of theory is devoted to the opening, not so much to the endgame—the hope is that the opening will set up a position that is strong enough to carry a player through the middle and end games. Of course, if this doesn’t happen, then a player has to try to win in the endgame, which often involves passing a pawn beyond the point where it can be caught, and almost always turning that pawn into a queen. The side is renewed. This doesn’t seem to be the way things generally work in the truth-sequences in politics (or in the other domains in which truth-events might occur, in Badiou’s conception, for that matter—science, art,

and love, though perhaps the greatest chance exists in the latter) that we have seen; the Cultural Revolution may be an exception of sorts.

I’d better not go too much further down the road of chess theory for now, I find it hard to stop—but we need to understand better this dynamic of the endgame of the truth-sequence. Under the mode of radical discontinuity, perhaps there is no real renewal in the endgame. Of course we carry forward the lessons of the previous game, but the next game has to be played for itself, as if each game is its own world.

I hope it goes without saying that there are limitations to any analogy; on the other hand, given the relationship of chess to mathematics, there might be more work to be done with chess in thinking through Badiou’s mathematical Maoism.

Lenin, it could be argued, did not live to complete his “opening,” so to speak.

The middlegame of Soviet socialism had some strengths, but much of it was a mess. Of course, there is another side that is playing the game, too, and it is in the other side’s interest that the middlegame turn from complexity to chaos, disarray. And so there is more to this question, structurally speaking, than just “if only Lenin had lived a few more years.” On the other hand, it’s hard not to think it would have made a very big difference. Why it might have made this difference, and how much this has to do with the concept of “caliber,” is another question.

IV. DEAD-ENDS IN SCIENCE AND THE SCIENCE OF DEAD-ENDS

Let’s shift gears back to the concept of the research programme.

Perhaps it is beyond difficult, but even in some sense impossible, to make a shift to a new paradigm from a place very deep inside the old one. (This is leaving aside the question of whether Avakianism remains deep inside of Maoism, or if it is indeed a supposedly “new” paradigm.) We might consider the research programme of string theory in physics, which has been the dominant paradigm in cosmology in recent decades.

For a layperson, probably the most salient feature of string theory is that it is a purely mathematical model, pure theory without even a conception of what experimentalists could do to confirm or disconfirm the theory. Though there are important detractors of the model, for instance Lee Smolin, this model is at present institutionally entrenched.

Now, suppose the model is simply wrong, which would be the case, for instance, if there is a workable model of the universe and of the quantum vacuum flux (the “nothing” out of which came something, the time-space continuum of our cosmos) that could account for everything in terms of three spatial dimensions and time, and that would not need the “exotic” dimensions of string theory. (Such a theory has been proposed, in outline form, by “surfer dude”-physicist Garrett Lisi, but many details remain to be worked out.)

Frankly, I am far beyond the limits of my competence in even raising the question, “what if string theory is simply wrong?”—though this is also a special case, where the parameters of confirmation and disconfirmation are beyond empirical definition and even present and foreseeable imagination.

So, there is really nothing more here than a hypothetical case of a research programme that may turn out to be a dead end, which does not mean that some important things were not found along the way—in this case, mostly in terms of pure math. But the point again, underlined by this admittedly extreme example, is that the exhausted and/or dead-end programme does not contain within it the seeds for getting to the right program (though perhaps some of the methodology is transferable—again, this is far beyond my competence).

Two conclusions might be drawn:

- 1) we are up against an “impossibility”;
- 2) there has to be a fresh start.

There is more to be understood here in terms of modalities (possibility, necessity, contingency, actuality, impossibility). “Impossibility” as “you can’t get there from here” does not mean that “here” was always a bad place to be.

In the realm of pure mathematics I do not know how it is known for sure that a research programme has

reached its limits. I suppose that if a definitive proof could be given that shows that Goldbach’s Conjecture is unsolvable, then there wouldn’t be much point to pursuing the solution.

Clearly those who take the experience of the twentieth century as some sort of unsolvability theorem for any future prospects of communism have to be refuted, but here too the refutation is not simply empirical, and neither can it simply depend on reconstructing continuities with the previous experience of revolution and socialism.

There is, however, a role for the *via negativa* (to look for something by identifying that which it is not), which is another name for what I am calling “debriefment.” The *via negativa* will only get us so far, and we ought to remain clear on this, but there is still a place for understanding why RCP Maoism/Bob Avakian Thought is deep into the *cul-de-sac*.

I will even go so far as to say that debriefment won’t even get us half of what we need to go forward, and of course, keeping in mind Mao’s “70/30” assessment of Stalin, this is not mainly a quantitative question, either. (Recalling that Mao was a schoolteacher, you could say that he gave Stalin a C- in Marxism.) And yet, that which debriefment can give us is worth having.

So, finally, I want to point to three phenomena that betoken exhaustion, but that people who are too deeply ensconced in the party do not seem capable of seeing. My Sartrean side holds that there is both personal and “structural” responsibility here, but what ought to interest us in the larger history of Marxism are those pathways of theory and practice that produce significant forms of blindness, perhaps even in equal and opposite proportion to at least a previous history of insight.

