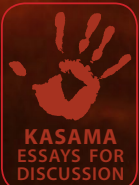


# INTO THE WILD

*Badiou,  
Actually Existing  
Maoism, and the  
“Vital Mix” of  
Yesterday and  
Tomorrow*

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# INTO THE WILD:

## Badiou, actually-existing Maoism, and the “vital mix” of yesterday and tomorrow

By Bill Martin

“The task facing us ... is to bring the communist hypothesis into existence in a different modality from that of the previous sequence; this is why our research is so complicated, so erratic, so experimental.” (Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, p.115; word order altered)

Can we fashion an approach to the communist project that allows us to sift through certain experiences and ideas and evaluate them without becoming stuck in a backward-looking posture? Can we forge some new roads, or find these roads, or perhaps let these roads find us, without entirely forgetting some of the places where we have been? Can we truly go someplace new, “into the wild”?

For those of us who want to set out on this journey, and who see the necessity of it, it might help to have a “workbook” of sorts (or several of them). Our theoretical work in this phase cannot help but be a bit “raw,” which is not to say that we should not aim for as much refinement as we can attain along the way. But the point is that it is “theory” done “along the way,” in something closer to “real time,” what Edward Said called “traveling theory.”

Two somewhat rough-and-ready terms that I would like to introduce in what follows are “actually-existing Maoism” and the “vital mix.” I will also introduce the term “socialist hypothesis,” in contrast to Badiou’s term, the “communist hypothesis.” I hope that these terms will help our work and that they might gain some currency. During the (long) process of completion of this (ridiculously) long piece, the first issue of the RCP’s announced “online theoretical journal,” *Demarcations*,

was released. Presented in this first issue of *Demarcations* is a book-length analysis of the ideas of Alain Badiou. I will come back to this text at the very end of this article, but my main goal here is to present some thoughts subsequent to my response (“Dear Prof. Badiou”) to the RCP’s earlier, “draft chapter,” on Badiou.<sup>1</sup> However, this article is a very long “postscript”! My aim is to not only dissect some bad methodology and to carry forward the larger project of the debriefment of Maoism, but even more to lay some ground for the next steps that need to be taken, practically and theoretically. Let me be clear: the next steps also need to be taken even as the debriefment unfolds, otherwise we will get stuck in this project of debriefment.

However, let me say at the outset that (and this is a topic covered in more general terms below), this approach in which there is no basic respect for intellectuals, and especially not for philosophers and for the history of philosophy, this approach of only reading a particular contemporary philosopher with no intention of being open to learning anything, but only with the aim of picking him or her apart, this approach is odious and needs to be rejected by anyone who hopes to contribute to radically changing the world.

There are some who do not see this project of “debriefment” as a particularly important task, especially some who supposedly moved beyond this stage of things long ago. Perhaps this question doesn’t “divide

1. “Dear Professor Badiou: About the RCP Assault on Alain Badiou, Philosophy And (Ultimately) Communism Itself” was first posted on [kasamaproject.org](http://kasamaproject.org) in April, 2009. It appears here as an appendix beginning on page 51.

into two," exactly, but there are at least two important aspects to it. The aspect which I would take as principal, or that I try to take as principle (though I probably fail in this respect here and there), is taking it as baseline that Maoism generates a "problematic" (as Althusser called it) from which we communists need to advance. That means building on the positive experiences, and understanding and criticizing the problems, and asking what it means to go forward from a certain place or a certain trajectory. This also means considering the contributions of Maoism after Mao. The problem is instead one of creating a framework where the really important contributions can be carried forward.

This also means understanding better some of the problems and contradictions of those contributions. By contradiction in this case I mean places where there is a definite advance, but where there is also a cost, and the cost is not understood or recognized. The key example of this kind of advance in the history of the international communist movement is the establishment of socialist state power itself.

The related methodological question that is central to how we deal with the "Maoist problematic" concerns continuity and discontinuity, whether we need a new synthesis that has continuity as its principle aspect, or whether we need something really new.

Clearly, the RCP is unable to really deal with this as the central question (and this inability is what generates, ultimately, all of the methodological difficulties of Avakian's New Synthesis, including the silly ones, such as constant self-referencing); however, 1) there are many others (within the various camps of Maoism, Marxism, communism, or socialism) who don't want to deal with discontinuity, either, they would rather take recourse to the accepted verities of twentieth-century Marxist theory and practice, in whatever form is comfortable for them; 2) more to the point, we who hope to contribute to the next phase of communism do need to take full stock of this question of discontinuity—and Badiou's work can help us with this.

We won't be helped by Badiou or anyone if we don't gain a bit of dialectical subtlety. Badiou supposedly sets aside the category of class, but then he goes on to talk about the proletariat; he sets aside even "Marxism"

and the history of socialist states, but also says that "it should be understood that in one form or another we shall retain the theoretical and historical teachings that issued from the first sequence [the Paris Commune and Marx's naming of the proletariat as the "central void" of capitalism] and the central function of victorious discipline that issued from the second" [from the Bolshevik Revolution to the Chinese Cultural Revolution; this is also from *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, p.114]. We need to understand what it would mean to take both sides of Badiou's formulations (putting certain things—essentially "presentations and modalities of the communist hypothesis"—in the past tense, and yet also affirming them, not abandoning fidelity to them) and to understand them not only dialectically, but also fundamentally in terms of discontinuity rather than continuity.

The other aspect of debriefment, which, as I've said, I hope to keep secondary but may fail at doing so here and there, is that some of us need to get some things out of our systems, so to speak. For those of you who weren't around the RCP for long periods of time, I realize this can be annoying. I think there is more here than simply an exercise in looking backwards, I think it goes to some things that we don't want to repeat in our efforts of regroupment and reconception. But, if you can't accept that, then, I don't know, I suppose you should just look away. There are some lessons to be learned about how we can really have effective organization without being merely sectarian, and about how intellectuals and artists can actually play a vital role in radical social transformation, and furthermore how, if we treat our comrades in a merely instrumental way, we are just reflecting and replicating and reifying (in the sense of contributing even further to) the very social forms that need to be overthrown..

Some object to the line of inquiry here, or the part of it that continues to deal with the RCP and Bob Avakian, because it seems to them to afford too much centrality and significance to that experience. But part of what I am saying is that, in addition to the need for some of us to get some things out of our systems, there is a need in the larger discussion toward reconceiving communism, and regrouping around this reconception, to dissect the ways that dogmatism and cultish-

ness seem to return repeatedly even in the midst of radical experimentation.

We might think here about how Albert Einstein not only could not bring himself to accept some of the basic ideas of quantum mechanics, beyond this he tended to fall back upon “constants” that were already more or less discredited by his own discoveries. (I think there is something here for how we understand the critique of the Nepali Maoists, too; it isn’t that there might not be some deep problems there (with the revolutionary process unfolding in Nepal), but what does it mean if we simply fall back upon “classical Maoism” when we ourselves have seen the need to forge ahead to a new paradigm?)

We might also consider the relationship between the genuinely new and the good in Badiou (or in Plato, for that matter!), where the good, the true, and the new are essentially the same thing. As Oliver Feltham puts it in his helpful introduction to Badiou, “Drawing his inspiration from the Maoist theme of the battle of old and new ideas, Badiou concludes that all truth is new. This thesis will become a cornerstone of his philosophy” (Alain Badiou: *Live Theory*, p.51). I don’t know that I agree with this (all truth is new)—but that is not the point, I’m just recommending that we think about it.

For those who have managed to stay with me thus far, I think you’ll find that I’ll be less fixated on the Avakian/RCP experience by and by, but let me try one more time to frame the whole effort in general terms, with the plea that you consider these terms. Accept in good faith, please, that I am also trying to understand these terms myself. I propose that the debriefment of Maoism is necessary for the reconception and regroupment of revolutionary communism. I propose that Bob Avakian and the RCP made contributions to the Maoist problematic. If we want to forge a new road in revolutionary communism, and to be open to events (or, to be more strictly Badiouean about it, an event) that could show us a whole new way forward, we need this debriefment. If instead we want to think in terms of anarchism, socialism, or Trotskyism, and their respective debriefments, that is a somewhat different project. I’m not saying these are not valid projects, and I’m not saying that we cannot learn from these projects, but let’s

not mash all of this too quickly together, either, and let’s not allow some purely quantitative measure of the significance or lack thereof of the RCP and Bob Avakian (as compared, for instance, to some other relatively small group of anarchists, socialists, or Trotskyists, or what-have-you, or to some other relatively-unknown leader or theorist) to undermine our ability to make qualitative distinctions. More will be said on these issues below, especially in relation to anarchism, Badiou’s concerns about the “party-state,” and what I’m going to call the “socialist hypothesis.”

Additionally, I would like to remind everyone that I am simply hoping to contribute to the work that we do here; we need many tribunes and tributaries, and we need a theoretical methodology and a form of organization that allows us to bring forward all of the constructive energies and positive elements and that helps us focus these energies on the work of creating a new society. Is there a way to say, without being merely “eclectic,” that not everything that needs to be united in practice has to be united in theory? (Part of my response to this question is found in sections 6 and 7, on the idea of the “vital mix.”) Is there a way to say that not everyone has to take up all theoretical questions at the deepest possible level without giving way to anti-intellectualism? Conversely, is there a way to pull together the theoretical work we need without sanctioning “theoreticism”? (Here the experience and work of Althusser is again relevant.) A great deal hinges on how we work through these questions—indeed, I would say everything hinges on this work, even if there are still a few more questions on which everything may hinge.

This is a long essay that doubles back upon itself in various ways, coming at some of the same basic themes from different angles. When I do propose an alternative idea or approach, I try to make it clear that I am doing that, and most likely I will construct an additional essay, “for more popular consumption,” as they say, that concentrates these points more succinctly. Here, although there is some rough going (reflecting at times, I’m sure, my own limitations in writing and conceptualization, but also reflecting the difficult terrain that we need to traverse), I hope there is at least some valuable

grist for the mill that will go toward constructing the “workbooks” that we need.

## 1. Into the wild

If you’re not sometimes confused in this crazy world, then you’ve probably abdicated on being human, and certainly on being an intellectual. And who isn’t sometimes confused? Fundamentalists and dogmatists and people sealed up inside a small, locked-up universe are the ones who are never confused. Charges of “agnosticism” and “relativism” do not do justice to the fact that sometimes we have to bracket what we know (or supposedly know or think we know) in order to be open to something new. Revolutionaries have to be willing to go into the wilderness, and this is, I think, the main point at stake in Lenin’s having taken up Hegel’s *Logic* in 1916. One reading of this is that Lenin felt the need to reground his sense of how the dialectic works in Marx, especially in *Capital*. This is how Lenin’s “return to Hegel” is understood in the Marxist-Humanist trend of Raya Dunayevskaya, as represented for example in the excellent book by Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*.

This trend has, I think, produced some good work over the years—and, again, I don’t think that is a matter of agreeing with it on all points. Methodologically, the point is that you’ll never actually engage with philosophy or theory if your approach to it is to simply see a systematically-developed argument as a set of propositions that can be summed up as either true or false. You will miss truth this way or you will miss some valuable ideas that could help us get to the truth.

Dunayevskaya and the other well-known neo-Trotskyist theorist of state-capitalism, Tony Cliff (and some of their respective followers, such as Alex Callinicos and Peter Hudis) are quite wrong, I think, about Mao, but that doesn’t mean that they can’t help us think through the ways in which Maoism was too much continuous with Stalinism. And they were wrong, but less wrong, about Stalin, but the difficulty is that they were in some respects not entirely wrong. I know Cliff’s work less well, but at least in the case of Dunayevskaya, Callinicos, Anderson, and Hudis (and some others), you could not fault them on not actually

bothering to read philosophical works and the works of twentieth-century Marxist thinkers, from Lukacs to Althusser (Hudis wrote a good review of Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*; Callinicos wrote an essay on it that I really do not like, but at least he bothered to dig into the thing).

But you can imagine how people around the RCP dealt with this sort of stuff—“if you think what they’re doing is so great, why don’t you go join them?” A bit like the old, “If he’s so great, why don’t you marry him?” Anything to not have to go beyond the narrow canon; I think we have to understand how this is a mindset that mixes all kinds of bad methodologies and attitudes, from dogmatism and absolutism to—with the New Synthesis and the conception of Avakian as cardinal question—narcissism, resentment, and, perhaps worst of all, fear.

## 2. Fear and trembling

I realize now, with no small amount of hindsight (but I had some sense of this even then and raised it as such) that perhaps the central factor driving the person who argued with me over the inclusion of the Zizek Foreword in the *Conversations* book was fear. Fear of Avakian’s disfavor, which in this person’s mind amounted to fear of being excluded from the revolution. I’m sure of this because I felt that sort of fear myself over the course of twenty-five years of interacting with the RCP, though I also rebelled against it from time to time. Since I do believe that the RCP was doing revolutionary work up to a point, the important methodological point is to understand how such fear can exist in such a context.

If you don’t believe the RCP was the pole of revolutionary communism in its time (and up through some point between about 2002 and 2006), there is still an important question to be answered: is it possible that there could be a revolutionary pole that has some element of this kind of fear (fear of breaking out of narrow bounds, but also fear of what’s outside of those bounds), but is still revolutionary, or is it that the presence of this kind of fear itself is an indication that this is not a revolutionary pole?



For my part, I think the first of these alternatives is possible—up to a point, there is a point where quantity (of fear) goes over to quality (of the organization, and perhaps that is the point where the organization is for all intents and purposes a “cult” even if this is a term I find somewhat unhelpful even in the context—of expressly religious groups—in which it is ordinarily applied). Given that this is a possibility (that a revolutionary organization could involve some of this fear), wouldn’t the point be to avoid this where possible and to “counter” it in some way?

This goes to the whole question of “ease of mind” and “making revolution in a hothouse” that was spoken to over the years in the original RCP programme and other places. As I told many RCP people over the years, I rarely if ever experienced “ease of mind” around them. Their response (again back to the relationship analogies) was, essentially, “that’s you, not us.” Certainly there were things about me that were me rather than them, you could say, in that I was trying to relate to the RCP as a musician and philosopher (even if in a formative stage on the latter point), though I hope to remain philosophically “formative” for the remainder of my days.

One answer I was sometimes given on this point is that the “as” part was the problem (“as” a musician or philosopher); that what I needed to do was to approach things as a communist. I think there is something to this, I don’t want to dismiss it, but I felt pretty sure that, if I did this the way my RCP contact person was looking at it, I would no longer be a musician or a philosopher. And, of course, one could say, “well, what’s one less musician or philosopher in the world, more or less?” This is probably true, and yet it is also a completely non-constructive, indeed destructive and reactionary way to look at the question.

The RCP did better than most on these sorts of questions, just looking at it in terms of “organization,” and leaving aside the outlook and aims of other “left” organizations. The latter are happy to have anyone, they will sign you up on the spot (as readers here may know, I’m not exaggerating), but that didn’t mean they really wanted to engage with radical philosophy, either, except perhaps in the sense that an articulate person (or a person who uses fancy words, at any rate) can do

well in what might be called a “rhetorical democracy of big talkers.”

“What’s one less musician or philosopher, what’s one less artist or intellectual?” was indeed the perspective of the RCP; it was mostly the perspective of other “socialist” or “Marxist” groups, even some of the ones that had some heavy hitters, theoretically speaking. There were moments when the RCP at least tried to have a better line on this; while I think some of this was sincere, perhaps even in Avakian’s own mind, eventually this always came up against Avakian’s role as the decider and the definer.

But there is an actual methodological and epistemological question in the midst of all this, quite apart from one’s perspective on Avakian and the RCP. There are/were groups that have a more lively theoretical scene in their midst, by which I mainly mean that they are willing to consider ideas from outside of some narrow canon, but either these are not revolutionary parties, in the Leninist sense, or their guiding principle is not revolutionary communism. Alex Callinicos and the Socialist Workers Party is a good example. (The SWP in the U.K. is a neo-Trotskyist group that follows the theory that state-capitalism was restored in the Soviet Union with the ascendancy of Stalin’s leadership, and that the Chinese Revolution was never socialist, but rather a bourgeois revolution in a predominantly feudal society, a revolution that brought to power the Stalinist model of state capitalism, as they understand this.) Callinicos does his homework and says some interesting things, or helpful things, but then he can also be quite rigid at times, not always but quite often bringing things back under the “classical Marxist” model of the SWP, which is essentially trade-union based economism. I’m not saying these things as smears, this is the SWP’s own self-conception.

Now, I have seen fear and emotional manipulation in these other groups, too, and the question is whether these things will almost certainly be a part of any kind of group that has radical aims. Then, is it also the case that, the more radical the aims, the more of this sort of thing there will be? Leave aside for the moment what is “really radical.” One answer that is generally given to this is that the real revolution is the one that aims to ul-

timately abolish the “four alls.” That sounds right to me; there is a difference between communists, who work according to this aim, and socialists, who view things in a qualitatively different—and often supposedly more “realistic”—way. (We’ll come back to the anarchists.)