Avakian’s Culture of Appreciation, Promotion and Popularization

First, in the extreme development of the “Culture of Appreciation, Promotion and Popularization” (CAP&P) of the work of Bob Avakian, and of BA himself, there was a one-sided emphasis on the person/subject over the event. Obviously there is a dialectic

tic here, the subject is emphasized because of the lack of an event, or the person is forced as the event.

When I refer to the “extreme” development of CAP&P, I suppose I part company with those who think elevating any leader is a problem. Even with actual religious organizations that have extreme vertical, top-down, integration, I don’t find “cult” talk very helpful, it just doesn’t explain enough.

Leadership and Vanguardism

In the case of the RCP, the tremendous frustration experienced by organized revolutionaries in our post-modern capitalist world, as viewed through the prism of an organization that has been increasingly closed in upon itself, mixed perhaps with a dash of the idea of the “rare and precious” individual, is enough to get us to the present version of the CAP&P—in other words to the endgame. But one reason to underline the elements that have led to this situation is that the situation is rife with contingency and did not come about inevitably. There are two sides to this coin: the one side says that elevation of a leader, and of leadership generally, inevitably leads to something like the CAP&P in its more recent form; the other side says that the solution is to get rid of the idea of the vanguard, and instead form some kind of “mass revolutionary organization.” I think this is the wrong analysis.

Furthermore, there are two sides to this coin as well:

On one side, these calls for a “mass revolutionary party” seem to always march along with an economist perspective (and this I would say is inevitable).

On the other side, there have been plenty of attempts to create such a thing, and it isn’t as if there is some record of great success there.

At least BA and the RCP have kept certain ideas alive, and that is a real contribution to the future. Those who have worked for reform have made contributions too—we can recognize this without accepting the narrow horizons of reformism. The problems of the former and the occasional success of the latter should not be taken as a prescription for an economic mass-based organization.

In my first Kasama post I mentioned the idea that new stages in Marxism have also featured new forms of organization. I won’t go further with this question here, except again to say two things. First, the economic mass “revolutionary” organization is not the solution. Second, we need leaps in understanding on the new way the world is working these days and the new Marxism we need to confront it. I think Badiou helps here, along with some others of course, and one thing we really need to try to understand is what might be called the extreme “anti-evental” character of post-modern capitalism.

So, having said this, let me underline again this particular element of exhaustion: substitution of the person for the event, or forcing an understanding of the person as the event.

Read from one angle, Badiou’s theory of truth is meant precisely to tell against this sort of substitution or forcing. One could say that, on his reading, this kind of subjective substitution and forcing is the measure of separation from truth—and therefore it issues in voluntarism, sometimes in extreme forms.

It ought to go without saying that the way out of this is not to make mantra-like declarations of “intoxication with truth,” especially as the latter is conceived in the form of a simplistic positivism.

To sum up on this point, it is not difficult to put together frustration with the absence of an event, the post-evental character of postmodern capitalism, and this forcing of an event in the form of a person who is the representative of a new stage in Marxism, especially when this happens from the inside of an organizational form that is largely closed off from the world and even makes a point of being closed off. But this dialectic increasingly gives us the very opposite of what is needed.

The second element of exhaustion is related to the first, especially on this question of “forcing.”

This has to do with the attempt to hype work such as the New Synthesis and *Away With All Gods!* into greatness, when they aren’t even good. You cannot make work good just by shouting about it loudly. You can try, and you might even get over with some people, but then it turns out that the only people you can get over with are ones who know little about the subject of

the work. Or, returning to the previous point, you can try to say the work is good mainly because it is work that has been done by a rare and precious individual. But that will only get you so far.

I still maintain that, if BA and the RCP had paid any attention to some standards of intellectual work, they could have gone a lot further with their ideas, even if there are objective barriers they are up against—the exhaustion itself is an objective phenomenon. At least if they had discovered and recognized the reasons for the exhaustion they might have responded in some other way than forcing the role of BA and closing in upon themselves.

But perhaps that is the string theory example again, there comes a point where you're too deep into the hole, and there isn't a way to dig a "lateral passage," either.

With the New Synthesis, we hardly know what's there. The RCP has refused to present it systematically. The speculation is that this is for two, related reasons. On the one side, the NS consists in various elements, for the most part undeveloped, and not "synthesized." No coherent, systematic presentation is possible—hence again the need for hype. On the other side, there is one element that is the heart of the "synthesis," but that cannot be presented as such, namely that this new stage of Marxism is tied together by its having been thought up by a rare and precious individual. (The RCP's official phrase is "unique, special, rare and irreplaceable".)

Precious Contribution Rooted in the Work

Are there not rare and precious individuals, for example in the fields of art, science, and politics? I think there are, and this is another reason why we have to be careful with just resorting to "cult" talk and other cheap and easy potshots at the idea of vanguard leadership.

As the case of John Coltrane was raised in some versions of the New Synthesis presentations from last spring (spring 2008, the comparison was between John Coltrane and the "classic quartet," and Bob Avakian and the party), let's go with that example.

To be very brief, John Coltrane was an artist of the highest order (in the estimation of many, including myself); as a rare and precious individual working in music, we can form a notion of "caliber" by grappling with

his work. On some level this is not such a hard thing to do, as even someone who does not know much about the technical aspects of music can hear readily enough that Coltrane had extraordinary skills. Not everything that Coltrane did was gold, though a great deal of his work was stellar, and there is work that has an undeniable quality about it, it doesn't need any special pleading.

Now, I want to reiterate that I think much of Bob Avakian's work prior to this more recent period is good, especially if one is willing to make a distinction between "Philosophical Marxism" and "Revolutionary Movement Theory."

This work ought to be taken up by anyone who is trying to join with the revolutionary project. Obviously, I have done my share of pleading on this point, as regards my fellow philosophers and social theorists, and while I am sure that simple middle-class academic timidity and attachment to a (sometimes!) "not-uncomfortable lifestyle" has played a role in the resistance toward engagement with Avakian's work, it doesn't help either that the caliber of the work is far from undeniable.

Yes, one can say that this "formal" aspect has to be subordinate to political line, but then, what is the line on doing good intellectual and theoretical work? But my larger point is that there is no "Coltrane" without the work, and if the work had not been there, we wouldn't be talking about the great John Coltrane.

By contrast, there is too much of BA's work that is practically a gift to those who are already predisposed to attack it or simply ignore it (in the hopes that everyone will ignore it). This is especially the case with Avakian's recent book on religion, *Away With All Gods!*—never mind the New Synthesis, people outside of narrow party circles aren't going to try to do the work to put it together, and the fact that "it" (when there is no "it") is supposedly coming from someone of a certain caliber isn't going to convince anyone to put in the time. Indeed, this effort wouldn't be appreciated anyway, since it would be taken to be "parasitic criticism," a discussion beyond the narrow parameters in which the party can exercise control.

(One funny thing about the announced “online theoretical journal” from footnote 16 of the recent Manifesto is that its aim is clearly nothing other than merely parasitic criticism. But I’m not holding my breath waiting for this “journal” to get off the ground.)

The hyped work and CAP&P were always something of a problem, and yet also understandable in the sense of breaking through into a larger arena of struggle. For what it is worth, I was willing to work with this culture up to a point. Maybe I have to take some responsibility for helping prepare the ground for this more recent, and I would say qualitative, jacking up of the culture of hype. For instance, apparently BA is entitled to say (or others feel entitled to say about him), that he has engaged figures such as Sartre or Derrida, because we discussed those figures in the Conversations book. I am sorry for this, but I am not sorry that we did the book; I considered it to be a privilege at the time, and I still feel this way. And I thought it was a part of going down a different road, in terms of intellectual work, and yes, in terms of political line. Whether that road really could have been part of breathing new life into the Maoist project, or if, instead, that road was simply a “last hurrah,” a part of a project that was already fundamentally saturated and exhausted, is something worth exploring further.

Certainly the claim that *Away With All Gods!* is a “great book” is indicative of other things in addition to saturation. We might call this a separation of the party from the larger world that is so great that the criteria of good work can no longer be communicated to the party. On another level, it’s just plain nuts. But these things themselves speak to a special kind of exhaustion for which Badiou has a special category, and we will return to this in closing.

V. NEEDING ENEMIES MORE THAN FRIENDS

The third element of exhaustion has a somewhat different character. It is the point in the arc of an organization when it appears to need enemies more than friends.

Obviously this is a very ugly moment, as evidenced by footnote 17 of the “Manifesto” and various articles in Revolution newspaper, and most of all by the “Glossary: What is Counter-Revolution?” article.*

Again we see a basic separation from the world, where BA and what remains of the RCP seem completely unable to see themselves through the eyes of others.

For myself, I want to speak to the other side of the coin, too, which is that, when I do my work, I feel a certain responsibility to philosophy itself. That the RCP is now willing to put itself in a place where this can mean nothing (or nothing good) to it is also evidence of a trend that has run its course.

For sure, there were economistic trends of Marxist organization for which there was never any course to run in this regard, philosophy and intellectual work never meant anything to them to begin with, and so there is nothing to become exhausted. In attempting to understand economism in its many expressions and dimensions, we might study further this phenomenon of contempt for intellectual work, and I would say especially this contempt for philosophy.

The Jagged Edges

On another level, one that I did not experience directly, but that is highly emblematic of the way things have gone in the last few years, allow me to quote at length from an article that Mike Ely posted to Kasama on Sept. 16, 2008, under the title, “Jagged Edges in a Divided RCP”:

There has been an unmistakable air of bitter anger toward the party as a whole and its members.

It is my impression that Avakian really believes that the party, its leadership and its rank-and-file all betrayed him: i.e. that this party has not taken off because Avakian was ignored and underappreciated, that he had to “reach around the party” to get to the masses of people — i.e. that the party (and its members) had in the main become an obstacle (not an instrument) to him. And so his great achievements were simply smothered by the rot,

* http://rwor.org/a/146/counter_rev-en.html

moronization, alternative lifestyles and revisionism of his own party...

This hostile tone was certainly set from the very top — mid-level leadership were harshly criticized for being too chummy with those they lead.

A slogan was promoted for party leaders: “don’t be an asshole, exactly, but...” Which in practice often meant that leaders were supposed to be harsh, distant, demanding and calculatingly rude. One leader said to me “what’s wrong with guilt tripping?” In one area of work an etiquette of “don’t speak until you are spoken to” even emerged.

The largely comradely relations between leaders-and-led have been transformed into something else.