Wouldn’t it necessarily be the case that, on this reading, there would need to be a higher level of commitment, I would say a qualitatively higher or deeper level of commitment, to being a communist rather than a socialist? For one thing, a greater degree of selflessness is required, and even different kinds of selflessness, to fight for long-range goals that not only cannot be connected to the interests of the individual communist (they are not, and cannot be, simply fighting for themselves) but in fact cannot be connected very closely to the interests of the greater part of the people, at least in an imperialist society. For the proletariat and the oppressed globally, yes, but that is a very different question and requires a completely different approach than one based on the notion of interests—and this approach requires a higher level of commitment and selflessness.

An essential, ineliminable, part of this discussion is that communists believe, and I believe, that we need communism to save the world. The one remaining “inevitablism” that remains after all others have been cleared away is that capitalism will destroy this world if humanity does not get beyond capitalism and save the world. Our fear of what capitalism is doing to this world, and what it will ultimately do if it is not stopped, is quite justified. Postmodern capitalism adds the twist on this, again ironically joined by religious fundamentalisms but especially fundamentalist Christianity (though seen as well, as Slavoj Žižek argues, in “Western Buddhism”), that the world doesn’t matter, so don’t worry about saving it. And perhaps there will be an even further step, where postmodern imperialism really does bring about a world that is not worth saving. (Read the *Dune* novels for a sense of worlds of such cruelty that it would be better if they simply were destroyed altogether.) We ought to fear all of these things.

As on so many points, the experience of the bicycle is a source of lessons. If you’re a cyclist, you’ll know what I’m talking about (or, frankly, if you’re a cyclist and you don’t get what I’m talking about, you may not

be a cyclist for much longer). When you’re riding on a country road, and you hear a motor vehicle roaring up from behind, you’d better be a bit wary of what might happen when that vehicle comes into closer proximity with you and your bike. After some experience, you are able to interpret the sound of the approaching vehicle and to respond accordingly. (More generally, a bicyclist needs to be able to “read the body language” of motor vehicles.) The point is that a cyclist needs to have the right amount of wariness and even fear regarding what can be a fearsome situation, but if the cyclist is overcome with fear, she or he will be paralyzed with fear and not be able to ride at all. Believe me, I’ve seen it happen.

Indeed, as I’m sure most people reading this know, this dynamic—paralysis by fear—is at the core of what is going on with people who break from Marxist organizations and then go away from politics altogether. Or, the paralysis is some combination of fear and exhaustion. The question of exhaustion is then complicated by the experience of different paradigms, ones that were never too good to begin with, or ones that had some element of truth to them, but that element, that paradigm, has run its course. Then fear comes back in a slightly different form, fear of leaving what one has known for the big world of unknowns.

Neither should it be surprising that some people then go in a more avowedly “religious” direction, really for two reasons. The obvious one is that there is a certain comfort in returning to this dynamic of fear and exhaustion, but under a supposedly transcendent paradigm that is supposedly inexhaustible and where some sort of “victory” is assured. The less obvious reason is that there is something “religious” about the dynamic of fear and exhaustion that is an ineliminable part of a real commitment to revolutionary communism. To put this in more complex but also, I would hope, more subtle terms, there is something about a certain kind of “religious perspective” that presents a real epistemological problem, and it has to do with believing in things that are, at the very least, “highly unlikely,” and in things that, at least in some sense, “do not exist.”

Let us come back to some of these questions; for the moment, let us try to reach an understanding of this dynamic of fear, and then move on to resentment.

I experienced fear at various times in my dealings with the RCP. I experienced fear of two kinds. The kind of fear that I want to focus on here is the one associated with “leaving the revolution.” The point is to avoid a merely “liberal,” “it’s my life” kind of response to this dynamic of fear.

However, the other fear is worth mentioning, as it is not unrelated, and that was the fear that, from the perspective of “what’s one less artist or intellectual, more or less?”, there were times when I could see the philosophical and theoretical work I was doing as not only not being valued, but instead being flushed down the toilet, and the material circumstances that allow for the development of this sort of work (that is, my “not uncomfortable” academic position and my adherence in some ways to certain kinds of “academic niceties”) along with it. What happens for an intellectual or artist, in the context of the main kind of fear I am pointing to, is that one can easily convince oneself, and there have been times when I was close to convincing myself, that the “what’s one less intellectual, more or less?” perspective is true. Or something close enough to this: “sure, your work matters (I guess—we’re not really familiar with it), but the Revolution needs something else from you right now—urgently!”

Here’s the problem or set of problems. First, it certainly could be the case that the revolution needs something else, either in general or at any given point. (This is apart from the argument, from Žižek and Badiou, that “the revolution has no needs,” which I am straining to understand. [see *The Parallax View*, pp.326-327].)

Second, most artists or intellectuals are certainly replaceable, and I count myself in this group of those who are “replaceable.” For one thing, I know full well I could go out on my bike after today’s writing session and be run over by some testosterone-poisoned motorist, and yet I would hope that one of my dying thoughts would be the same as one of my constant living thoughts, namely that I hope that humanity can somehow go on and get itself out of its present bad patch and make something truly good and beautiful and just of itself.

There might be—indeed, I think there are—intellectuals and artists and others who are in a sense “ir-

replaceable,” but this is again where Badiou can help us. What is irreplaceable about them is not their being the “subjects” who they “are,” it is not the “subject” who has being, at least not fundamentally. Rather, it is the discovery, for instance, of general relativity that makes a certain person “an Einstein,” and it is the discovery of how to make a socialist revolution in a Third World country, and how to make a revolution in the revolution, “a Mao.”

(The distinction between “invention” and “discovery” is perhaps the biggest difference between Derrida and Badiou; from Badiou’s perspective, Derrida’s question, “What can I invent?”—which opens, for example, Derrida’s essay, “Psyche: Inventions of the Other”—places the subject before the event, and shows the co-implication of subjectivity, consciousness, language, meaning, and interpretation; this is the Kantian problematic that Badiou hopes to surmount with the turn to mathematics as ontology, the return to Plato via Cantor’s set theory. Let me note that none of these philosophical questions, which are central to Badiou’s work, figure even the slightest into the RCP’s “critique” of Badiou.)

Third, it is probably a necessary and even good thing that we might feel fear about changing our commitments. If we could just shake off a commitment to something that we think has to do with the possibility of the future flourishing of humankind, something that is necessary for avoiding the destruction of humankind, and something that is necessary for getting out of the past and present misery of the far greater part of humankind, if such a “commitment” could be shrugged off like water running off the back of a duck, then clearly the commitment didn’t amount to much to begin with. A real and deep commitment should not be easy to walk away from, but the other side of this coin is that, when a commitment does require a major re-orientation, then one’s life is necessarily going to come unraveled to some extent, probably to a large extent. Absolutely this is a fearsome thing, and yet it doesn’t do justice to a real commitment to say that it shouldn’t contain this element.

On the first point, however, one big problem with the RCP was that too often it was not able to tell the dif-

ference between the “general” and the “any given point.” It had little sense of the “general intellectual and cultural scene” beyond itself and a few things it had latched on to (the Clash or whatever horror movie Avakian had just watched), and so its view on why some people should be doing something other than what the RCP were doing was often uninformed, often arrogantly so.

On the second point, while it may be the case that most artists or intellectuals are “replaceable,” it is clearly a very bad thing to proceed with work with artists and intellectuals on such a basis. I expressed many frustrations on this point in the “What is the opposite of bullshit?” interview. While at the time of the interview (the first months of 2008) I didn’t openly express these frustrations in terms of the RCP, of course I was thinking of them and what I was hearing about how the thinking had been completed on the New Synthesis. But, if anything, what the declaration of Bob Avakian’s New Synthesis reveals is that hard and creative intellectual work is not so easily done, much less replaced.

And, on the third point, there is the difficult question of how the ease of mind that will allow for the creative initiative of revolutionary communists can co-exist with deep commitment and political discipline and a sense of a collective project. This “co-existence” problem exists (or, it should exist) for all revolutionary communists, whatever work they are doing.

However, there are specific issues within this general problematic concerning the work of intellectuals and artists. Here we are up against the division of labor that capitalism and imperialism has created. The temptation is to say that, since these seemingly semi-autonomous spheres of artistic and intellectual work are the products of imperialism, and of forms of commodification and valuation that are specific to the imperialist world system, we can just ignore the specific issues of these spheres altogether. Hardly anyone will openly put forward this solution anymore, but there are variations on it that amount to the same anti-intellectualism.

Badiou’s separation of the truth domains (politics, art, science, love) gives us something to think about here, as does Adorno’s notion of the autonomous artwork and his critique of the “committed artist” (in the essay, “Commitment,” which is a critique of Sartre’s po-

liticized conception of aesthetics). I always thought it was interesting but somewhat dubious that Raymond Lotta presented work in public as “a Maoist political economist.” What does that mean, exactly? Does it help if I look at Bertolt Brecht as a “Marxist writer,” or Hans Eisler as a “Marxist composer”? In the cultural sphere, I would say that the main impression of such an appellation is that somehow the modifier (“Maoist,” “Marxist”) represents some sort of shortcut or way around the academic niceties.

I don’t have the answer on this, I just want to underline it as a question, but it seems to me that there are two good reasons to not engage in intellectual self-definitions such as “Maoist political economist” or “Maoist philosopher” (or “Maoist pastry chef”). The first is that it takes away from the idea that a person needs to have done a certain amount of work to legitimately call her- or himself a political economist or a philosopher (or a bike mechanic). Please understand that I am not saying that intellectuals working in these fields cannot have acquired their educations outside of narrow academic channels. As a rock musician and writer on (mostly) rock music, I think I have sufficient sensitivity on this question. (Musicians in the field of Western classical music quite commonly think of themselves as “real musicians playing real music,” and everyone else as “not legit,” much to the frustration of everyone else. Of course there are some very significant exceptions.) Still, there are some basics that need to be acquired one way or another, and then one looks for a certain amount of development, and of course for some creativity or at least something that couldn’t already be obtained somewhere else.

The second reason for avoiding these sorts of self-definitions brings us back to the larger question of fear. To do real intellectual work, and, perhaps more importantly, to do anything political that would go beyond reformism and economism, requires willingness to experiment, and willingness to go into the wilderness. Experimentation cannot occur at all points at all times, of course, any more than a revolution can simply happen at any time even if a sufficient number or sufficiently strategically-placed group of people want it to happen. However, even keeping in mind Thomas

Kuhn's distinction between "normal" and "revolutionary" science, even under conditions where we are filling out the picture in a new and rising paradigm (or, to use Imre Lakatos's term, "research programme"), our work needs to be guided by a spirit of creativity and openness to experiment. We should not take our commitments lightly, but there is a version of taking them "heavily" that crushes the life out of them. "Pre-definition," a heavy setting of parameters in advance, stifles critical and creative work. What is more to the point here, pre-definition is a phenomenon of fearful recoil; within Marxism, it is a form of what might be called "pathological materialism," a "materialism" based on a pathological recoil from anything that could even conceivably prove to be insufficiently materialist.

Under such a pathology, as evidenced by such intellectual designations as Maoist pastry chef, fear can take the intellectual beyond paralysis—into pervasive fear of the wild, fear of deviation and fear of coming under suspicion for having a critical thought. This fear can lead to having a brain that is running so hot it is boiling over, a brain in perpetual "fugue state." Anyone who has been a committed religious believer and who has significantly changed his or her perspective knows what this is about. And I would lay very strong odds that anyone who has done intellectual work in or close to the RCP knows what this is about.

To return to earlier themes, I am not saying that there might not be moments when it is necessary to risk such an outcome. Putting intellectual or artistic work on an unending "war communism" footing, however, is just another way of destroying this work or preventing it from ever getting off the ground. This occurs in the context of a world where real creative work counts for very little, and it is hard to see the "war communism" way of destroying intellectual and artistic work as being so different from ordinary, everyday anti-intellectualism.

### 3. It will eat you up: resentment

Imagine someone who believes he can make a contribution to music on the cello, but who has never heard of Yo-Yo Ma. And who, now having finally heard of the esteemed maestro in the midst of a joint project with

a musical collaborator, can only respond by saying, "I sure wish that guy didn't exist, it takes attention away from me." Suppose our resentful cellist is in some other genre of music besides Western classical music, however; wouldn't he be entitled to pay no more attention to Yo-Yo Ma than maestro Yo-Yo has paid to him?

Well, some of these resentments are perfectly understandable—just to be fair, I'll admit that it bothers me quite a bit that my own work isn't more in the mix of these recent discussions around "the idea of communism," as I think my work has a real contribution to make, and this has nothing to do with any desire for "fame" in and of itself. (It should go without saying that any such "fame" for this sort of thing comes with a price, and is viewed by many as instead being infamy.) More needs to be said about this problem of resentment; suffice it to say for now that, 1) functioning in the academic world, where resentment is rife, I am not only very aware of this problem, I think on the whole I do a pretty good job of not getting mixed up in it, and 2) the pursuit of "fame" per se is bound up with too much attention to some particular subject—some central, defining personality—and to a "culture" of hype.

Over the course of my life in philosophy and social theory, especially as a graduate student and then a professor, I have devoted a significant amount of energy to the fact that my colleagues in Marxism and otherwise radical politics and theory were devoting insufficient attention to Lenin, Mao, the problematics of the Soviet and Chinese experiences, and to the contributions of Bob Avakian on these problematics. Indeed, the reason I was approached, at least as it was explained to me, to engage in the conversations that ultimately became the book with Bob Avakian, was that I was the person out there who had consistently engaged with Maoism and Avakian in my work—and if you look at my books you'll see that this is the case.

Now, undoubtedly some would interpret these engagements as "eclectic," since I was engaging with other diverse thinkers and subjects at the same time, everything from Sartre and Derrida to progressive rock music to Mormon communitarianism. I will try to write a little something on dialectics and "eclectics" by and by, but here again I find Badiou helpful: in the non-reduc-

ibility to one another of the domains in which truth-events are possible, but even more in the idea of the “communist hypothesis” itself. From time to time, for narrow “professional” reasons (for instance in coming up for tenure and promotion) I’ve had to answer the question, what is it that brings the diverse aspects of my work together, or am I just “all over the map,” as they say.

Well, for one thing, forming a conception of the “map” itself is a difficult problem, especially if it turns out that we cannot ultimately create a coherent conception because in reality there is no “map,” no “common coordinate system” built into the structure of reality itself. (This raises some of the important issues that are at stake between Badiou on the one side, and Jacques Derrida and Donald Davidson on the other; on this point about the “map” or “coordinate system,” see Davidson’s essay, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme.”) However, if there is really only one philosophical idea, from Plato to now, and that is the idea of communism, then we also have a basis for seeing diverse contributions, if they really are contributions (if they either initiate or develop a living truth sequence), as contributions to the possibility of a world of mutual flourishing.

In Badiou’s work (and it has more in common with Derrida’s on this point than some might recognize) there is a systematically-articulated ground for recognizing the irreducibility of these domains of truth, their real difference and diversity, and therefore for appreciating the actual contributions that occur in these domains. Here the question of continuity and discontinuity again comes to the fore, but also simply the problems of dogmatism and know-nothingism.

But what is the real reason for this strange and sad and messed-up view of intellectual work? Beyond fear, it is resentment, of a sort that fits in all too well with the world of academic niceties.

Yo-Yo Ma, on the other hand, is a wonderful exemplar of what it means to be open to learning from many sources; he is a great humanist in music, in the mold of Pablo Casals. And he seems to be pretty good in the chops department, too.

#### 4. Responsibilities of philosophy

As I said, and as I think most anyone reading this would know, I engaged with Bob Avakian’s work more than anyone outside of the RCP ever did. There are some who find that a problem, that any of us ever engaged with Avakian, and that some of us continue to, to take him seriously and therefore treat him as someone who should have been taken seriously, up to a point. You could say they offer the Richard Rorty/pragmatist version of deconstruction on this point: the way to get out of a certain vocabulary or a certain discourse is not to work through it and then out of it (as Derrida does). Instead, our pragmatists aver, we need to simply drop the language and get out of that conversation—whether the conversation concerns ancient Greek philosophy (Rorty wondered why Derrida still traveled or trafficked in the land of the Greeks, so to speak), theology, or Bob Avakian.

This point has special applicability to the question of religion. In the famous (at the time) debates between Frederick Copleston and Bertrand Russell on religion (from 1948), the former argued that the persistence and pervasiveness of religion must account for something, and this something must speak to religion’s having a measure of truth to impart. One could say that this is a good Hegelian argument, about truth being “in history” and historical through and through. (Copleston was a Jesuit priest who wrote a still much-used history of Western philosophy.) Russell, despite not being exactly a logical positivist, gave an essentially positivistic response to this historicist claim. That is, Russell’s contrary answer to the claim represents a synthesis of two-valued logic (a proposition is either true or false and not some other, “middle” value) with a world constituted by atomistic “facts.” In this perspective, the existence of God, or the asserted validity of any other bits of religion, is conceived propositionally. That is, “God exists” is a proposition that is either true or not true, and we look at the “logic of the concept” (for internal coherence or contradiction) and the empirically-verifiable facts of the world to form a judgment. So, for Russell, the persistence and pervasiveness of religion

means something about the failure of people to reason well and look around in the actual material world.<sup>2</sup>

But isn't it also the case that the way we approach the question of religion shows something important about our general methodology and approach to reality and the human condition in general? I will say again, and will continue to repeat as many times as seems necessary, that there is too much approaching this "question of religion" without grappling very deeply with what religion is, or what might be understood by some of its key terms and ideas, especially apart from the taken-for-granted or completely unexamined "propositional" approach. Soren Kierkegaard already gave an excellent critique of this idea of religion as simply a set of propositions to which one either assents or dissents (with the proposition, "God exists," as the centerpiece). From roughly the same historical period (roughly!), William James's argument from *The Will to Believe* concerning "optimism and pessimism as definitions of the world" bears further thought in this connection.

That is, I suppose, if reading the work of actual philosophers is worth doing, and my larger point here is that it is this very idea that the RCP's recent demarcations are set against.

Where you end up under such a conception is a sui generis "philosophy" that just reinvents the wheel—at best, and often not very well.

The particular wheel that Bob Avakian has reinvented on the question of religion is not only positivism, it is a far less interesting or valuable positivism than what we had from Russell, Carnap, Neurath, Schlick (and others of the Vienna Circle, including the youngsters Ayer and Quine), or certainly the early Wittgenstein.

2. Russell changed his basic positions on basic philosophical questions on a regular basis, though his book, *Logical Atomism*, was meant as a refutation of Hegel—or of a certain Hegelianism and of Leibniz's concept of internal relations—and it was a key inspiration to the Vienna Circle. There are different paths through this argument, and I have conflated Russell, Carnap, and Wittgenstein a bit here, for instance on this notion of an ontology of "facts"—Wittgenstein's famous, "The world is all that is the case." But this account is close enough for present purposes. I go more deeply into some of these issues in *Ethical Marxism*, pp.402-445, considering especially Rudolph Carnap and Daniel Dennett.

And that's the story on much supposedly Marxist critique of religion, it's just warmed-over and crude positivism and secular rationalism. But my point here wasn't to go so much further with this discussion of religion, but instead to point to the methodological problems of the secular rationalist approach that prevent us from contributing to the needed radical transformation of the world. Historicism and questions of language, meaning, and interpretation are related but also analytically-independent issues that would also divert us from the central focus of the moment, but again let me underline the point that a certain "religious problematic" has features that are very close to a certain "revolutionary communist problematic."

Badiou's answer on this, simply put, is mathematics—it could be said that mathematics is how we can have a communist problematic that is not a religious problematic. For my part, I want to understand this better; but even when I do understand it better, I don't know why my main reaction would be to figure out a way to make a demarcation against it. My own general heading for understanding how Derrida approaches these questions in *Specters of Marx* (and elsewhere) is "Marxism's ghost of a chance," and I don't think it bothered Derrida that there was a kind of "religious" resonance there, that's where the investigation took him. But I don't know that Badiou ends up entirely somewhere else, either, I really don't know if mathematics entirely escapes this resonance either.

Derrida and Badiou are often placed with the thinkers of immanence, and certainly there is a question here regarding how either could be materialist or what kind of materialist either could be ("intertextual"? "mathematical"?). For my part, I think there is a transcendental aspect to each (or "quasi-transcendental," as Derrida put it), and yet I think they both contribute to materialism.

However, even while I think we have to be systematic (and scientific) about what approach to the communist problematic we ought to have, I think we also ought to have an appreciation for what it means to try to make a contribution (that's my Kantian side speaking up), and an appreciation for the idea that, as I said before, not everything that needs to be united in prac-

tice (in the sense of a united front against the existing system and for a new social system) needs to be united in theory, especially if the latter unification is simply forced and crushes the creativity out of our efforts.

My other main comment about the positivist or secular rationalist critique of religion (and here is where the comparison of the “deconstructions” of Rorty and Derrida is helpful) is that the “empiricism plus bivalent propositional logic”-approach leads us to a unitary conception that is simply the “flipped-over” version of what we had before. In other words, you don’t dispel logos and telos (the “one,” the “center out of which everything unfolds,” the “unfolding” in which “the end is in the beginning”) by simply turning them upside-down.

It would be so much more valuable than what Bob Avakian did in *Away With All Gods!* to look at the ways in which Marx’s conception emerged against the problematics of Western monotheism (and here we can still learn so much more from Althusser’s arguments about how Marx broke with humanism—or, one might say, Althusser’s conception of how Marx should have understood this break in philosophical terms) and how Mao’s conceptions were formed against the background of “godless” China. Everywhere one goes in the world, one finds gods or God—except China..

Furthermore, there are ways in which Mao’s approach to Marxism is more like Kant and Derrida, and others in which it is more like Plato and Badiou, and what is the harm in developing these questions?

What is a new synthesis in Marxism without logos or telos, and is that something we actually want? Is the result a kind of piecemeal “synthesis,” a set of working hypotheses without any claim on a larger unity?

If this (piecemeal hypothesis formation) is itself objectionable, does that mean we have to bite the bullet and reaffirm a logocentric perspective, as is recommended, for example, by the advocates of “radical orthodoxy”—John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and others?<sup>3</sup> They are thinking in terms of Christianity, but

3. See not only their works, especially *Theology and Social Theory* and *After Writing*, but also the collection jointly edited with Creston Davis, *Theology and the Political*, as well as the more recent encounter between Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, also edited by Davis, *The Monstrosity of Christ*.

the questions they raise can be developed in terms of Marxism readily enough, and of course this similarity or parallelism is instructive in itself.

This is not only heavy stuff, it is the tip of the iceberg of heavy stuff. Or it is the tip of one among many icebergs. The point is not the familiar but wrong idea that, until one has read and mastered a boatload of books, then one has no role to play in theoretical discussion. The point instead is that it is unacceptable to approach these heavy ideas without a sense of respect and responsibility and willingness to do some work.

It is unacceptable in itself, I would say, because we ought to show respect for people who have put in the time to try to think through some things and to write things up and put them out there—especially, one would think, if the aim of such work is to try to participate in the possibility of a fundamentally better world.

One form in which this disrespect and irresponsibility is sometimes found is in the “Aw shucks, I don’t know about your book-learning, mister, but I sure do know that we need to get out there and do something”-school of thought. But what is very important to note is that a good deal of this “aw shucks”-ism comes not from “honest, everyday working people,” but instead intellectuals and would-be intellectuals who place this anti-intellectual construction on the consciousness of “ordinary people” in order to advance their own agendas.

A variation on “aw shucks”-ism that is often heard in anti-intellectual America and that is too often heard among even the opponents of this America is the “I’m not an expert on X [Badiou, etc.], but ...”-line of presentation. This is reminiscent of the people who love to quote Marx’s having said “I am not a Marxist” (in response, very significantly, to the rendering into mere social-democratic economism of his ideas by the formulators of the Gotha Programme), as a way of taking their own distance from both Marx and Marxism—when no one would have ever suspected them of being Marxist in the first place. When you hear, “I’m not an expert on X, but ...”, please, friends, be on guard!

The real problem, then, is with these would-be intellectuals who have little appreciation for what it really takes to do intellectual work, and this is where the al-



lergies and inoculations against philosophy, specifically, come into play.

My guess is that there is not a single chess grandmaster out there, not even someone with the ego of Bobby Fischer or Garry Kasparov, who will claim to have completely mastered chess. Philosophy is that way, too—and so is music and so on—and again the point is that the greatest practitioners are precisely the ones who will most dispute the possibility of complete expertise. So, beware the one who says “I’m not an expert, but ...,” and also be wary of the one who claims mastery—especially in philosophy.

There is much to be said about this disrespectful and irresponsible approach to philosophy, something that runs deeper than mere utilitarianism, but the utilitarian statement of the problem should not be completely ignored, either. In other words, it ought to be asked, Of what utility has the disrespect of philosophical work ever been to the International Communist Movement?

In discussing the work of Paul de Man, as I recall, there is a point in his *Literary Theory* where Terry Eagleton asks of what use is this theory to the guerilla fighter in the jungles of Guatemala? Well, perhaps. Then again, perhaps not! However, it also has to be added that what Prof. Eagleton said on this point doesn’t do anything for the guerilla, either. In other words, perhaps it is the case that deconstruction has nothing to do with the specificities of a particular fighter in a particular struggle, but what is at stake in glibly pointing this out and making a generalization out of it?

I will say again that, at least on the level of appearance and at least in some ways, the RCP usually did not fall to that level of instrumentalism and utilitarianism when it came to theory. On the other hand, when it comes to philosophy, perhaps this doesn’t matter anyway, since they didn’t pay attention to philosophy beyond a very narrow range of figures and questions. This is to avoid for the moment the question of bad faith in some of what was presented as an anti-instrumentalist perspective.

The real problem runs deeper and it needs to be considered by anyone who aims to contribute to the long march of communist revolution—and I thank Prof. Ba-

diou especially for helping us understand this problem. The real problem is that, to put it in stark terms, to be against philosophy is to be against communism.

Prof. Derrida helps us here, too, I think: What is this fear of philosophy?

Even apart from Badiou’s specific argument about the communist hypothesis—that it is the one idea toward which all philosophy aims—we might simply ask what it means to be willing to dismiss and disrespect the intellectual inheritance of humankind.

On this question of fear (are we back where we started, with fear?) we might consider the term “homophobia.” As many have pointed out, there is something missing in the term, since the problem we want to address is hatred of gay people, not fear of gay people. But there is something to the term: what homophobes fear are the homosexual desires that may become manifest in themselves. Philosophobes fear the openings that might be created by critical philosophical questioning. Better to cut that off at the get-go, especially through inoculation; in other words, the RCP’s polemic on Badiou is not meant as encouragement for people to read Badiou—on the contrary.

Sure, we put up with a lot of bullshit in the institutions of philosophy, and we spread a lot of bullshit too (or “academic fluff” or whatever), but our luminaries don’t make explicit demands for awe and reverence (with the possible exception of a few Wittgensteinians and Heideggerians!).

(I could tell an amusing story here about how I once got into an argument with Jacques Derrida in his seminar, and how later that day someone from literary theory upbraided me harshly for this—“How dare you argue with Professor Derrida!” Prof. Derrida himself thought it was fine, as far as I could tell—we had a few arguments over the years, some of which affected our friendship but didn’t undermine it—and my response to this other person was, “we’re philosophers, we argue.”)

Please consider that these arguments have nothing to do with whether one is a philosopher or not, by whatever criteria a person may claim to be (or not be) a philosopher. That isn’t the question, and neither is it the question that “not everybody can be a philosopher.”

This latter may be a question, but it's not the question here. Here the point is simply that to be against philosophy — to be against critical questioning and to be against the intellectual inheritance of humankind — is to be against communism.

## 5. Of standing and drawing lines

Let us now relate the foregoing—which however I want to underline as a core concern of what I hope to communicate in this essay—to questions of “standing” and demarcations.

Clearly we communists do not want to replicate the academic niceties on this question, we know we need to be very careful about anything that leads us down the road of starting with the question, “Who are you to say such and such?” Obviously we don't want to contribute to bourgeois procedures of credentialing. On the other hand, hasn't the real problem been more the tendency to reject, under the heading of “academic niceties,” the work that people do to investigate questions, and, concomitantly, the construction of a model of specifically “communist authority”?

I will add, however, that over the course of about twenty-five years, when I did express sharp criticisms of some theoretical or practical work of the RCP, the initial response was almost always, “Who do you think you are, that you are going to say something to the RCP?” In one case, back in the early 1980s, the response took the form of, “This is the RCP, motherfucker!” This was from someone with whom I worked closely and continued to work for another couple of years. In the 1990s, around 1993 as best I recall, I wrote up a document under the title, “Doing intellectual work and relating to the party.” The initial response from my party contact was, in an accusatory mode, “You think you're going to tell this party something.”

We can discuss in other contexts the tone of these sorts of expressions. I'm not in favor of “enforced politeness,” and sometimes we have to be harsh and we ought to be harsh. On the other hand, having said that, in general I don't know why it helps “among the people,” so to speak, to be uncivil and gratuitously insulting.

I'll throw in an example that I'm sure some will dislike on at least two levels, and here I'm not even

talking about “among the people,” exactly, though I'm not talking about the ruling class, either. The example is that I don't call police “pigs.” On one level, the problem is that this sort of dehumanizing rhetoric tends to be expansive—a clearer example would be the idea that it is acceptable to use misogynistic terms (and worse, actions) as long as the objects of such language are not from among the people. With Eldridge Cleaver and the Black Panther Party this misogyny expanded to take in white women in general. Even “theoretical anti-humanism” (Althusser, Foucault, Badiou, or, from another angle, Adorno) doesn't aim to add to the expansive dehumanization of capitalism (though whether it entirely succeeds in this is another question). On another level, what did pigs ever do to anyone? One of the things that first attracted me to Jacques Derrida's work in the early 1980s (and, I see now, more and more as I felt that I needed to get away from the direct influence of the RCP for a few years—I went off to Kansas to work on my Ph.D., though I still read the party press and Avakian's books, and I entered into communication again after about three years) was its critique of the very idea of authority. This is a longer discussion, obviously, but it seems to me that the conclusion to be drawn from Derrida's critique (of authority, the concept of the author as originating voice, of logocentrism, phonocentrism—of the fully-present to itself voice, and of what Derrida calls “phallogocentrism,” and of “arche”—the notion of an overarching “order of things”) is that even “legitimate authority” can only ever be temporary, even momentary, and the moment such authority takes itself to be self-justified, which is usually betokened by a certain smugness and a certain “how dare you question?” attitude, then even this authority is passing over to being illegitimate.

There are differences between this view and anarchism, but we desperately need a deepening of theory on this question. Just to say something superficial about the Stalin period, I don't think anyone can doubt that there were extenuating circumstances. At the same time, I don't think anyone can doubt that Stalin had very few issues regarding, shall we say, the authoritarian imposition of authority. I don't think it is wrong to argue that Stalin thought his authority was grounded

in the underlying logic of proletarian revolution and the security needs of the socialist state. No doubt the person who said,

“This is the RCP, motherfucker!” to me felt similarly authorized. Well, perhaps there are moments and circumstances when authority can be legitimated even that far—I mean concerning the Stalin period. I know there are different views on the film “Enemy at the Gates” (which in Europe I think was titled “Stalingrad”), and I might even be willing to recognize that the underlying logic of the film is reactionary, but I thought the film did a good job of showing just what the Soviet Union was up against, even while exposing pretty well the deeply flawed political and military line that was leading the Soviet Union at that point. No doubt there will be further occasions for emergency measures in future socialist societies (even while some of these measures in the past were not at all warranted, they were almost gratuitous, and certainly arbitrary, exercises of authority—indeed, some of these exercises of authority were precisely meant to be arbitrary), but why is it that these measures tend to become the norm? One might say this norm is formed out of the same process by which authority takes itself to be fully grounded.

In light of Badiou, and in light of the experience of Stalin, Mao, and the Maoist movement since Mao, it is coming more into focus for me what the critique of “State philosophy” has been all about. This is a critique that more recently has its basis in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Antonio Negri, and before that in various currents of anarchism, situationism, and Italian autonomism. (Before they became famous as the thinkers of *Empire* and *Multitude*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri wrote *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form* [1994, but some of Negri’s material goes back to the early 1970s].) Without at this juncture pursuing this critique so much in its own terms (of these anarchist or quasi-anarchist arguments), in *Ethical Marxism* I did raise the question of the common roots of the terms “polis” and “police,” and the way that a vanguard party seems to face the necessity of prefiguring the socialist state, in other words the dictatorship of the proletariat. It’s not a big step to see that the “This is the RCP, motherfucker” response has more than a little

bit of “cop mentality” behind it. What might be more useful is to see that the “This is the New Synthesis, you fucking [spitting it out] Rousseauist!” is also cop mentality. But then take the next step, too: “Who needs all this philosophy shit, whether it’s the New Synthesis or Badiou or whatever?” is also cop mentality and “state philosophy.”

What we need to understand better is the revolutionary communist alternative to state philosophy, as opposed to the anarchist alternative. On this point I find Badiou both helpful and elusive. In his essay on the Cultural Revolution, Badiou says some suggestive things about how Mao was up against the contradiction of the state, or of the “party-state”—even that Mao was “the man of that contradiction.” All right. But all that Badiou says there regarding the alternative is that “our flag is red, not black.”

More helpful is his more abstract argument about the difference between the state and politics; the latter is a thought, while the former is unthinking. It is clear, reading his memorial talk on Sartre from 1980 (in the recently translated *Pocket Pantheon*), that Badiou owes a good deal to Sartre’s distinction in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* between a “group” (a self-active collectivity) and an “institution.” It is not hard to see why some might align Sartre’s and Badiou’s arguments with some form of anarchism, since the institution always seems to be playing a conservatizing role. There is of course a whole discourse on this question that comes from Rousseau, Kant, Jefferson, and others, up through Mao—a discourse in which Marx’s philosophy is situated and ought to be understood as situated—where there is a tension between the ongoing revolution of the self-activity of the masses and the creation of the stable social institutions of a civil society, even if a civil society of a “new type” (perhaps!). There is a tendency with the “permanence of the revolution” folks—with whom I have always aligned myself, please don’t misunderstand—to either see institutions in wholly negative terms (in Sartre, and I think this is true for Badiou as well, the “congealment” of the revolution into an institution or set of institutions is the end of the revolution), or at least not to take the question of institutions very seriously.