I would add to much of this ‘in some areas,’ because all of these developments are highly uneven. In a number of areas there was resistance to these methods and demands — that too was ‘part of the revisionist package.’ So the result has been a check-board within a shrinking organization — where there are calls for intensifying the ‘cultural revolution’ and complaints that it has not been carried out thoroughly or correctly. It brings with it old discredited methods of self-cannibalizing known, within the RCP, as farrago or ‘war on the right.’

These organizational developments took their place within a larger, hyped set of fantasy plans — the failed ‘Engage’ project, the plans to topple the regime without attention to allies or reality, the plans to make Avakian a ‘household name,’ the plans to prevent an imminent fascist takeover by the Christian right, etc. Plans lost touch with reality, while lower level leaders are supposed to be accountable for fulfilling those plans (financial, paper distributions, whatever).

Inevitably there developed (from what I saw) a remarkable and new CYA (Cover Your Ass) culture within this party — where people at all levels were desperate to avoid further criticism, and ended up nervously ‘pointing the spearhead down’ (blaming the lower level cadre and their supposed backwardness) for any problems. There is a new culture of revolting bootlicking toward superiors (of a kind I had never ever seen before outside the corporate world).

A new arrogance sparkles among some leading people that radiates their sense of anointed

superiority. After all, if Avakian is ‘rare, special and unique,’ aren’t those who “get the Main Man” also special and unique and rare and....? Grandiosity apparently trickles down.

And aren’t those who stubbornly ‘don’t get the Main Man’ really despicable and objectively promoting capitulation?

Very ugly stuff, obviously, and this was before the ridiculous “Glossary” article.

Hopefully it goes without saying that to use as an advisory, “don’t be an asshole, exactly,” is to already have crossed over into being an asshole.

Perhaps there really can’t be friendship among comrades. Discussing the idea of politics as an “unbinding,” Badiou writes,

A genuine political organization, or a collective system of conditions for bringing politics into being, is the least bound place of all. Everyone on the ground is essentially alone in the immediate solution of problems. [Discussions among political comrades] is no more convivial ... than that of two scientists involved in debating a very complex question. ... true instances of politics tend to manifest this faint coldness that involves precision. (*Meta-politics*, pp.76-77)

Perhaps a politics of friendship, as Derrida understands it, is misguided—though I am not ready to accept this yet.

I will say this from the other side of the question: If you find yourself in a place where you are treating a lot of people, former friends and comrades, in a very ugly way (which may just be the endpoint of having an underlying instrumental perspective on people in the first place), then maybe it is time to look in the mirror and ask if it is really all of those other people who are the counter-revolutionaries.

This is just another way of saying, if you are in a position of needing enemies more than friends, then this is indicative of something, something needs to be uncovered here. This also looks very much like Stalin’s perspective. Of course there are real enemies of communism out there, that isn’t the point, the point is the need for enemies as an aspect of self-definition for rev-

olutionary leadership. This need betokens exhaustion and the need for a real change in direction.

But precisely because of what the party has come to it is unable to see what it has come to.

Furthermore, there is an element of the RCP's response to Kasama that probably now has to be embraced as such, the part that said that Kasama "is not even the same project." What is the RCP's project if it needs enemies so badly that it is engaged in such ugliness even toward many of its comrades, former comrades, and friends?

A Point Beyond Insights

One sign of what we might have to actually start calling "Stalinist degeneracy" is the manic search for someone to blame for objective difficulties. With the RCP this has pretty much gotten to the point of caricature, and rubber and glue. They need to stop blaming others for their limitations, but from inside of their limitations all they can see are enemies. Surely if the core is able to carry forward its asshole programme vigorously enough they will win through toward revolution—and God knows there is a major asshole shortage in the world today.

What's funny is that many of us around Kasama still feel for these people, in part because we have also been these people—but we see that it is a dead-end.

Paul de Man put forward the theory that every insight actually depends, structurally, on a blind spot. I like de Man, I think his ideas could stand to be appreciated more in the context of Marxism.

But there is a point beyond the dialectic of blindness and insight, where there are no real insights, though perhaps some continued applications of previously sharp theoretical instruments—and this is the point of not only saturation, but even the point of the dogged persistence in exhaustion, and this is what Badiou calls "disaster."

Disaster: The night without stars.

Appendix

29 Responses to "Bill Martin: Going Forward From Here (Kasama Post #1)"

1. *redflags* Says: September 23, 2008 at 9:01 am
Welcome, Bill. Good to see you.

2. *celticfire* Says: September 23, 2008 at 9:06 am
Yes thank you. There is a lot to consider here.

3. *Anon* Says: September 23, 2008 at 9:07 am
Very cool. Welcome, Bill.

4. *chegitz guevara* Says: September 23, 2008 at 9:42 am
Welcome, Bill. It's great to be working with you again.
your former student and always friend,
chegitz

5. *Sophie* Says: September 23, 2008 at 10:51 am
I deeply appreciate Bill Martin's posting. To see an opening, a doorway, a possibility and to then see it shut down is heartbreaking and a disservice to the people.

Many points in this post speak to a profound unraveling of the RCP. I agree with Bill about *AWAG (Away With All Gods!)*. The self-quoting is deeply intertwined with content. It is intellectual work on-the-cheap to insist it is just a matter of form. As someone who worked with the RCP for a long long time, I am familiar with the self-quoting, self-congratulating, self proclamations of this or that being "historic" "great" ...of the closed systems.