What I don't have a clear sense of from Badiou is how we could even conceivably be done with some form of state in the foreseeable future—especially when he himself says that sometimes it is necessary to make demands upon the state. But didn't Mao, through the experience of the Chinese Revolution and Cultural Revolution, provide the basic template for how we need think about this question, summed up under the concept, "politics in command"? Perhaps we would want to fiddle with the sense of "command" a little, perhaps it would be better said, "politics in the lead," or even "politics decides."

What I do think is clear is that there is a sense in which philosophy is always set against the state, and thinking is always set against "state philosophy." And so, to bring this back to the main point here, when a party mainly understands itself in terms of anticipating the creation of a state (even if a new state, and even if a dictatorship of the proletariat), then it will draw lines of demarcation in theory in a way similar to the way that a state sets up and defends borders. To put the matter quite simply and directly, the policing of philosophy is not a philosophical activity—indeed it is the opposite.

Are there other ways in which lines of demarcation can be drawn in theory and philosophy, lines that aren't the policed borders of the unthinking state?

In other words, where does philosophy find its possibilities? The police maneuver is always to shut down thought. It's not hard to imagine that one weapon in this policing of thought would be to sum up a philosophy under a label, such as "Rousseauist," and then dismiss it as such.

Perhaps there are demarcations that close down and others that open things up, and here again we need to think about the relationship between being against philosophy and being against the communist project. Clearly, the history here is difficult, there has been a great deal of activity against philosophy in the ICM, and again we need to wonder why there has been such fear of philosophy. I don't know that fundamentalist communism is really so different from fundamentalist Christianity or Islam, at least on this point, and in the latter pair of fundamentalisms it is certainly the case

that anything that might open up questions is feared and condemned.

Perhaps to really open up and explore philosophical questions, one has to have two things: some decent amount of background in philosophical work, and a passion for these sorts of questions. One of the responses to my initial posting at Kasama ("Going Forward From Here") really gave me a jolt. Sophie wrote, "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 pretty much nails it other than to add that, while Avakian might have "drawn" from a narrow range of other people's works, he has rarely engaged with anyone's work outside of the narrow canon.

The "delight and excitement" point is not only valid, it needs to be underlined in the face of not only the criticism of that initial post by a self-proclaimed "Stalinist" to the effect that "interesting discussions may be nice, but is that really the point?" but also in the face of the critique of the RCP's polemic against Badiou that does not really rise to the defense of Badiou or philosophy. Philosophy is interesting and exciting and delightful when it opens up important questions and provides an analysis that gets people thinking. When philosophy doesn't really do that, then it probably isn't philosophy. For sure, not everyone is in a position to be receptive to this, and not everyone is turned on by the same philosophical work at the same time.

Even so, it is still the case that to dismiss Badiou is to dismiss philosophy itself. (It can be added that there is too much of this kind of dismissiveness in the institutions of philosophy itself.) What is interesting is how this works both ways. The larger dynamic that shapes the RCP perspective is that of course Badiou is no good because philosophy in general is no good. What needs to be appreciated from the other side is that, even if there is unfairness and ideology and contingency at work in who gets to be regarded as a "major figure" in philosophy, and even if we ought to be wary of getting overly agog at any contemporary figure, gen-

erally there are good reasons that someone is being accorded the status of an important figure.

Maybe that's one of the good things about "academic niceties," at least in philosophy, and despite the difficulties of the analytic/continental split. It's true, and also an interesting question, that many major figures, perhaps especially of the last two centuries, have had significant numbers of detractors who go so far as to claim that this or that figure is actually a fraud—famous examples being Wittgenstein, Quine, Davidson, Rorty, Heidegger, Sartre, Althusser, Derrida, and so on. And it's also true that we cannot exactly vet "results" in philosophy the way that we can in the sciences (though it is also the case that scientific work is itself guided by philosophical and ideological conceptions, though often conceptions that are hidden). And yet I don't have any problem with the simple idea that, if someone's work is attracting a lot of interest from what appear to be smart and well-prepared people, then there is probably something there worth checking out. What I don't do (though, again, some academics do have this response, which is deplorable) is to say, "Oh crap, a lot of people are looking over at that theory and they might be misled—because we already have the one true theory; I'd better call the police!"

It might be argued that the sort of person or organization that has that sort of response is in fact demonstrating that they have no standing to offer a real critique.

I suppose you could say that the RCP and Bob Avakian ought to have standing on this question because they come out of Maoism, and Alain Badiou came out of Maoism, though the RCP doesn't accept Badiou's Maoist credentials (or the credentials of any of the French Maoist groups, as I understand it). Well, okay, there's something to discuss there, but this discussion too would take us into Avakian's dismissal of philosophy and his discovery of truth. One significant point on the latter issue is that, if the various Maoist groups in France had wrong conceptions, it appears that Avakian's discovery of truth means that the RCP was working with the wrong conception for a long time too. But what is more important is that we need some new conceptions in order to advance the communist

project in our time (this includes new conceptions regarding the character of our time), and thinking through Badiou's ideas can help us with this, whereas thinking through Avakian's fragmentary, self-referential offerings does not.

While all of the foregoing fits well enough under the heading of "debriefment of Maoism," let me sum up a couple of points in a way that goes beyond that supposedly narrow project.

First, imagine that we are being presented with a dichotomy: either Badiou or the New Synthesis of Bob Avakian. Fortunately, reality is larger than that dichotomy, there are many other possibilities out there that ought to be considered. And neither of these possibilities—AB or BA (these initials and the way they work together appeal to my deconstructive side!)—should be understood as standing or falling simply in contrast to the other. They could both be wrong, though in saying this I want to repeat something I said in my initial response on the Badiou polemic, that if Badiou is wrong, he is wrong in his large-scale, systematic project, whereas if Avakian is wrong (or "right," even), he is wrong in his non-systematic, fragmentary, self-referential scheme, and not in either case because of some simplistic "correspondence to reality" or lack thereof. However, having said all this, it is still significant that it is this dichotomy that the RCP and Avakian are working with, either Badiou or the New Synthesis. (Let's not forget, too, that even in what I understand as a more creative period of the RCP, during which time it was at least possible for some RCP people to say that Badiou was "pretty interesting," was also characterized by a dichotomy: either the vision of George W. Bush and the Christian fascists or the vision of Bob Avakian.) In that case, I choose Badiou, and I hope I've given some reasons for this, and I will give some more reasons in the future—but one reason that I especially want to underline is that, in this dichotomy, to choose Badiou is to choose philosophy, and to choose the New Synthesis is to choose the idea that philosophy is at best worthless and for the most part harmful and "wrong." Critical thought absolutely has to draw a line of demarcation against that perspective.

Second, I hope there is some material here that will be useful in the larger context of rethinking the question of the state, the question of forms of revolutionary organization, and questions of authority and legitimacy. It might be helpful if we think about how on every level this has to do with politics, and politics always has to do with the masses. So, a good deal of what I concentrated on in the foregoing may be overly focused on what might be considered a circumscribed field—philosophy, academia, intellectual work in general. But the larger point is, that which unleashes politics also unleashes thought. How do the “two unleashings” (to give it a nice Maoist formulation) come about? Notice that I didn’t ask, “How do we accomplish these unleashings?” This goes to Badiou’s conceptions of truth, event, truth procedure, fidelity, and so on. But we do still have work to do in understanding how these unleashings are impeded, or at the least not helped, and this is where we need to think about the depth at which it is true that, to be against philosophy is to be against communism.

One little coda on this question of “standing”: those of us with experience in Maoism do have something to bring to the discussions around Badiou, especially if we really do engage with the philosophical arguments involved (and, yes, struggle with the math a bit, too)—and I think we should get in there and do that. Yes, I realize that there are many who are gravitating toward Badiou for whom the communist hypothesis is almost purely abstract and not much grounded in any association with practice. But this is a general problem with intellectuals who are attracted to radical ideas, and the people who are attracted to Badiou and who engage seriously with his work are not entirely of this sort, and furthermore there is clearly something exciting going on when people gravitate toward someone who talks about communism. Why would we not want to get into the mix of that?

## 6. “Taste this, it’s terrible!”, or, Death to the philosophers

Is there a slippery slope involved in raising the question of “standing,” even if in the form of simply saying that, “If you don’t respect philosophical work and don’t intend to do any real philosophical work, then perhaps

you ought to remain silent on such topics, especially if you’re putting yourself out there as taking responsibility for revolution everywhere on the planet”?

Obviously, the real question here is why I or anyone would need to go on at such length about this bad methodology, when a good deal of the critique can be stated much more succinctly—and pretty much already has been. Even for those of us who feel bad and sad about it, why should we impede the RCP’s own drive toward irrelevance? I have a number of answers to this question, most of which I have rehearsed already, but the point I want to underline here is that there is something significant in how we understand this “irrelevance.” This “irrelevance” has to do with quality first of all, not quantity.

I think many of the detractors of Avakian and the RCP, basically the ones who say that Avakian was never relevant to their sense of left or radical politics (I would say more of the former than the latter), are looking at this question in terms that are more quantitative than qualitative. Certainly it is the case that, if indeed Avakian and the RCP were never really relevant to the kinds of changes we need in the world, then the project of “debriefment” would only be about two somewhat narrowly circumscribed questions: 1) the need for some of us who were around the RCP and who now want to go forward from Maoism to sort ourselves out; 2) the need to make a decisive break with certain conceptions that were influential not only in the RCP but more broadly in the International Communist Movement, Marxism, radical theory and practice, and the left in general.

But it’s this last category, “the left in general,” about which I am most skeptical, and I think some of the people who have always been dismissive of Avakian/RCP come from the perspective that the problem with the RCP is that it didn’t relate very well to the broader left, and thus it was destined to remain “small” and “irrelevant.” I don’t want to stretch this analogy too far, though in fact I think it could be taken a good deal further than I will develop it here, but if you think of the RCP as a musical group, with Avakian playing a special role as leader and visionary, something analogous to the John Coltrane Quartet, then you can at least say of the RCP that they played the music they

thought they should be playing. Walter Benjamin said that “no great work of art was created with an audience in mind,” and Jon Anderson of Yes said that he tried to make the music he thought he ought to make, and then he hoped that someone would like it. At least in aesthetic terms, this seems entirely right to me, and we might think more on two questions: 1) the relationship between experiments in art and experiments in politics; 2) what is the deeper meaning of the “mass line,” especially in terms of the way that it attempts to “concentrate” the aspirations of the masses, especially the “higher aspirations.”

This is an old debate by now, the tendency in left and radical politics to be dismissive of aesthetic experimentation, as not “coming from the people.” Of course, the theory of neutron k-leptons as the building blocks in the physics of time didn’t exactly come “from the people,” either, so we might think about that.

But let us take stock also of the fact that we would not want the achievements of experimental artists to be understood in mainly quantitative terms, and, from the other side, we also can’t fall into “ten million Elvis fans can’t be wrong!” Apart from the academic niceties and the pedigree system, and apart from the question of “standing” in some sort of established system, we need a qualitative assessment of Avakian’s work and of other work that is premised upon Avakian’s conceptions.

Why do we need this?

Let us consider an idea that may seem paradoxical and probably is paradoxical. There is intellectual work that is of the first rank, it represents really penetrating and profound thinking, and yet it might not be “indispensable,” at least for politics. At the same time, there is intellectual work that does go to the core of certain political questions, and is therefore indispensable, but it isn’t work of the first rank.

We might ask ourselves if we need some depth and profundity. It might seem like a silly question, but, for instance, Richard Rorty and Don Cupitt are two major thinkers who answer this question in the negative. Their answers hold, essentially, that everything is surfaces, and it is a fool’s errand to look into the depths. There are Marxist versions of this idea that are all too prevalent. One version of this idea holds that it is a

mistake to aim for philosophical profundity, that this is simply the realm in which the imagination runs wild, but where the entities discovered in this realm do not exist and are not real. In other words, in this view, most of what calls itself philosophy is just the construction of a fantasy world. If there is any distinction to be drawn between appearance and (a “deeper”) reality, the Marxist version of this perspective holds that the distinction should be drawn in political economy, not philosophy. This is the path toward positivism and instrumentalism, and not very far along this path one finds there is little use for philosophy after all.

Certainly one might wonder if, in rejecting this path, Badiou (not unlike Heidegger in this respect) has bent the stick too far in the other direction. It is clear that he is not much interested in political economy, but one might wonder if political economy has at least some status in his work under one of the “conditions of philosophy,” namely science.

What if we were to replace the question about the need for depth and profundity with a question about the need for philosophy? It isn’t only in Marxism that the need for (or value of) philosophy has been put in question, though this does describe a good bit of Marxism in the twentieth century and certainly there is a major strain of this devalorization in Marx’s own work. But it is also the case that a dominant strain in Western philosophy as a whole in the twentieth century tends to see philosophy as mostly something to be gotten rid of, along with depth and profundity as anything that can be explored in a systematic way.

This positivist strain remains alive in the work of even ostensibly post-positivist analytic philosophers, especially Quine and Rorty. Not that they don’t have their arguments for this strain, and these arguments are worth studying (as opposed to the kind of non-argument in Avakian’s work that is not worth studying—I’m going to turn to an example in a moment). The manifestation of this strain in Quine and Rorty is the idea that the main purpose of philosophy in our time is to move the scientific questions out of philosophy and into the specific sciences where advances can be made, and then to move the “non-scientific” questions either into the dustbin or, at best, into the realm

of the “poetic,” which is not a realm of truth (as they understand it). That art can be a realm of truth is one reason why, despite other appearances to the contrary, Badiou is not a positivist. For Quine, philosophy is this sorting operation plus a kind of minimal ontology.

One interesting way to come at this question is to ask for which philosophers is death a question, and what sort of question is it for philosophers. Depth and profundity are often found in proximity to the question of death and mortality—if mortality is a “question,” or if it is a philosophical question—so we can situate philosophers somewhat readily in relation to this question.

For Carnap, who gave us some of the most important formulations of logical positivism, not only is death not a philosophical question (it may be something—not a question, exactly—for poetry or for what he broadly called a “worldview”), an intellectual preoccupation with death is an indication that one is not doing philosophy.

Badiou, reacting especially to Derrida I think, has said that we have heard enough about death for the time being, as well as mortality and finitude, and that it is time to reorient philosophy toward immortality and infinity.

To be sure, Derrida was all about death, especially in the last ten years or so of his life and work, and I don’t intend it as any insult to say that there was a deeply morbid strain in his later thought, especially. (In an interview given in the last year of his life, when he was dying from pancreatic cancer, Derrida said that not five seconds passed when he did not think about dying.) But Derrida was also all about temporality and the future, while one of Badiou’s “Platonic” and mathematical arguments is to insist that truths (real truths, as opposed to mere facts) are atemporal, ahistorical, and eternal (add to this that Badiou has said that he only knows of one idea, namely that of communism).

Placing this question in a larger frame, it isn’t so much whether or not there is a question about the future of humanity, or a question of a possible future in which there is human co-flourishing, but instead whether or not this is a properly philosophical question.

To my knowledge, there is not a single comment on death, as a philosophical question or otherwise, in the work of Quine and Davidson. My guess is that, for them, death is a “scientific” question that has only to do with the biological finitude that humans share with other animals. The same might be said for Badiou, except for him human life has possibilities of immortality—and it is from this side, of life, that we ought to address the question.

To cut this discussion short, my aim has been to frame some of the philosophical context in which a discussion of meaning and mortality ought to take place if it is going to contribute anything to our understanding. And this is even to leave aside the main discourses on death from the history of Western philosophy—the Greek tragedians, the German Idealists (whose work relates to the Greeks), the German Romantics (and, I would say, because this is underappreciated, English Romanticism as well), and of course Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and what Bob Avakian brushes off as the “existential literature.”

Now, we might wonder what any of this has to do with politics, or at least whether our thinking about politics and radical change has much need for exploring this question of meaning and mortality.

Simply as a matter of philosophy, it seems to me that the question of death (and questions relating to the interconnections of meaning, mortality, and morality) is either deep or, if for some reason it is not deep, there must be some profound reason for this as well. What I have a very hard time with is people who want to just screw around with such questions, especially if they think they are speaking to the problem of “meaningful revolutionary work” and “a life with meaning,” as Bob Avakian purports to do in the “Ruminations and Wranglings” piece.

For my part, I think these are important questions for politics, and my thinking here is probably closer to Derrida than Badiou; for both of them, however, it might be said that their deeper explorations on these questions (death, mortality and immortality, meaning, morality, finitude and infinity) give them more of an appreciation for the philosophical insights of religious traditions, communities, and writings, whereas Avaki-



an's superficial treatment of these questions is of a piece with his superficial treatment of "religion"—but also, it could be said, of science. Even apart from the problem of whether these questions matter to politics, there is still a political cost to treating these questions superficially and carelessly. It is again the cost of being against philosophy and therefore against communism.

Before turning to other things, let us spend a moment with a testimonial that appeared in *Revolution* newspaper on March 22, 2009—a testimonial deemed so important that it was made a cover story. This is an unsigned piece with the title, "An Open Letter to the Revolutionary Communists and Everyone Seriously Thinking About Revolution: On the Role and Importance of Bob Avakian."

Fortunately, the second paragraph (of approximately eight single-spaced pages) of the testimonial contains many of the questionable claims of the piece as a whole.

How one evaluates the role Bob Avakian has played in the revolutionary movement in the U.S. and internationally over the last almost 40 years has, in the final analysis, proven itself to be a question of how one views communist revolution itself: are you for it, or not. Not to make an absolute of this nor to suggest that at any particular point every person who is not clear on the role Bob Avakian has been/is playing, is therefore consciously against communist revolution: such a mechanical view would be both wrong and harmful. Knowledge and understanding are something in motion, they develop (as has the role Bob Avakian is playing). So it is a question of "in the final analysis". At the same time—and as actual experience has repeatedly shown—it is objectively true and this truth will sooner or later assert itself in someone's subjective understanding as well.

I'm sure that, for many of those reading this here, there is little needed by way of analysis, but let me just point to a few things.

In the first sentence alone I want to point to two issues. First, what is the form in which this question of how one evaluates the role of Avakian has "proven itself" to have the dividing-line status that is claimed for it here? This sort of claim is repeated throughout the

testimonial; while not being completely vacuous, the author never gets into the question of how this "proving" occurs, exactly. Second, the sentence does indeed put forward Bob Avakian as a dividing-line question. This again is repeated throughout the piece, but so is the equivocation that follows this line. Clearly there is something here that the author doesn't quite know how to deal with—as well he would not. This dividing line is not "an absolute" and yet it is a matter of "in the final analysis," because "it" ("the role of Avakian" appears to be the reference) "is objectively true ... ." One hardly knows where to begin, but I am assuming that, with the present audience, I don't have to.

(At the expense of sounding like a pedantic schoolmaster, let me underline what I think is actually a substantive theoretical question, namely the endemic trouble that Bob Avakian and other writers from the RCP have always had with pronouns. This especially applies to "this" and "that," and more than any of them to "all this." I'm sure I've committed similar mistakes and such mistakes are not hard to make, but this is not really so much the question of the "dangling pronoun"—which is the problem with "it" in the line I quoted—but instead with the idea that "all this" can stand in for a massive, dialectical synthesis, a "this truth" that will "sooner or later assert itself in someone's subjective understanding." Someone's? Whose?)

So, Bob Avakian's role has "proven itself" again and again, and you're either for it—and therefore for communist revolution—or you are not for it (and therefore "in the final analysis," we might presume, against it). These are the basic themes of this testimonial. It could be said that these are the basic themes of the RCP in general, since about 2002 or 2003. Of course these themes were around from the start, but now they are the ur-themes that guide all else—in fact, there isn't much else anymore.

However, there is a methodological point here that is difficult to grasp. There is a point where the testimonial refers to Avakian in an almost-offhand way, saying, "he is also a visionary." The testimonial also goes on to speak to Avakian's emphasis on the imagination. (Of course, let us go nowhere near the fact that, of the figures in the philosophical canon, it was Immanuel Kant

who first developed the theory of the imagination and its role in cognition.) Less offhandedly, the author refers to “a ‘communist imagination’ of exceptional quality and strategic sweep,” and “that rare kind of radical visionary who, so far at least, has only appeared once or twice in a generation—if that often.”

Well, these things—imagination and vision—are lacking in the world today, for sure. Even more, integral to postmodern capitalism as I understand it is what might be called an “organized and enforced failure of the imagination.” So, it is indeed a problem that Avakian has actually not been an imaginative visionary on the level that is claimed for him, though, again, this does not cancel the fact that he has made some important contributions. And yet, the methodological point that needs emphasizing is the way that vision and imagination are not simply lacking, but rather become increasingly drained by the dialectically-related elements of 1) the saturation of the Maoist revolutionary sequence, and 2) the global articulation of the anti-imagination program of postmodern capitalism. (When I say this program is “organized,” I don’t mean in the sense of a conspiracy, but more like in the way that the culture industry is organized and integrated.) In other words, of course we need more imagination and vision, but we especially need them in terms of a new sequence or at least in terms of the anticipation of a new sequence. This means that our work is of necessity not only visionary and imaginative, but also complicated, erratic, and experimental.

Put another way, the problem of the exhausted sequence that is still the object of fervent persistence is similar to that of one of 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.”

I’ll come back to this question (in section 10) in terms of Badiou’s assessment of the revolutions of the twentieth century. I have some disagreement with his use of the term “disaster” as a summation of this experience, though I would want to understand better how Badiou is using this term. What we might concern ourselves with is what there is to show for all of this

experience, which was, shall we say, purchased dearly. Looked at from this end of things, “disaster” is not the only word that comes into play (and neither is it the only word in Badiou’s summation), but it is one of them. In that light, while again I do not want to minimize the contributions that Bob Avakian has made, these “theoretical consolidations” representing almost forty years work just don’t add up to much, especially when one considers that they are “consolidations” within and aimed toward the previous, saturated sequence of communism.

I’ll say again what I’ve already said numerous times: I take no pleasure in this assessment, and neither do I think any of us should. However, apart from the descent of the RCP into mere cultishness, it is worth thinking about, from a methodological standpoint, how to respond to statements such as the following: “Some of those who make these “what has he done” arguments either state, or imply, that in order to make the theoretical advances that Avakian has made, one must have first led a successful seizure of power—or at least a major revolutionary war. But this argument is, again, just another expression of pragmatism and empiricism...” There’s a subtle problem here, even if as usual the RCP is just hitting the question over the head with a hammer. Of course we don’t want just “pragmatism” or “empiricism” as they are understood here, and yet we do need a way to be able to back up and talk about something that has been tried for a long time but isn’t really getting anywhere. I feel pretty sure — and the whole effort at Kasama is in a sense predicated on this point — that the lonely hour of the final analysis, at least as the author of this testimonial understands it, is not going to come. And, again, the real testimonial is the “body of work” that has been created over these four decades, and the idea that this body of work has supposedly, magically (since clearly not systematically) congealed into a new synthesis.

Lastly, by way of transition from this testimonial into a typical example of what Bob Avakian really thinks of philosophical questions, let us consider a few more comments that, to put it mildly, really burn me up. “When it comes to Bob Avakian and important questions of political principle, there is never even a

hint of superficiality.” I think it will be clear in the passage on mortality and meaning that I am going to quote that there is nothing but superficiality, but perhaps this means that the issues touched upon are not “important questions of political principle.”

The testimonial writer refers to “over 25 years of continuing analysis, leaps and advances in evaluating, summarizing and synthesizing the experience of the communist project: the political economy of imperialism; the question of democracy; the collapse of revisionism; the question of communist morality, ethics, etc.; the role of intellectuals, art, and “awe and wonder” more broadly; epistemology and philosophy in general....” The first one in this list, yes, there’s some good stuff there; for the rest, less good. On art, forget about it. And on “epistemology and philosophy in general” — please.

Still further, the claim that Avakian “has deeply immersed himself in . . . the philosophical, ethical, and political debates and discourse of our times.” Again — please. Where? When? What?

So, let’s look at an example of this immersion. This is from “Ruminations and Wranglings: On the Importance of Marxist Materialism, Communism as a Science, Meaningful Revolutionary Work, and a Life with Meaning,” from the sections titled: “Life With a Purpose: Different Experiences, Different Spontaneous Views, and Fundamentally Different World Outlooks” and “Human life is finite, but revolution is infinite” (*Revolution* newspaper, April 13, 2009; the second section title is a quotation from Mao and is in quotation marks in the transcript of the original):

Going further, there are two things that are relevant to all this, things which do bear very significantly on human life, human relations and human thinking: one, all human beings die; and two, human beings are not only conscious of this but in many ways acutely aware of it. Now the point is not to “wax existential,” or to lapse into existentialism as a philosophical outlook, but there is a value, if you will, to exploring this, at least a little bit. Why do I raise this? Well, often, for example, in existentialist literature, but more generally in a lot of literature which seeks to deal with “profound ironies and tragedies of life,” this contradiction—

that human beings are living beings but all human beings die, and that human beings are conscious of this—forms a significant theme, a significant phenomenon with which people wrestle. This is true in philosophy but also in the arts. Especially in a society which places so much emphasis on “the individual,” in an ideological sense, even while it grounds down individuals in material reality—and this is particularly true of U.S. society and U.S. imperialism—it is not surprising that this phenomenon, that human beings die and they are conscious of this, has a prominent place in the culture.

This is also one of the main elements that factors into religion, and in the way people understand and explain the phenomenon of—and, as many portray it, the need for—religion. Some people even argue that you will always have religion because people will need a way to deal with death—not only their own death, but perhaps even more the death of loved ones. It is interesting, I was recently reading one of these pulp novels, by these two sisters, the O’Shaughnessy sisters (they write these legal thrillers—“page turners”—fun to read for a little diversion), and they actually made an interesting comment in passing in this book about how American society is so litigious these days (one of the two sisters is a former lawyer). They were speaking specifically of all the litigation that goes on around wrongful death, which of course is a big phenomenon in the U.S.: somebody dies, well very often there is going to be a lawsuit for wrongful death—unless it’s one of the basic masses, and then generally nobody in a position of authority or prominence cares and, while there are some prominent cases of people suing when a loved one is murdered by police, the death of one of the basic masses is not the kind of thing that usually ends up in litigation. But, in any case, in this book the point was made that in countries like the U.S., where there is a certain decline in religious belief (at least of the more “traditional” kind), there has been an increase—I don’t even know if this is actually true, but it’s an interesting point to think about—there has been an increase in wrongful death suits because people have to find somebody to blame. And especially if you can’t get the false consolation that religion offers—“they’re in a better place, god had a plan for them,” and all these other outrageous

things that are said when someone dies—then somebody's got to be held accountable, so you sue somebody for wrongful death. Now I thought that was an interesting and provocative point. I'm not sure this is capturing an essential aspect of reality, but it's a little bit interesting as a side point.

The main point I'm exploring here, briefly, is that the fact that human beings die is often used to justify religion, or in any case to argue that human beings will always need religion: in order to deal with death, the argument goes, human beings will always need some sort of consolation in the form of religion of one kind or another.

"Human life is finite, but revolution is infinite"

This is something worth exploring a bit—precisely from a materialist standpoint and in relation to our communist outlook and communist objectives. First of all, it is necessary to recognize that while death is universal for human beings—all human beings die, sooner or later—there is not one common viewpoint about death: people in different social conditions have different experiences with and different viewpoints on all kinds of phenomena, including death.

In this connection, I was thinking of a statement attributed to Mao near the end of his life—I believe it was in a letter that he was reported to have written to Chiang Ching in which he talked about what he had tried to achieve through the revolution in China, and as part of the world revolution, and the ways in which he'd run up against obstacles in this. His statement was something to the effect that "human life is finite, but revolution is infinite." Now (assuming he said this) I don't think Mao meant this literally—that revolution is literally infinite—because Mao was materialist enough to know that human existence as such, the existence of human beings as a species, is not going to be infinite. Or, perhaps, as another leading comrade has suggested, Mao was actually thinking more broadly—beyond just human existence—to reality overall, and the fact that all of reality proceeds not just in a gradual and linear way but is marked by profound leaps and ruptures, involving qualitative changes from one state of matter in motion to another. In any case, and in the dimension in which Mao was speaking about human beings and human society, he was

pointing to the contradiction that individuals can play a certain role—and specifically if they become conscious of the need for revolution, and more especially if they take up the outlook and method of communism, they can contribute a great deal to radically transforming human society—but, in all cases, their role and their contributions will still be limited, not only by their particular abilities (and shortcomings) and by their circumstances, but also by the fact that human life is finite, that people live only a few decades. But revolution—that is, not only the overthrow of exploiting classes but, even far into the future in communist society, the need for the continual transformation of society, the need to recognize and transform necessity into freedom—will constantly pose itself and human beings will constantly, and with varying degrees of consciousness, act in relation to that. So, with regard to human society, that is the essential meaning of the statement (attributed to Mao) that human life is finite, but revolution is infinite.

As with the testimonial, I'm not going to dissect this bit of writing as much as I could—clearly I must be at least a little nuts to spend the amount of time with it that I have already. For most readers here these passages pretty much critique themselves, and so most of what could be said in response to the passages is pretty obvious stuff.

So what is the point? The point is to underline once again that to be against philosophy is to be against communism. One way to be against philosophy is to have no respect for what people working in philosophy have tried to understand, and instead just to screw around with heavy ideas as if no one else ever said anything worth thinking about.

The crux of this problem is seen at precisely the point where Avakian mentions "existentialist literature" and then goes on to discuss a point about wrongful death litigation made in a pulp novel. It should not be necessary to say that I have nothing against such "diversions," as Avakian calls these particular novels. It is pretty clear by now, I hope, that I find such artifacts of "pop culture" to be both valuable as barometers of social trends and sometimes better as works of art than some give them credit for. (And neither do I begrudge

anyone a bit of diversion.) The issue instead is that here was a chance to get into some deep questions deeply, some questions where it is an insult to people, and not just philosophers, to just screw around with them, but this is what we get—and this is too often what we get from Bob Avakian when it comes to philosophy.

This superficiality extends to pretty much everything Avakian has written on religion — again, it is an insult. To mention in passing that religion “is a way that people deal with death.” Oh, interesting. And, is it wrong for people to want a way to deal with death? Is death—and its meaning or lack of meaning — a purely “scientific” question?

In the next section, “infinity” is dealt with in a similarly superficial and ham-fisted way. I don’t see how anyone who deals with any of these issues in this way could be called a “radical visionary.”

It’s not fair, really—I quoted this long passage (which, Dear Reader, you may or may not have read), mainly in order to say that this sort of thing is not worth the time of day.

So, that’s more than enough of that for now, let’s just leave it that such superficiality is death to the philosophers and death to philosophy.

## 7. Debriefment and beyond, I: the vital mix

The simple question—that is in fact vastly complicated—that I want to develop here is whether there is a “beyond” without debriefment.

By “debriefment,” I mean going back through the history and experience (of radical theory and practice, but also of all sorts of things), to see what we can build on and to see what needs to be set aside.

One (very large) complication is that we have to carry out this sifting work in terms of both the coherence of the previous synthesis and in terms of the need for new, experimental theorizing that is in essential respects discontinuous from what came before.

It is helpful for us to think of this project in terms of Maoism and post-Maoism and the relationship between the two. If post-Maoism is in some real sense discontinuous with Maoism, there is still a relationship. The relationship is named, I would argue, by the term communism. One way to look at this is that there

is a difference here with, say, Trotskyism and post-Trotskyism, though we might also define this relationship in terms of the term “socialism” or “leftism,” and think, in Badiouan terms, of the difference between “presentations” of the “communist hypothesis,” and presentations of the socialist hypothesis.

Some of our Trotskyists and other socialists and leftists might think about this a little bit, and of course we post-Maoists need to think about it too. I haven’t seen where anyone has really defined or articulated “post-Trotskyism” as anything other than what is really neo-Trotskyism. But perhaps, similarly, some of us “post-Maoists” are only and simply, neo-Maoists. It is worth thinking about the fact that Badiou sometimes refers to “Trotskyists and ossified Maoists” in the same breath, and one argument might be that, when a form of presentation of the communist hypothesis becomes exhausted, there is a reversion to what might be called the “socialist hypothesis.” But the socialist hypothesis, in my view, is the “left side” of what is possible in terms of the logic of bourgeois right and capitalist social relations. (If this is the case, then we can see by contrast why socialism is not an idea, and that the only idea is communism.) There is a larger discussion to be had about what it means to make demands on the (existing) state—it seems to me that one kind of demand can be made on the basis of the communist hypothesis, and another kind on the basis of the socialist hypothesis, and that the directionality of these demands is fundamentally different, but that in certain circumstances alliances are also possible. However, it also seems to me that something that starts out ensconced in bourgeois logic will not only stay there, this “leftism” will make whatever compromises are necessary to stay there. And it is already hard enough to keep the possibility of another idea—communism—from being assimilated by the logic of capitalist society.

Another way to come at this problem is in terms of the question, “Who needs debriefment?” Let’s just come at this issue directly. Please tell me if I am wrong, but it seems to me that the people who don’t think we need any of this debriefment, or any further engagement with either the past or the present of the RCP and Bob Avakian (for example with their critique of

Badiou), are almost to a one people who did not engage with the RCP/Avakian to begin with, and were never interested in engaging with them. Their attitude is, "I never thought the RCP was worth engaging with, so why would I engage with them now?"

There are of course good reasons, on the whole, to not keep engaging with the RCP and even with its history, and certainly not with every statement or text or whatever that comes from them. For the people who never knew much about the RCP, or, especially young people who are gravitating toward not just leftism but even to communism, to spend too much time with the past or the present of the RCP just seems like building something up in order to tear it down, and it all seems irrelevant to the momentous and difficult tasks of the present.

In addition, there are ways of coming at this history that do seem too much caught up in merely "personal" issues and that therefore come across as "gossipy."

These are real issues, and it is right that they be raised when some of us want to go back into RCP history or respond to some recent document from the RCP.

However, it is also very interesting that the people who raise these issues are mainly those who are somewhat familiar with the RCP but who were never especially impressed by it.

Suppose it really is the case that, to use Badiou's language, we really are, or at least we really hope that we are, on the precipice of a new "sequence" in the "presentation of the communist hypothesis." This is also to suppose that it really is the case that the previous "sequence" is "saturated."