When I read the *Conversations* book, I was very excited and hopeful that this represented a fresh process of discovery for the RCP, and for Bob, really engaging with important theorists and intellectuals and exploring questions. My hope was that this also would open an invigorated life and discussion inside the party that brought other people, other perspectives into the conversation. This did not happen.

While Avakian drew from other people's works it was, unfortunately, most often to "second" his own theory or conclusion. I rarely remember Avakian expressing the delight and excitement of discovering someone else or an approach that surpassed his own.

This is not a matter of style or form this is an issue of methodology and ideology. And, again, struggles, such as over the forward of the *Conversations* book, were very private even though as we understand more of the workings and happening were clearly impacting the "line" and the approach, and, the closing door.

Yet, there is a whole world out there, that is very much requiring a new synthesis and communism. I thank Bill Martin for his courage and conviction.

6. *EME* Says: September 23, 2008 at 11:11 am

Certainly plenty to consider, but so infested with self-pitying subjectivism its hard to get to the truth here. Why does he care so much what BA or the RCP think about him? And now he comes here whining for sympathy! Get over it. He may well be right on the need for a new post-maoist and even post-BA syn-

thesis, but I'm not what his contribution would be. And having "interesting" conversations is nice, but is that the point here? I could never understand why the RCP was so excited about its relationship with Bill Martin and I am equally unclear as to why Kasama would not be so welcoming to this "intellectual." I guess I'm still a Stalinist at heart!

EME

7. *Mike E* Says: September 23, 2008 at 11:48 am

Moderator note: EME, your note focuses on the person, not on the questions of line and substance. Why don't you elaborate into your differences with Bill's post? Why don't you elaborate your differences over the role and contributions of intellectuals (to society and revolution)?

8. *Anon* Says: September 23, 2008 at 12:04 pm

EME,

When I read Bill's piece above I didn't get the sense of him "whining for sympathy" as much as the real kind of appallment that he didn't expect from the rhetoric that the RCP and Avakian had previously spoken of. This being the rhetoric which stated that the party should be in favor of "wrangling with ideas" and "getting into this/that". I think this was also accompanied with a real and very understandable feeling of sadness at such a reality (in regards to the line the RCP takes on intellectuals, or as they might now call "intellectuals").

9. *josetheredfox* Says: September 23, 2008 at 1:06 pm

Bill,

We met at one of the Rev Bookstores and we jokingly spoke about starting a band (you playing bass)...

More importantly, I just wanted to let you know that we read your book on Sartre years ago while in grad school, folks dug it.

I look forward to struggling/building with you more in the future.

Palante! Jose

10. *Iris* Says: September 23, 2008 at 1:10 pm

Bill Martin, thank you so much for your work and contributions. It is so amazing to sit here and read this document. At the risk of sounding dramatic, I will settle on saying things feel rather historic at this moment. All this is inspiring to a new communist like me!

11. *Iris* Says: September 23, 2008 at 1:25 pm

EME,

I agree with anon in post #8. Is it so shocking that there would be emotion in a document that was basically a personal letter? Please engage on the level of line. I am also angry—angry that friends have disappeared after being pronounced 'revisionist', angry that I feel like a *crazy person* when I say that AWAG just isn't that good and half a dozen people tell me its the epitome of historical materialist approach to religion.

But I am also jubilant and inspired by all this struggle, engagement and energy, especially as someone new to communism!

12. *orinda* Says: September 23, 2008 at 3:25 pm

It's almost a full-time job keeping up with this site! Thanks Bill, for summarizing problems with the NS so well. EME, I have no idea what you're going on about. Admitting to feeling hurt is not the same as self-pitying.

"...I am equally unclear as to why Kasama would not be so welcoming to this "intellectual."

I suspect you didn't mean to include the word "not". Otherwise it really makes no sense that I can see.

13. *NSPF* Says: September 23, 2008 at 4:07 pm

This is for you Bill: If Sarsi insists that I must believe ... that the Babylonians cooked eggs by swiftly whirling them in a sling, I will believe it; but I must say that the cause of such an effect is very remote from that to which it is attributed, and to find the true cause I shall reason thus. If an effect does not follow which followed with others at another time, it is because, in our experiment, something is wanting which was the cause of the former success; and if only one thing is wanting to us, that one thing is the true cause. Now we have eggs, and slings, and strong men to whirl them, and yet they will not become cooked; nay, if they were hot at first, they more quickly become cold; and, since nothing is wanting to us but Babylonians, it follows that being Babylonians is the true cause why the eggs became cooked, and not the friction of the air, which is what I wish to prove. ... I, at least, will not be so wilfully wrong, and so ungrateful to Nature ... that, having been gifted with sense and logic, I should voluntarily set less value on such great endowments than on the fallacies of a fellow-man and blindly and blunderingly believe whatever I hear and barter the freedom of my intellect for slavery to one as liable to error as myself.

And I doubt EME has heard of this passage before: Perhaps Sarsi believes that all the host of good philosophers may be enclosed within four walls. I believe that they fly, and that they fly alone, like eagles, and not in flocks like starlings. It is true that because eagles are rare birds they are little seen and less heard, while birds that fly like starlings fill the sky with shrieks and cries, and wherever they settle befoul the earth beneath them... The crowd of fools who know nothing, Sarsi, is infinite. Those who know very little part of philosophy are numerous. Few indeed are they who really know some part of it.