Significantly, for all of their talk about a "new stage," the RCP clearly do not believe these things. The failure of the "New Synthesis" to be either new or a synthesis has to be understood in this respect. In their book-length critique of Badiou, where there is vastly more actual "homework" than in anything from Bob Avakian or anything else associated with the New Synthesis, there is still a methodology of cherry-picking in order to critique Badiou for not lining up with the previous orthodoxy. The result is that the problems of the pre-

vious sequence are addressed by shouting that, "next time, we'll have a constitution!" and the like.

Okay, sure, you could say that sort of thing critiques itself, we don't need to spend much time with it. But there is also the need to put things a little more charitably. The RCP needed to turn a corner, they needed to do something really radical, but they weren't able to do it. My own interpretation of the period from about 2000-2006 is that there were some creative openings (which is most of what I saw, as someone not a member of the party), but also some further narrowing of the basic conception of the communist project and the leadership appropriate to this project, resulting in this fragmentary "New Synthesis" and the declaration that Bob Avakian is a leader and theoretician of the "caliber" of Lenin and Mao; the New Synthesis is purportedly a development within Marxism of world-historic importance, and Avakian himself is a cardinal question for the international communist movement.

It is important to understand that this is what became of the most revolutionary current in Marxism and the most creative and least dogmatic expression of that current; in other words, this is where we see the Maoist current running its course and depleting its resources. It is important that we understand how this happened.

Is it our most important work, or is it work that we need to put front and center in our attempts to reconceive and regroup? Absolutely not. The case for not having this focus has been stated very well, and I agree with it, even if sometimes it may seem as if I don't and am reacting too much out of frustration.

However, it then seems that some people want to go a good deal further, and say that we don't need to engage with any of this material again. I think it was John Steele who said that we need to increasingly "put the RCP in our rearview mirror." That's right, but there are others who don't even want the RCP or Bob Avakian there.

Again, I would say there are two tracks to pursue on this question, one of which is less important, to be sure, but I don't know that this means it shouldn't exist. By this I mean the fact that some of us who were closer to this experience (of Maoism, the RCP, and

Bob Avakian's leadership and theoretical work) need to work through some things and get them out of our system, or at least come to grips with them. I suppose you could call this "settling accounts." Again, I find it interesting that the people who think none of us should be engaged in this are the ones who do know a bit about the RCP and its history. For sure, there is a large element of this aspect ("track") of sorting things out that is a good deal like looking back on failed personal relationships. In my own case, this was especially acute in the cases where my involvement was intense, and yet where the conception of what we were doing together (the RCP and I) was not really what I was led to believe. (I'm thinking especially of the time when I went to Lima, Peru, in 1992, and my co-authorship of the *Conversations* book with Bob Avakian.) Is it really the case that there is nothing instructive here, nothing that we can take a lesson from? Are these things really of no interest to anyone outside of a fairly small circle? Or is the "interest" that some have in these things only counter-productive, simply an "interest" in the completely-understandable but not always helpful desire to "share something"? Perhaps to engage in this way is only backward-looking, or perhaps some forms of this engagement amount to little more than gossip in the large scheme of the work we really need to be doing.

I think there might be something worth thinking about in the frustrations some of us have (and that others do not have), and there might also be something worth thinking about in the fact that some say they do not share these frustrations and are not interested in hearing about them. The latter perspective is grounded in the idea that, "You are coming out of a conceptual framework and a set of practices that we were never a part of in the first place, so your frustrations do not mean anything to us and are a diversion from the new things we need to do; we would all be better off—you too—if you would just let go of your frustrations."

Perhaps a few of us would like to think we could do something productive with our frustrations and our desire to settle accounts, but perhaps we are wrong. We do need to put these questions in the frame of how they could conceivably matter in the future—and, not to be narrow or philistine about it, we might wonder

how some of these things even matter in this particular moment or even simply in the coming next while. I do think the "Who really gives a shit?" approach covers some of this, but perhaps not quite.

I think of all the "minor" debates that Marx and Lenin were involved in, with various characters who are only vaguely known (if that) even to most of us in the contemporary Marxist milieu. We might wonder "who gives a shit" about Lasalle or Martov today. And yet there might be something to the fact that Marx and Lenin thought these debates were important, and again let's keep in mind that what we are trying to do is regroup and reconceive communism—which, to take a not-insignificant example, Marx was also trying to do in response to Lasalle, one product of which is still one of Marx's most important texts for our time, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

But it certainly may be that there are no important debates today, that our wretched culture of post-modern capitalism has rendered everything into "Who gives a shit?" The person who said this (in the context of "who gives a shit" what the RCP says about Kasama, Badiou, etc.) also said some things that were, analytically and politically, on a much higher level, and it has to be admitted, again, that the "Who gives a shit" question is not entirely off the mark, either, but it does divide into two a bit, as well, there is something of cynical realism to it, when, instead, we need to go ahead with certain things in the hope that they will matter, or in the hope that there is at least some chance they will matter, even if this is a very difficult hope to maintain in our postmodern culture.

But obviously this doesn't mean that everything we say matters very much, and certainly there are some engagements that are better avoided and that can be simply counter-productive. What is possibly as important, though, is the basis on which we make these determinations, and my point is that this depends on two things: where we've been, where we hope to go. (I suppose that, since I'm temporalizing it, there's the question of where we are now, and, to be a bit Derridean about it, how these different collectivities—the "we"s—are constituted in these temporalities—and so on, e.g., how the temporalities are constituted.) To be

sure, the latter has to be by far the more important consideration—where we hope to go.

There has been an interesting discussion at the Kasama site that circles around this question—of anything mattering anymore—in terms of the spirit of Woodstock. Some were saying that there never really was a rebellious core to the Woodstock experience, it was simply another staged bit of rebelliousness in the context of a thoroughly commodified culture. This has been said about the “student rebellion” aspect of the 1960s and its aftermath as well (one famous critique back in the day was when Alasdair McIntyre referred, in an argument against Herbert Marcuse, to the “parent-financed student movement”).

Let’s bring Badiou into this a little bit, without thinking we are going to sort out Woodstock at this juncture. To say that Woodstock or the student movement, etc., were “mixed bags” is not in itself to say that these were not also real instances of rebellion. Both were expressions of the rebellious sixties, which had many different sides to it, but of course some of these sides were perhaps too much shaped by the commodity culture to begin with. If we take the logic of the commodity as being the core of what we are up against, and if we understand the ways in which this logic took extraordinary leaps in the twentieth century (and, arguably, qualitative leaps since the sixties, which is what the “postmodern capitalism” thesis is all about), then we would also recognize that there is no way any kind of rebellion against this culture would not be a mixed bag. But, if what we saw, in May 1968, say, was an actual event, then there is also in that event something like a pure moment—even if this moment only truly exists in the abstract—around which we might form fidelities and truth procedures. But in Badiou, it is also the case that the event is rare and fragile, and it is always possible, after the fact, to say that the event didn’t really occur, or that it was a pseudo-event.

In this discussion around Woodstock, one person brought in Thomas Frank’s book, *The Conquest of Cool*, which makes an argument that is especially important in this context. In terms of where we have been, certainly we need to understand that there were at least some moments within the rebellions of the sixties that

did not escape the logic of the commodity and were in fact inhabitations of rebellion by this logic. However, I would go so far as to say that, if the argument that the entirety of the sixties rebellions was nothing but a ruse of commodity logic is really true (as one person argued persistently in the case of Woodstock), then we are probably doomed in our present, where commodity logic has gone a good deal further to preempt rebellions impulses.

The naïve hopes of some of the sixties rebels, perhaps more on the side of the student rebellions and the hippies and other idealistic utopians (I mean “idealistic” in all of its senses, and both in good and bad ways), while still charming and at times inspiring, cannot be our form of hope today, at least not in the main, and at least if we not only hope for a better future, but also want to work actively to create openings for the renewal of the communist project. We have to have a better sense of what we are up against, and that is where work such as Thomas Frank’s comes in. In the past I have called this the “Lenin and Adorno” question, and I hope to elaborate further on this soon.

Another way of coming at this, recognizing that the names I’m deploying here are more in the order of place-keepers for present purposes, is that the Marxists (of whatever stripe) of the sixties and after tended to be economic and even too narrowly “political,” where “political” means a kind of narrow “realism” about how political power works (in other words, the usual “grind it out” dogmatic Marxism), while the anarchists and situationists, who brought a focus on culture, tended to be a bit aesthetically-oriented, if I can put it that way. (What is left out of this dichotomy, especially in terms of how things unfolded in the U.S., is the role played by Black liberationists and radical feminists and gay liberationists in bridging these poles.) The problem is that it was in this domain that the festival of the oppressed actually took off in a way that was inspiring.

When I think of 1968, I try to have a more global view than Badiou seems to have, where it’s all about the Events of May 1968 in Paris. On the other hand, the Events of May stand out in the way that they brought together a new level of worker-intellectual alliance and even integration. Despite Badiou’s criticisms of “an-



archo-desirers” and situationists, May 1968 and the fidelities that were unfolded from it would not have been at all the same without these elements (any more than the sixties would have been what they were in the U.S. without the hippies, the Yippies, Abbie Hoffman, and so on—and Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, for that matter), and we might think on this.

But do we think on this purely for understanding where we were? I don’t see anything wrong with thinking on the vital mix that made the sixties even from the “mere” perspective of historical scholarship. There is a kind of scholarship that seeks to keep all of this stuff in the past, to lock it away and be done with it, and that I don’t appreciate so much. But even there something can be learned from grappling with the motivations of these efforts. (Significantly, Badiou frames his discussion in *The Meaning of Sarkozy* around this attempt to once and for all lock away May 1968.) However, I think there is a lot more to learn for the present and future of struggle as well.

Much good work has already been done regarding the elements of the “vital mix” of the sixties and May 1968 and its aftermath, but more theoretical work needs to be done on how the actual synergies of this mix worked. What might be said about this in terms of the RCP’s Maoism can be said even more of other Marxist trends, and it is in a way simply pitiful and shameful that Marxist trends have never gotten much beyond simply saying that we need certain elements in order to lay the ground for responding to revolutionary possibilities that might open up—elements such as “culture” or “theory” (or “intellectuals”) that are never pursued much beyond square one.

This is not simply a question of not being so hard on the intellectuals or artists (though, again, the shameful thing is that this is about as far as anything has ever gotten), but is in fact the question of how a real united front emerges and develops.

(We might also do some theoretical work on the relationship between the vital mix and the mixed bag, and my point is that it seems unlikely that the former will ever be found without the latter—though the reverse does not necessarily hold, there are mixed bags with no truly vital elements. Was this the case with

Woodstock, or, for that matter, the history of the Soviet Union during the Stalin period? For my part, I don’t accept the “mixed bag with no vital elements” assessment in either case.)

What does this seeming digression have to do with the project of debriefment? Simply this: that in both the United States and France, and in several other places, Maoism was part of the vital mix of the experience of the sixties and of 1968, and so were some other trends (in France, situationism and psychoanalysis as well), but what was not part of the vital mix was Soviet “Marxism” and the varieties of Trotskyism and reformist “socialism.” Yes, in some cases these trends were represented on the streets, but their “contribution” was the opposite of vital, these trends always sought to limit the scope of struggle.

Another version of the “mixed bag” came in with the shift from the sixties to the seventies in the U.S., when the student movement aspect of the rebellions ran its course and radicals aimed for a grounding in the working class that had not developed in the immediate aftermath of the struggles of 1968. When people are converging, even if from different angles, on an economic-workerist approach, then I suppose all that matters in debates about history (Stalin and Trotsky, etc.) are ways that different groups are trying to “brand” themselves.

Even so, there were two differences that were important. First, the Trotskyists and CPUSA people were not turning to economism, they were recommending that the left and socialists and radicals who had gotten caught up in the excitement of the sixties return to what was supposedly the real deal. They came through the sixties with their orthodoxies intact, and then they were able, after things settled down, to wear that passage as a badge of some kind of honor. Whether it was Woodstock or Black Liberation or radical feminism, none of these things really “happened,” from an economic perspective.

The Maoists, broadly speaking, instead saw themselves as making a “turn” to the working class, and here is where a second difference arose. Groups such as the Communist Workers Party and the Communist Party Marxist-Leninist went to the same part of the work-

ing class upon which the CPUSA and the Trotskyist groups were focused.

The Revolutionary Union and then the Revolutionary Communist Party went substantially in this direction as well, but not completely. Why not? Long discussion, but I want to offer a very short answer and say that it was precisely because of what was vital in the mixed bag that was the sixties.

Now, clearly this also played out in terms of what was happening in China from about 1972 onwards, where there was tremendous contention over continuing the Cultural Revolution, against the background of threats from the Soviet Union and the opening to the United States, and ultimately the seizure of state power by the counter-revolutionary capitalist roaders, led by Deng Xiaoping.

In terms of the mix of all this, what is significant is that, the points where the RCP was going wrong (probably the two biggest examples of which were the Boston busing issue and the line on homosexuality) were closely connected to a kind of workerist orientation, while the places where the RCP was going in a more revolutionary direction had very much to do with what was vital in the mix of the sixties.

(Why were questions of sexuality and homosexuality so intractable within this mix? That remains a worthwhile question to pursue.)

So, again, what were some of the elements of this mix? Very broadly: internationalism, anti-imperialism, the sense that we need to understand and support the socialist experiments in China, the sense that we need to understand and forge an alternative to Stalin's version of socialism, the rise of the New Left, a certain Third Worldism, a certain sense of anti-revisionism that was also wary of dogmatism and the forging of new orthodoxies, a sense that the constellation of questions and struggles around race and gender are not simply secondary or subordinate, certainly the experience of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Movement generally, and then let us not forget the general culture of rock music and rebellion, and, finally, but not insignificantly, what might be called a certain Bay-area trippiness.

All good stuff—that's a good mix!

And, again, this is not the mix one finds in Trotskyism or CPUSA "communism" (and obviously not in Hoxhaite Stalinism).

Significantly, the parts of the counterculture where this mix was also prevalent, or at least more parts of it, were more toward the anarchist and situationist end of things.

There is always a tremendous temptation to go down into the economist ditch, or to get into an economist rut. It seems to me this is not unrelated to the temptation in materialism to get into a reductivist rut. (Again, I'm calling this a "pathological" materialism.) These temptations always affected even the most vibrant strains of anti-economistic radicalism, including the Maoism of the RCP and Bob Avakian. But it is still important to mark the difference between the eagles that sometimes fly low and the other birds that cannot soar so high. The difference is that the low-flyers are never out of the rut and the ditch and they make a principle out of being there. For the eagles, it is important to both understand how they can be tempted by the ditch, but also what was in the mix that kept them from staying in the ditch. Additionally, it is important to see the relationship between the economist ditch (or, changing images, the swamp, as Lenin put it) and the moment when even the eagle becomes exhausted and is not able to sufficiently change course.

The irony here is that we need to understand how postmodern capitalism has as a central cultural strategy the undercutting of even the possibility of a counterculture—and we need to figure out what, if anything, we can do about this—but it is this very exhaustion of experimental, countercultural vibrancy that keeps us from turning the corners that need to be turned. Indeed, too much activist Marxism, even coming from the most vibrant trends, has been complicit in the reductivist idea that experimental culture (and theoretical work) is so much epiphenomenal "fluff." (An "epiphenomenon" is akin to a shadow; it is "there," but it is not "really real," and it has no existence apart from the entity that casts it.) There are still elements from the vital sixties mix that can help us here, but: 1) these elements must be reconfigured, and 2) ultimately a new mix is needed, one that is shaped in relation to the new

configurations of capitalism that have emerged since the sixties and in many respects in deliberate reaction to the sixties.

Notice that the term “vital mix” is at least in some important ways replacing the word “synthesis” for the moment, and this is for at least two reasons.

First, it is unclear that even now we really grasp the Maoist synthesis. This is one of the reasons why Badiou’s work is exciting, especially *Theory of the Subject*. There may be problems and omissions in this work, Badiou’s version of the Maoist synthesis, but there are whole new dimensions that are opened up as well, and a whole new framework, things that were invisible within the context of the often insightful but philosophically ham-fisted perspective of Bob Avakian’s generally non-rigorous, non-systematic, non-scientific work.

The irony is that Avakian’s work is at times almost the Nietzschean, aphoristic version of Marxism, and it is about telling stories, but with the addition of the condemnation of “narrative” as a methodology and the continual chanting of “science” as a mantra. In fact, despite his more recently-expressed distaste for the idea of “narrative,” the central theoretical contribution of Bob Avakian to the communist project is a reading of parts of the revolutionary experience since Marx and especially in the twentieth century. As I said earlier, I was always very frustrated with Marxists (of whatever sort) in academia who did not see the need for such a reading; they frustrate me still. (Let us be clear that some one-word “summation” of the experience as “totalitarianism,” “horror,” “genocide,” “megalomania,” “disaster,” and the like is neither a reading nor at all helpful.) It seemed to me, and it continues to strike me, that, despite some of the serious limitations of Bob Avakian’s theoretical work, this reading is still very valuable and helpful.

What still needs to be done is for this reading to be set out systematically. Where there are aporias and lacunae, there is still valuable work to be done—in either solving these problems or taking stock of the significance of our inability to find a solution.

Put another way, and more straightforwardly: did Bob Avakian deepen our understanding of the communist revolutions of the twentieth century and of

Maoism, and did he develop Maoism in some important ways? Were these important and valuable things to do?

Even while being resolutely angry with Bob Avakian and the RCP for the hash they’ve made of all this, we still need this chapter in our “workbook of post-Maoism,” our workbook of the next phase of the communist hypothesis and the new possibilities for a vital mix.

But my larger point is that there is still work to do in forming the larger sense of Maoism as synthesis—and then to ask what it might mean to view this synthesis in the past tense.

Second, with his placing of the event before the subject, Badiou is also giving us another way of understanding the primacy of practice over theory. Why is it the case that our theorizing not only is complicated, erratic, and experimental, but that it ought to be and necessarily is such? The answer to this question, it could be said, is in the necessity of contingency and the contingency of necessity.

There is a primary need for a new synthesis even while there is also a secondary need to continue to sort out the previous synthesis. However, in light of the primacy of the event and of practice, it has to be understood that our work toward this new synthesis is anticipatory.

This goes to questions of complexity (our work is “complicated”), contingency, and the “vital mix.” We should continue to study and try to understand and theorize the vital mix of the sixties and its aftermath. We should try to understand something of how a vital mix works and how it emerges, even while holding firm to the truth that such study will not yield a fully-worked out “science” of how any previous vital mix emerged, and neither will it provide a complete template for either creating or recognizing a new vital mix.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant argues that a scientist can be “formed” (through education) in a way that an artist cannot be. Kant’s distinction might be refined using Thomas Kuhn’s distinction between “normal” and “revolutionary” science, to read instead that social institutions can “make” a “normal scientist” but not quite a “revolutionary scientist,” a real innovator

who opens up “new continents,” so to speak. This doesn’t mean to toss away the training in the basics of scientific investigation, or the basics in artistic technique for that matter. The emergence of the new, however, is underdetermined, and so our work has to be anticipatory—and complicated, erratic, and experimental.

This is a point that the book-length RCP critique of Badiou just does not want to come to terms with, despite circling around it a bit and despite the opening to it that was created in the Notes on Political Economy and in the discussions that Bob Avakian and I had concerning “inevitablism.” And it is indeed a very difficult complex—of indeterminacy, underdetermination, and contingency—to come to terms with; it may even be that something very deep in our human cultures and histories and experiences is set against coming to terms with contingency, as coming to terms with contingency seems to lead to the various forms of nihilism.

There are of course many rich discourses on these questions, from ancient times, from diverse cultures—as always, I would point toward what seems to be the Buddhist discourse and the attraction of Western intellectuals have toward at least certain readings of it, and of course from Nietzsche and twentieth-century French philosophy.

As I tried to demonstrate in the previous section, Bob Avakian avoids all of this discussion, in a way that would almost seem studious and careful, if it didn’t so much more betoken simple intellectual laziness. But this is again where the project of “debriefment,” here understood simply and straightforwardly as digging ourselves out of certain holes, is important, because this kind of avoidance (1) is widespread through everything that has called itself communism, socialism, anarchism, the left, radical activism, or what-have-you; (2) can be characterized as pathological or as symptomatic of a pathology—one that I am calling pathological materialism; (3) has real practical effects. Even people who do not want to grapple with all of this theoretical or philosophical stuff need to take some sort of stock on this last point.

A very simple, but I think worthwhile summation of the foregoing is that we need to begin to think politics in light of contingency. Two corollaries to this

point: (1) we need to understand better what it means to think, period, in light of contingency, as well as what it means to act, in light of contingency; (2) “in light of contingency” does not mean that there is never any moment when there are law-like motions in “brute” materiality or in “social reality” or in abstract thought; what it means is the primacy of contingency over necessity. But what this means is something we need to understand a whole lot better!

I don’t want to leave this issue of anticipatory practical and theoretical work without quoting some very interesting formulations from Mike Ely, in a Kasama post on electoral politics and revolutionary organizing:

If you conceive of a revolutionary united front capable of seizing and holding power in the U.S. — and you imagine the demographic support you would need.... you get (more or less) the social forces who now make up the Democratic party base. (Plus, one might hope a chunk of farmers — who are largely trapped these days in some version of Republican politics... or worse.)

And to imagine a revolution in the U.S., that Democratic party has to shatter, lose its base and become profoundly de-legitimized as the alternative to the ugliest, racist, uber-capitalist right.

Forgive my history-geek reference: but I personally see an analogy (in American history) in the way the status-quo Whig party shattered on the eve of the Civil War, and a new (more radical and ultimately revolutionary) Republican Party emerged on the basis of opposing the dominance of the slaveocracy.

In some ways, that kind of repolarization has to happen in the U.S. — where the social base of the Democrats simply abandon them, and re-congeal in a number of other movements, which in turn need to be unified around a revolutionary program of transitional demands in the midst of a profound social crisis.

That’s what the pre-history of a revolution looks like in a future America.

And the question is, how do we prepare now, in ways that help the repolarization of American poli-

tics to include a powerful revolutionary pole attracting millions?

We really don't have much of a mix these days, vital or otherwise. This again has to do with postmodern capitalism, which I would say is a "stage" of capitalism within imperialism, as opposed to "beyond" imperialism, even though there are qualitative developments. One of these developments has to do with the degree and qualitative depth of post-60s social pacification in the United States, even despite significant counter-examples (in a moment we will turn to the most important of these, the L.A. rebellion of 1992). In terms of the emergence of a vital mix, we might wonder if we are in "pre-pre-history."

On the other hand, there is a sense in which we not only do not know everything that is simmering under the surface of our present social configuration, we cannot know—or, we cannot know what dynamic synergies might lead to a true eruption. This doesn't mean we don't look around and try to understand and unite with "the central void of capitalism" (as Badiou characterizes Marx's understanding of the proletariat), and it doesn't mean that we cannot learn from the ways in which the vital mixes of the past emerged.

However, to shift terrain to music again, we won't get the new Beethoven or Coltrane or Beatles simply by studying the previous exemplars. It may well be that we (or someone) won't get to something new in music without studying the "past masters," and my own thinking tends this way (because we still have to try to be methodical, even if in light of contingency and even while aiming to experiment)—but then the problem is not to become a slave to this tendency. Ironically, there is something in the very nature of Bob Avakian's actual contribution to the development of Maoism and the communist project that at the same time prevented him from really breaking out with a new synthesis or at least a real contribution to an emergent, new vital mix.

I'll turn to this question in a moment, but one aspect of recognizing this "something" is the further recognition that Badiou's work, in being experimental, can make more of a contribution to the next phase of things, even where it might be "wrong" on some particular point, than Avakian's work, in being "merely

methodical" (in continuing to unfold the Maoist problematic in a certain way and along a certain path), even where Avakian and the RCP might be more "right" on a particular point. A good deal hinges on our being able to understand how this could be the case.

## 8. Further into the "vital mix" idea: particularities and methodological questions

Let us consider a few more aspects of this idea of a vital mix, as perhaps not the new synthesis itself, but as crucial for the possibility of a new synthesis.

(i) Looking again at May 1968 in Paris, there were many elements of the rebellion that are, shall we say, not the favorites of Alain Badiou. Among these, especially, are what Badiou calls the "anarcho-desirers" and the situationists. The former are the "arm your desire" set of trends that we also have in North America (e.g., associated with *Anarchy* magazine). With this term ("anarcho-desirer") Badiou seems to also have in mind Gilles Deleuze and some of the students around him. (In the aftermath of May 1968, Sartre—whose name was attached to the rebellion as much or more than any other—complained that students weren't reading his work anymore, that instead "they're all reading Deleuze!" I will return to this question of the intense "cauldron" of what its detractors call "68 Thought.")

Ever since I've known about them, I've found the situationists fascinating. (As best I recall, this encounter began with reading a review in the *Village Voice* of the *Situationist International Anthology*, edited by Ken Knabb, back in the early 1980s; I was kind of amazed and thrilled when Knabb popped up in one of the threads on Kasama, precisely the one on Woodstock and the commodification of cool.) Badiou once said to a friend of mine, "Je suis Sartrean totalement" ("I am completely Sartrean"). Well, I'm very Sartrean too, and in the same way that Badiou is, based more on the existential Marxist works than the works grounded in classical phenomenology. The situationists, in response to an interview Sartre gave to mark his seventieth birthday, referred to Sartre as an "imbecile."

And yet the ideas of the situationists, especially Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem are too important to not incorporate into our understanding of contemporary capitalism. It may be that the thesis of a completely totalized “society of the spectacle” is not quite sustainable, any more than Adorno’s conception of a “totally administered society” (each may be involved in a strategic exaggeration), but we could learn quite a lot trying to figure out why this is the case, and each thesis certainly seems to go quite far in explaining the way that the logic of commodification has gotten into every nook and cranny of human life, at least in the imperialist countries (but increasingly everywhere).

What this has to do with the vital mix is that the situationists and their ideas are perhaps not the sort of thing where one might have said, “If they did not exist, they would have to be invented.” Even to many today, including those who were around at the time, the role of the situationists is an unopened chapter in the unfolding of developments that led to the Events of May. In November 1966, situationist students at the University of Strasbourg managed to gain control of the student activities budget for the year and to use the entire amount for the production and publication of a booklet entitled, “On the Poverty of Student Life.” It may be something of an exaggeration to say that a direct line can be drawn from this brilliant stunt to the Events of May, but certainly an indirect line can be drawn, and such indirect lines—lines without linearity—seem to be of the essence of a vital mix.

Taking stock of contingency in politics (and quite possibly in the other domains of truth as Badiou understands them) means grappling with this notion of line without linearity.

(Here we would also be interested in the concept of “lines of flight” from Deleuze and Guattari, as well as the critique of the concept of line—taken as linear—in their work and in Derrida’s work. As applied to experimental music, I take up this question in *Avant Rock*, pp.229-236.)

Just as a provocation (for now), I will add that a parallel track has to be run with our basic understanding of materialism: we need a materialism of the multiple. Another way to put this is that political line without

linearity, and political organization without “monolithic, iron-willed” structure and program, are categories or at least corollaries within a materialism of the multiple. Badiou helps us with this, and the basic philosophical scheme out of which the RCP is working does not.

(ii) The role that the situationists played in the eruption of the Events of May should also highlight for us the question of locality—which is an issue in Badiou’s work that I am trying to understand, that truth could be both universal and local. I will develop this question a little more when I turn to the RCP’s polemic against Badiou, on the question of the relative significance of 1968 in France compared to the United States and other countries. The polemic maintains that the rebellion ran deeper in the U.S. than it did in France. Possibly, but there is also simply the question of the significant differences in the two situations (but of course there is also the question of whether these were two different situations and what that means in the context of a “world system”). In France they had the situationists, and it might well be that only in France (or only in certain parts of Western Europe, at the least) would you “get a Debord.” But similarly it could be said that only in the United States would you get a Black Panther Party or an Abbie Hoffman.

The hypothesis is that the different vital mixes are representative (or somehow indicative) of the radical possibility in different localities.

From a particular locality we might ask what is universal in this experience, or, what seems to be a different question for Badiou (though possibly a non-starter), what is applicable in some other locality. We could take this approach as an alternative to both dogmatism and a priori-ism.

(iii) Something very important seems to be missing from such an approach, however—namely the sense of a world system that must be radically overcome. On one plane of analysis, namely that of “place” and “places,” I pursued this question in *Ethical Marxism* (pp.269-303; this was in the context of a discussion of Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, and agriculture). I argue that one of Marx’s philosophical contributions is to

hammer home once and for all the truth that the earth is a place.

However, just as in Hegel, when you focus on the large category, you tend to lose “sense certainty,” or, in Marx’s case, “locality.”

There is a bundle of basic philosophical issues here; the reading by Althusser and Badiou is that Marx is one of the great rationalists and formalists, and not an empiricist. Given that Marx also seemed to be all about the empirical, it might be worth revisiting the way that Donald Davidson was interested in generating a philosophy that is “rooted” in the empirical (or has an empirical “basis”), but that is not itself an empiricism.

The key point is that we need somehow to be able to understand the earth as a place and the social system of capitalism and its mutations (imperialism, postmodern capitalism) as forming a global mode of production, and yet not to lose the sense of particularity and places, in the plural. Again, methodologically, this is where we are drawn toward a materialism of the multiple—or else we recoil from this and remain smug within a monolithic, monological “materialism” that will necessarily tend in a certain “religious” direction, namely of “the one.”

All of these ideas need to be developed further, and perhaps some of them will hold up and others will not. To come at the basic issue in the present essay with a slightly different spin, we can say simply that it makes more sense to pursue this investigation in terms of Badiou’s contributions, and not in terms of the RCP’s polemic or other theoretical writings and talks that have come out of the RCP in recent years—even if we might find ourselves asking some of the same questions that are found in these writings or talks. But then, we—reconceivers and regroupers of the communist project—need to have real questions, and not engage in “conversation” just to tell somebody something or to “demonstrate methodology” or some such.

(iv) To once again come to the point as regards the project of debriefment, what was not part of the vital mix of either France or the United States was the alphabet soup of Trotskyism or others who were advancing what I’m calling the “socialist hypothesis.” (On Badiou’s

model, this “leftist trend” is neither a hypothesis nor an idea, but I will pursue the discussion of this “idea idea” in other contexts.) The world needs socialism, and perhaps it even needs alliances with those who support the socialist hypothesis (but not really the communist hypothesis), but these things are needed “under the communist hypothesis” or “as part of the communist hypothesis.”

Badiou often refers to the “Red Years,” roughly 1968-1976. What we might understand best as marking those years was something like an ascendancy of the communist hypothesis and a radical striving toward (to use Lenin’s expression) finding another way. As the rebellion was ultimately being crushed, reigned in, and even assimilated in various ways (e.g., to fashion and the beginnings of a more complete commodification of cool, captured well in the transition from radical to “rad”), there was both a reassertion of and a falling back toward various orthodoxies.

A good argument can be made that, while the RCP also “fell back” quite a bit in some ways and on some fronts, they also carried forward some crucial elements of the vital mix of the sixties and the experience in China, and they made some important breakthroughs on the basis of this mix. That is why it is still worthwhile to “debrief” on this experience and even to come to terms with the idea of there being final phases of this experience.

One measure of falling back is the increasing linearity of line, which has its equal and opposite effect in the declining appreciation for the vital mix.

On the other side, the Trotskyist groups, the CPU-SA, other socialist groups, or even the other Maoist groups, did not carry forward the vital mix or significant elements thereof, either because they were never a part of this mix, or because they fell so completely into economist orthodoxy that nothing vital could survive.

To be very “May 1968” about it, these groups were either always under or they placed themselves back under the conception of “politics as the art of the possible,” as opposed to the “demand [for] the impossible” as the “realism” of the Red Years. “All power to the imagination!” doesn’t fit with this “realism” of the socialist hy-

pothesis, which could also be called the “left-capitalist hypothesis.”

Regarding the vital mix of the Red Years, the lesson isn't that we should try to repeat those years, but rather that we should remain faithful to the idea that we have to find another way.

Neither the economic realism of the socialist hypothesis nor the positivistic (scientific) realism of an exhausted Maoism will help us to respond and contribute to the real ruptures that are needed.

For my part, I tend to bristle at “reality”; I had an interchange regarding Bob Avakian's “dreaming in accord with reality” formulation in the *Conversations* book, because something I had said about this formulation (that I didn't like it) had gotten back to him (see pp.194-197). Subsequently, thinking back on the discussion, I began to sign some of my emails to friends with the phrase “keep it unreal.” I love this line from W. H. Auden and used it as the epigraph for my second book: “Nothing can save us that is possible.”

Speaking of Auden, and thinking of his powerful and sad poem, “Funeral Blues” (“Stop all the clocks,” 1938—readers here may know it from the film, “Four Weddings and a Funeral”), what was clearly not a part of the vital mix for the RCP, either back in the day or in more recent years, was Stonewall and gay liberation. Neither is this part of the vital mix for Badiou. This is a serious problem that goes far beyond either (what might be called) the “demographic” response—talking about the supposed numbers or percentage of people who are affected by this question, in terms of how many people are gay—or the response in terms of there being more important questions (e.g., counter-revolution in China). There are serious ethical and methodological questions here that go to basic tendencies toward reductionism and mere utilitarianism. I will get back into all of this in my “personal stuff” article, as these are questions that are very important in their own right, but also they played a large role in shaping my own engagements with radical politics and with the RCP. In terms of the vital mix, however, this is not only a matter of history or scholarship (of elements of the vital mix of the sixties that have not been afforded the full credit of their contribution), but also of something still vital

in our present-day world, and an historical task — gay liberation — that has not been accomplished and that is important not only in its own right but also important as part of any new vital mix that might emerge.

(v) Turning, then, to more recent decades, has there been any sort of vital mix in the United States since the high tide of the sixties and its aftermath?

Badiou calls this period an “interval,” which we are still in. Following Jameson, I call it “postmodern capitalism.” In any case, we need to understand better the shape of this interval, including its political economy. It is a period (though on another level something like an “anti-period,” a period that resists periodization) in which things are very difficult for meaning and significance; it is very difficult for things to stand out as important. The recuperative mechanisms of capitalist culture have gone into overdrive.