The fusion of intellect with emotion, and above all, devotion is rare and all the more commendable.

14. *Linda D.* Says: September 23, 2008 at 11:30 pm

This initial post by Bill Martin is to me so liberating. For those of us who have experienced the disconnect between theory and practice, been relegated to keeping at our posts without engaging in theoretical struggle, etc. I think we need to view this article as an opportunity for us to jump into the fray. Many of us can simply testify to our own experience with being slam dunked, but that just gets you so far.

Bill Martin isn't whining, while speaking to real line differences in a substantive way, he is welcoming the rest of us to take part in the developing theoretical project on Kasama (and other projects), as well as us taking seriously, and investigating other contributors to the ideological/theoretical realm.

It is apparent that many of the participants on K. have already been on this road—Badiou, Althusser, Žižek, etc. I need to step up my game. For many of us, the notion that the “train has left the station” is absurd, whether or not some agree in part with Avakian’s new synthesis. Bill Martin is making a concrete contribution to the revolutionary process, a process that is ongoing, and “not there for the taking.” We owe him some gratitude, whether or not we’re in agreement with all he has put forward. I hope Mike E.’s “moderator note” doesn’t get lost in this continuing discussion: “EME, your note focuses on the person, not on the questions of line and substance.”

15. *Ka Frank* Says: September 24, 2008 at 3:00 am

Thanks Bill for opening up this door to understanding how Avakian and your party contact see “engaging” with intellectuals. In the course of your letter, you speak of the need to develop a “post-Maoist” communist synthesis, that Maoism has played itself out. Are you arguing: that some essential elements of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism are wrong; that MLM does not contain the theoretical tools, including the methodology, to address the major questions confronting humanity and revolutionary communists in the 21st century; that MLM has to be developed in major ways in order to be relevant to 2008; or something else? I know this is a huge question, but I would like to hear a little more of your thinking here.

16. *rosa harris* Says: September 24, 2008 at 7:32 am

I took the sense of ‘opening’ very seriously too. I thought that there were going to be deep positive changes. When things started to shut down in the RCP, I thought that I was just fighting something local— a few dogmatic people in my own city. I did not realize that it was an overall direction that the RCP was taking.

Bill (and really the whole site, and the 9 letters) helps lay bare that it is the party, and that it is the GENERAL LINE..... the problem is the line, not some local dogmatic application of a decent line.

17. *saoirse* Says: September 24, 2008 at 7:39 am

From the outside looking in but also having worked with RCP members in projects like Oct. 22nd Coalition, RnR and WCW, it seems like the pendulum has swung back and forth from openness to being more closed in cycles. Therefore when I seemed to note the beginning of a change around 06 I figured things were temporary shifting back but in general i thought things might be qualitatively moving in a better direction dating back to the initiation of the October month of resistance. And in some of the parties internet based projects engaging the program, etc.

I think what is so hard is seeing a party that had such a high level is public discussion and critical thinking coming out of the party building phase of the new communist movement become what it has become today. The method is decayed. The practice none existent.

18. *John Steele* Says: September 24, 2008 at 10:05 am

In his post Bill Martin talks of

“the opening in the RCP that I perceived (and that many perceived) in the period roughly 2000-2006.”

I too saw it that way, and it was this sense of opening up and a new creativity which made me believe that this party could be a major instrument in forging a revolutionary path in the situation after 9-11.

Some of the aspects that led to this perception were the new *Draft Programme* and the *Notes on Political Economy*, which seemed to betoken a new beginning, with their criticisms and discarding of old and clearly bankrupt positions (on “war or revolution in the eighties,” on gays, and some other things).

Just as important was the much more interactive way in which the RCP seemed to be approaching political and ideological work. The 2changetheworld website impressed me with its openness, back-and-forth, and “wrangling” quality. And I was very inspired by the Not In Our Name statement of conscience, both its inherent quality as a statement and its possibilities as a point of departure for rallying a wide spectrum of resistance at a relatively early point after the onset of the “war on terrorism,” etc. Here too, in the party’s work in leading the forging this statement, as well as in the subsequent NION organization, there was a far greater openness and work with others on a broad scale.

It was these sorts of perceptions that brought me back around the RCP, after a long period of distance. (I hope to write about this experience in a separate post.)

Were these perceptions accurate?

Bill says at another point, speaking of his experiences during this time,

“I thought that you were breaking with instrumentalism with regard to intellectuals, and some good steps were made, and we even made some good steps together....”

But at the end he floats the idea that

“apparently, it was decided for instrumental reasons that it would be good for a period to have a critique of instrumentalism, and now that period has passed and there has been a reassertion of the value of instrumentalizing people.”

Is this true? Was this openness, which included a greater valuing of intellectuals and intellectual work outside the party as well as greater interactivity – a noninstrumental approach – was this only a ploy? Was it simply a way to gain some traction before closing things up again?

I think this underestimates or negates the presence of different lines within the party (an inevitability in any living organization) and the dynamics of their struggle. I think the opening up was not an illusion; it was real, and it was not a premeditated ploy. The way in which it was shut down was through a decisive intervention by Avakian in an extreme sort of way – this was the “cultural revolution.”

What stands out in this is not a “monolithic” party, but a real failure on the part of the organization’s leadership who had a different line, to stand up and to struggle for it, and in the end, if it came down to that, to split the party. Instead they knuckled under and were brought into alignment with the new order.

Bill talks at another point of the way in which “so much has been squandered around this party, so much of the basis for solidarity and radicality.” And that’s true in spades – on the one hand people ground up and spit out, both in and around the party, but more important is the squandering of the possibility the RCP might have become a real revolutionary instrument or pivot. This would have taken more than just the sort of openness we’ve been referencing; but that mode of work held the possibility of helping to forge an actual new synthesis. Bill’s post speaks to this, and I think clearly he’s right that this would be a post-Mao synthesis.

By this point, of course, any such possibility with reference to the RCP is long gone. Oh well.

But to quote from Letter 9:

“Meanwhile, five minutes out that door is a beautiful blue planet crammed with contradiction and life. The rush into the future does not hang by any single thread — but it does demand something of us. One way or another, something different has to raise its head.”

That’s where we come in.

19. *zerohour* Says: September 24, 2008 at 12:14 pm

Bill -

Thanks for putting this out there. You’ve made quite a few intriguing points that are worth further exploration.

“That struggle revealed, to me, that the RCP was not really ready to work with radical intellectuals. In retrospect, it seems to me that the struggle revealed that the opening that was represented by the Conversations book was closing up, and now this opening seems all but closed up. Why has this happened?”

Exactly. Why?

John Steele provided some indication:

“I think this underestimates or negates the presence of different lines within the party (an inevitability in any living organization) and the dynamics of their struggle. I think the opening up was not an illusion; it was real, and it was not a premeditated ploy. The way in which it was shut down was through a decisive intervention by Avakian in an extreme sort of way – this was the “cultural revolution.”

What stands out in this is not a “monolithic” party, but a real failure on the part of the organization’s leadership who had a different line, to stand up and to struggle for it, and in the end, if it came down to that, to split the party. Instead they knuckled under and were brought into alignment with the new order.”

I think it would be good to look further this line struggle.

What were the lines being debated? How was this impacted by key events like of 9/11, the Iraq War and Katrina? What was the relationship to the struggles going on in the ICM, in particular, surrounding the revolution in Nepal?

I’d also like to hear your thoughts on a “next synthesis” and what you think that involves, and also WHO you think it involves. I agree that it should not be viewed solely as the work of a couple of major leaders. How can we broaden that process?

You raised a provocative point about how every new synthesis was accompanied by a different view on organization. Could you elaborate on that? Obviously, Lenin had more developed

views on this than Marx, but was Mao such a departure from Lenin? If the party-form is exhausted as you and Badiou argue, what could RCP have done anyway? How do we begin to conceive new forms of organization appropriate for revolution against postmodern [I’m not sure I agree with you about the “postmodern” part] capitalism?

I look forward to continuing the discussion.

20. *r* Says: September 24, 2008 at 1:34 pm

this brings up interesting questions towards security policy. how should intellectuals privacy be treated? If only one sentence was of concern, why was the entire letter forwarded? This seems to go against free room for intellectuals. Also, I think BA tries to self quote to emphasize practice and make things more accessible. I don’t see it as a problem, but i’d like to hear more on how the NS [Avakina’s New Synthesis] was developed.

I personally thought AWAG [*Away with All Gods*] was an important book (what is Bills disagreement?).

Christian fascism is a serious matter and BA dealt with it thoroughly.

BA’s polemic on Kant and his disagreement with Bill was extremely fascinating, and seemed vital - text search on revcom, I’d like to hear others opinions.

21. *N3wDay* Says: September 24, 2008 at 2:07 pm

r,

I posted a quick response under the post, “Away with all Gods, critiquing religion without understanding it“.

22. *zerohour* Says: September 24, 2008 at 2:18 pm

Here’s a critique of AWAG on kasama: <http://mikeely.wordpress.com/2008/08/23/critiquing-religion-without-understanding-it-a-review-of-bob-avakian%E2%80%99s-away-with-all-gods/>. Not Bill Martin’s position, but a substantial one nonetheless.

Here’s a critique of RCP’s approach to religion in general: <http://mikeely.wordpress.com/2008/07/09/militant-materialism-or-biblical-literalism/>

23. *Mike E* Says: September 24, 2008 at 2:27 pm

Moderator Note:

Bill Martin wrote me to say he will respond to comments posted in this thread. But that it might take him a couple days to get to it.

24. *EME* Says: September 24, 2008 at 3:18 pm

Maybe my previous comments were made impatiently and arrogantly.

But I do have a hard time sorting out the actual line questions presented in Bill Martin’s published letters.

First though, he was asked not to publish these communications and then told the RCP he had no intention of doing so. He should have honored that commitment. He certainly could have paraphrased or outlined his feelings to Kasama while maintaining that obligation.

I also admit that much of his writings are over my head. That may well be mainly my own shortcomings. But he also brings an “above it all” mentality to the discussion. I find that tiresome.

Lets look at the issue that seems to have precipitated his break with the RCP - the forward of the book with B.A. and the party's demand that Žižek edit that forward. The RCPs efforts to open up and work with intellectuals was not about trying to make them feel good. They never dropped the insistence that "the proletariat needs to lead", as they would put it.

From their perspective, it was about the ability to get to truth and the need to listen to many voices and realize that we (they) don't know many things with certainty. So the RCP telling Žižek to re-do the forward does not stand in contradiction to "opening up." Why would the RCP publish a forward without involving the author in some back and forth over the content?

Martin is caught up in the status of Žižek in a bourgeois sense. And he was astonished at the idea of going back to him to edit the forward. In his world this is unacceptable. This he describes as a "horrible week." Most of us who spent years working with the RCP probably chuckle at that.

Sorry to go on, but the line I am getting from Martin is actually one of bourgeois right in regards to the intellectuals and the privilege of "interesting conversation" vs struggle for the truth.

EME

25. *Iris* Says: September 24, 2008 at 4:28 pm

Thanks for that post, EME. What you wrote is something I am glad to chew on!

A thought: Bill says:

"...one would think that constant self-reference would be almost the very definition of subjectivism, but I guess that's just a matter of form rather than content [this is something that the LPM said to me, that my challenging of the method of self-reference only goes to form, not content]."

I have said this very thing, and expressed concerns about the quality and thrust of AWAG, even when I was still a supporter. And I have also been told that all I care about is tone, or my own feelings, or style—that I don't care about 'what BA is really saying.' I think that form reflects methodology, at least on some levels, and I am continually frustrated when my questions are rejected as subjective complaints.

I don't feel capable of engaging on a deeper theoretical level at this time, but don't know how else to put my objections, however related to 'form.'

26. *BobH* Says: September 24, 2008 at 5:26 pm

In response to what EME says in #24

"Martin is caught up in the status of Žižek in a bourgeois sense. And he was astonished at the idea of going back to him to edit the forward. In his world this is unacceptable."

I think Martin's outrage is pretty understandable. First I think it is not just Martin that is caught up with Žižek's status. Why would BA and the RCP ask Martin to approach Žižek for a forward to the book unless they are aware of Žižek's status as a radical intellectual? Let's face it, Žižek's name carries a lot more weight among people the RCP clearly wants to reach (students, intellectuals, etc.), so asking him to write a forward is essentially asking for a celebrity endorsement.

By asking Martin to get back to Žižek for a new forward, it clarifies that what is happening here is not a principled "engagement" with Žižek, but arrogance and chutzpah. The "New Synthesis" is supposed to recognize the importance of free struggles of ideas, right? So why ask a famous intellectual to do you a favor and help plug your book and then throw it back for editorial changes because it's now what you would have written? It just reinforces the manipulative nature of the RCP leader's relationships with subordinates and supports: you are hear to be used, not to be listened too. In that sense, the "line question" seems clear to me.

27. *N3wDay* Says: September 24, 2008 at 6:55 pm

Perhaps Bill can answer this better when he has the time. So warning, for the moment this is just speculation on my part. But my guess is Žižek wrote something ideologically different from the RCP and that was not acceptable. I have serious doubts there was ever a desire to have a back and forth discussion over the issue. Žižek was ideologically divergent so he had to rewrite his contribution. Period.

28. *John Steele* Says: September 24, 2008 at 7:44 pm

EME -

You say, "the issue that seems to have precipitated his break with the RCP - the forward of the book with B.A. and the party's demand that Žižek edit that forward."

How do you infer that this issue precipitated his break his break with the party? It's not what Bill says, and in fact it's not true.

The book to which Žižek wrote the forward, *Marxism and the Call of the Future*, was published in the spring of 2005. Here we are more than three years later and Bill is only now making public his break with the rcp. His reasons, as he gives them, are far deeper than any particular incident, including that around the preface. That incident was a symptom of a mode of practice on the part of the rcp, not in itself the cause of anything except some anguish for Bill. (And whether Bill's skin is thin or thick is really not the issue.)

According to the account which he gives above (very carefully dated), his contact in the rcp did not reply to his letter of early June 2008. So it would seem that it was the rcp which broke with Bill, rather than maintain a critical interchange with him.

29. *land* Says: September 25, 2008 at 4:16 pm

This is very thoughtful and kudos to Martin. In the book by Avakian *Observations on Art Culture Science and Philosophy* there was a chapter on The Struggle in the Realm of Ideas. At the time it seemed that there was some new thinking on how communists might work with intellectuals without crushing their creativity and critical thinking.

Whatever happened it seemed to have much to do with a criticism by Martin that AWAG was not very good. And some major disagreements over the the New Synthesis. In any case the RCP did not take their own words seriously.

I am glad Martin spoke out. Also Gary Leupp.

I think it is tough to work with intellectuals in some ways. But it is impossible unless you have respect for theoretical new things. You need respect for climbing the unexplored mountains.

I would hope the Party would take these criticisms seriously.



Bill Martin is a philosophy professor at
DePaul University in Chicago.

He is author of nine books, including
Marxism and the Call of the Future: Conversations on Politics, History, and Ethics
(co-authored with Bob Avakian, 2005) and
Ethical Marxism: The Categorical Imperative of Liberation (2008).

Current projects include
A Debriefment of Maoism: Alain Badiou and the Renewal of the Communist Hypothesis,
and *This Bullshit Society: An Experiment in Truth and Social Theory*.

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