Comparisons have been made to the 1950s, some of which are apt, but there are two major differences. First, this “new fifties” (of “the end of ideology,” the “organization man,” the “return to normalcy,” and general quiescence and de-politicization) comes after the sixties and is very much shaped by what can be called anti-sixties agendas—again, within the spectrum of repression and recuperation.

Second, the first time the fifties came around, it had all sorts of undercurrents and it only lasted a limited time, in fact we might take stock of the significance of this period lasting less than it takes for the formation of a new generation of adults. This is important because, meanwhile, the “new fifties” goes on and on and it could be said that two generations have been formed in its midst.

The New Left was mentioned as part of the vital mix of the sixties. We will have to develop an engagement with this broad trend in another venue, but allow me here to send up a little trial balloon. It might be said that our present “interval” is something like a “new fifties” to the extent that a trenchant critique such as Herbert Marcuse's great book of 1964, *One-Dimensional Man*, still helps us to understand our present “culture” and what Marcuse called “the new forms of



control.” Personally, I still find “1DM” very relevant and very insightful.

The problem is that Marcuse wrote this book in a context where he saw new rebellious forces bubbling under the surface; while of course there are forces bubbling under our surfaces, too—capitalism not having resolved its fundamental contradictions—the new forms of control, which include new methods for keeping everything on the surface and shaping and enforcing a pervasive depthlessness, have now done their work for so long, and with the express intent of fundamentally ridding the world of any kind of radical hope for a different future, that, well, it may be that we are up against something not previously seen and that we have little sense of.

For sure, we will have no sense of these problems and questions if we are not open to the possibility of these being real problems and questions. A lack of such openness has been the general tendency of the “left” and forms of Marxism that tend toward orthodoxy.

We now need not only a broad engagement with cultural analysis, we need an account of the cost of not having entered into this engagement. What have we had instead of this engagement? Two things have taken the place of this engagement: bluster and a focus on the question of interest. The idea is that the culture of distraction that is an integral part of the “interval” or postmodern capitalism (or what Adorno called the “spell”) will dissipate like so much steam at the moment when people “raise their eyes and set their sights on their true interests.”

The writings of Marx and Engels are filled with cultural critique. At the same time, neither of them had to deal with the culture industry as it emerged in the twentieth century, and which has gone through qualitative developments in recent decades. (A very good place to start in dealing with these more recent developments is Mark Crispin Miller’s 1988 book, *Boxed In: The Culture of TV*, especially the essay, “Big Brother is You, Watching.”) Marx famously argued that, “Once the inner connections are grasped, theory becomes a material force.” The basic terms of this claim are problematized by the culture industry and its more recent development into postmodern capitalism, which makes

of the “interval” a meticulously organized (even if still expressive in some sense of the anarchy of capital) impasse. We might first come at this problematization by asking what it means to “grasp” anymore. I don’t think it was ever right, even though I have no problem admitting that this is what Marx thought, to think it meant that the grasp of inner connections occurs at the point when the distractions are no longer powerful enough to cover over the proletariat’s sense of its “actual interests.” There might still be something to the idea that “death focuses the mind,” but even this singular “focus” will be refracted through the ideological lens of imperialism and postmodern capitalism. One of the most grotesque accomplishments of postmodern capitalism is to trivialize death.

One of the points I was attempting to make with my discussion on Bob Avakian on death is that Marxists can be pushed along by postmodern strategies of trivialization, relativism, and cynicism as much as anyone else, especially if they have no regard for critical analyses of the cultural logic of the commodity. If I recall correctly, in his memoir Avakian wrote that he never really had anything against the New Left. But he did have something against these philosophers and cultural theorists, he was against learning anything from them. I also cannot help thinking back to the “reality” that the RCP was declaring in the early 1980s and onward (until Ardea Skybreak’s essays on art and intellectual work from around 2000), that “art is entertainment.” While my engagement with the RCP began after the analysis that issued in this verdict had been completed, what I heard often was that this verdict had been reached through the study of the work of Bertolt Brecht. Not that I have anything at all against studying Brecht, but why did Adorno and Benjamin not then come into the discussion? The answer is simple, even if to unfold it takes us into numerous complexities: the “art is politics” line allows us to not have to take either art or philosophy in their own terms.

Certainly such thinking (or, in reality, anti-thinking) is itself representative of a time—the “post-sixties,” so to speak—that had no end of “mix,” in the vertiginous swirl of commodity logic, but little in the way of vitality. There is a cost for this, and it is also very im-

portant to recognize that even when efforts were made to break out of this intellectual straitjacket, there was not nearly the sort of effort that would have been required to dig out of some of the holes that the RCP had dug itself into. There were some promising moves, I think, but there was also the problem that, even in the case where there was some good “digging,” the “shovels” were those of an exhausted paradigm.

Regarding debriefment, however, there is a good deal we still need to learn from this experience. Yes, we do not want to find ourselves in a merely backward-looking posture, but neither do I accept the idea that there is nothing more to be excavated, and I am especially wary when this latter proposal is put forward by those who were part of trends that were not part of the vital mix to begin with.

All right, though, we are interested in looking forward, and the problem is that the very possibility of a new, emergent, vital mix is in dire straits today. The point is simply that we will not address this particular interval that we are in without attempting to understand it as such, which understanding includes a crucial role for cultural critique and not only political economy (though also not drawing a sharp line between the two), and we will not address this interval through mere bluster or, even more, reversion to economism.

Still, looking to the period from the mid-seventies until now, let's take two episodes from the 1990s as instructive. Just using the term “left” in a very general, fuzzy way for the moment, there was one part of the left for whom the 1992 Rodney King verdict and the subsequent riots and rebellion were of special significance, and another part of the left for whom the “big thing” (I'm avoiding the word “event”) was the UPS strike. I'll write more on this in my piece on economism, but my point is that the L.A. rebellion (which spread elsewhere) and the forces that engaged with it and supported it were at least closer to the possibility of a new vital mix than were those for whom all of this was a sideshow to the “real deal,” the wage struggle around UPS. Now, it is not inconceivable that such a struggle (which I hesitate to call a struggle, for reasons that I will get into in the essay I'm writing on economism, but which are also basically reasons that

Bob Avakian framed well in *Conquer the World?* and elsewhere) could, under certain circumstances, and in combination with other things happening, get into the swirl of a vital mix. However, that sort of thing is not the place from where radical transformation is going to jump off, and the groups that base themselves on such starting points are groups that are pursuing the “left bourgeois hypothesis.”

(vi) I'm all for Trotskyists and other socialists and leftists becoming communists, just as I am all for Christians becoming communists. There is always a question of the quality of the “leap” (which Badiou doesn't mind calling a “conversion,” but of course this drives secular Marxists nuts), but there might be a question of the “quantity” of the leap as well—what distance does one have to go? How much bourgeois baggage has to be thrown out (especially given the problem that we in this fallen state of bourgeois society can never really get rid of all of it)? But, to continue, I'm all for reading the works of Trotsky and the smart and sometimes brilliant Trotskyists who have done work that can be very helpful to the communist project. That doesn't phase me a bit, until we get to the point where critical discussion of the Soviet and Chinese experiences becomes mere dismissal.

(I will take this up in a discussion of religion, but of course the kernels of at least some very important aspects of communism are to be found in the old Israelites and the early Christians—“from each according to his or her abilities, to each according to his or her needs” is from the *Acts of the Apostles* and so on. There are important ways in which Gautama the Buddha expressed what Badiou calls the “egalitarian maxim” as well. One of the things that the RCP, as well as my other secularist friends — Marxist or otherwise — was never able to hammer out of me was the conviction that these folks, Jews, Christians, and Buddhists, ought to be challenged to embrace and live up to these elements of communism and what might be called “inherent radical anti-capitalism,” and at the same time we “avowed communists” need to understand that we still have a great deal to learn from them. One very instruc-

tive point here is to see how quickly the “reality-based” rejection of this approach turns into cynical realism.)

This line of discussion raises the difficult question of what it is to be a communist today—and to do this in a way that is not merely sectarian or, for that matter, ugly and discouraging or condescending toward everyone who is attracted toward this singular idea of communism. Is there a way to make some demarcations that need to be made, but in a way that is all the same inviting rather than disinviting?

People will rebel against capitalism and imperialism when their backs are against the wall. But the form of their rebellion is not necessarily by itself a movement in the direction of the communist project. Recognizing this is what we might call Lenin’s epistemological break with economism. And in fact, rebellion can take the form of reaction and fascism, perhaps even a kind of pre-secular medievalism. (As readers here will likely know, Marx analyzed this latter reaction in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, and Engels also has a very important analysis of the relationship of political forms to the mode of production in *The Peasant War in Germany*.) The communist hypothesis must be put forward in and of itself. This hypothesis is not unrelated to the interests that people have, or that collectivities understand themselves to have, but the communist hypothesis is not in any way reducible to a “dialectical” (or mechanical or what-have-you) reading of interests.

(It is crucial for our ontology, epistemology, and politics that we see how a “dialectical” perspective motivated primarily by the category of interest always ends up in mechanical thinking and ham-fisted praxis.)

It is hard for me to imagine someone being a communist who does not only “uphold” the experiences of the Paris Commune, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Stalin period, the Chinese Revolution, the Cultural Revolution, and certain other failed-but-heroic attempts on the part of the International Communist Movement, but who also takes these experiences as truth procedures to be unfolded and studied. I might be wrong about this, certainly there are more arguments to be heard. If we really have turned a corner toward a new phase of the communist hypothesis, what difference does a fidelity to these earlier experiences make? We

are also talking about and hoping for new generations to take up the communist hypothesis, and furthermore, we need to reconceive and regroup from all of our previous experience; what sense does it make to just keep “going back into” all of this “past history”? I have some inclinations here, but I also want to make it very clear that I don’t have the answers to these questions. Furthermore, while this is of course true in a general way, it is especially true here that the answers to these particular questions have to be forged in what might be called a collective process that itself is the forging of a collectivity.

However, I do think this distinction between the socialist hypothesis and the communist hypothesis can help us again here, and in a way that is not a disinvitation. We want to invite people to form collectivities around the communist hypothesis. My guess is that people who do not accept the historical experiences I listed as valid instantiations of the truth procedures of the hypothesis are instead those who are more attracted to the socialist hypothesis. (Leave aside for the moment whether there is an “anarchist hypothesis.”) Some of these socialist friends might even “uphold” some of the historical experiences of communism, but from a socialist and economist perspective. I think we need to challenge these friends in a friendly way, basically to come forward to a sense of communism that, again, while it is not unrelated to either real or perceived interests of the proletariat and other classes, is not fundamentally reducible to some sort of “logic of class interests.”

We need to challenge these friends, quite often make common cause with these friends, but also we absolutely need to not “dissolve communism into socialism.”

The motivation here is not toward some sort of communist or revolutionary “purity” or “good conscience.” That’s not what this is about, and neither is it, again, about looking down our noses at anyone. Instead the motivation is simply that, if there is not an independent center for the communist hypothesis, then something that is already a very long shot passes over into nothingness.

One paradox we are up against is that, without disavowing fidelity to the historical experience of the ICM, we still have to affirm the need to break with exhausted ideas.

Showing once again my Kantian side, I would say being a communist has fundamentally to do with the orientation of one's aspirations.

Of course this is not a fundamentally "subjective" question, and we see subjectivity in a bad (non-Badiouean) sense when politics devolves into mere sectarianism. Even so, why isn't it perfectly clear that we can at least make a distinction between those whose fidelity and subsequent work is predicated on the communist hypothesis and project, and those who have fidelity to the socialist hypothesis? Following Badiou, we might say that objectivity is on the side of the communist hypothesis because it, unlike socialism, is the truth of humanity and history. Every real instantiation of the communist hypothesis is irruptive and new, not simply the mechanical, interest-driven reaction of a class toward that which is set against those interests.

Surely it is not hard to see that vitality is on the side of the irruptively new, and not on the side of continuity with the basic structures of existing society, even if pushed in a "leftward" direction.

(vii) In the United States and the U.K., orthodox socialisms and economisms were not part of the vital mix of the sixties and its aftermath, though it cannot be said that theorists and perhaps some activists working in the categories of what many of them choose to call "classical Marxism" did not make some contributions after the sixties had played out. I've mentioned some of these, basically thinkers associated with the Raya Dunayevskaya and Tony Cliff versions of neo-Trotskyism.

In my book with Bob Avakian, *Marxism and the Call of the Future*, I took a little swipe at those who think that things would have worked out better in the Soviet Union if Stalin had read Hegel in 1927 (p.45). While I do think my Marxist-Humanist friends overplay "reading Hegel as the key to revolution" a bit, I now regret what I said in light of the way that it plays into the general anti-philosophy tendency of the RCP and others who would call themselves Marxists.

I don't know if there is a systematic study on this question — I would gladly be informed — but it is important that we grapple with the way that different historical figures, apart from the content of their arguments, can also play the role of shaking all and any of us Marxists, with our tendencies toward pathological materialism and mechanical thinking, awake from our dogmatic slumbers. This was Kant's famous assessment regarding the role that the great David Hume played in spurring his own critical project, and we see similar roles played in the cases of Kierkegaard and Sartre, Spinoza and Althusser, and now Plato and Badiou. Of course there are studies of these specific pairings and many more, but what I haven't seen is a study of the dynamics of the pairings in connection with the regeneration of the communist project.

We still have some things to learn from various dimensions of the Trotskyist experience: the turn toward Che Guevara by the Socialist Workers Party (in the U.S.); the Trotskyists in France who seemed to work productively with various philosophers; parts of various Trotskyist critiques of Stalin that, while they are not entirely right, are not entirely wrong, either; the "late capitalism" thesis of Ernst Mandel.

It isn't so much the idea of "taking aboard" this experience wholesale as it is getting beyond the mindset that freaks out at the very idea that there is something to learn here. Again, perhaps this is my Kantian side, and I realize this approach has limitations, but I think there is something to be said for recognizing good intentions and the work that can be subsequent to such intentions. The alternative is a kind of "Maoist" model that sees all departures from a narrowly-conceived line as not only "revisionism," but, therefore, as no more than the constitution of a new "bourgeoisie-in-waiting." In reality this model is actually "Stalinist," and to the extent that this model was carried forward into Maoism, it needs to be excised.

To shift terminology a little, this ("Stalinism") is an approach where we are not only interested in knowing our friends from our enemies, but even more an approach where the need for enemies becomes paramount. Like many people involved in the discussions around Kasama, I try to do my utmost to resist over-

simplifications of the Stalin period and Stalin's role in the international communist movement. Having said that, however, this dynamic that leads to the need for enemies might be called "Stalinism in a nutshell."

Here again this distinction between two hypotheses, socialist and communist, can help us to avoid mere sectarianism and "Stalinism" in the sense just mentioned. I always thought that Lenin took a little too much satisfaction in inviting others to go into the "swamp" (of revisionism). As my mother used to say, "You just worry about you." Don't we generally find that people who want to work on the socialist hypothesis, and not the communist one, are well able to sort themselves out that way? Our problem is more that we often aren't very good at sorting ourselves out when it comes to applying ourselves to the communist hypothesis.

However, the "ism" that most needs avoiding, even where considerable risk may be entailed in this avoidance, is "a priori-ism." As communists, of course we should support everything that really breaks out from the existing order of things, or even that tries to break out—that which tries to point toward a fundamentally different future. On another level, a deeper level it might be said, the vital mix will prove itself in the larger mix of the world. Sure, we're not completely clueless in all of this, we're not completely back to square one, at least not in every way, and yet there is a way in which we really don't know and cannot know what form the vital mix will take on the morrow.

(viii) Not to obscure this previous point, which could be called the key to everything I am trying to argue here—that we really do need to go "into the wild" and to be open to what might be called a "real experiment" and even (what Derrida called) "an experience of the impossible"—but we might again take this point back into the distinction between the two hypotheses and even into the dynamics of Stalinism.

Advocates of the socialist hypothesis, and here I think I can include all of the varieties of Trotskyism, are not really interested in the things I just mentioned—the considerable risk of breaking with a priori-ism, of the experiment, of the experience of the impossible. Neither, bless their hearts, do these socialists claim to

be advocates of such "erratic" (to use Badiou's word) undertakings.

For this reason, "socialism" is not really a "hypothesis" in the sense in which Badiou is using the latter term. With "socialism" there is nothing to hypothesize, no experiment to be undertaken. Again, bless their hearts, socialists recognize this.

This can be seen in the kinds of interventions socialists, perhaps especially Trotskyists, make in discussions of reconceiving and regrouping around the communist project. These interventions often take the form of, "You see, we were right all along!" It has been amusing to watch the excited reaction of some Trotskyists around the fact that the name Trotsky sometimes comes up in a not entirely negative light in the discourse of the Nepali Maoists—a bit like George Castanza's "I'm back, baby!"

But I'm fine with the idea that these folks were "right all along" about the socialist hypothesis and the economist program; they know what they were doing, better than we communists know what we are doing. That's how it works in the difference between unfolding dimensions of what already exists or, instead working in an anticipatory and experimental way toward the possibility of something new.

What is more important, then, is that advocates of the communist hypothesis—in theory and practice—understand the distinction in constructive terms. This constructive, experimental approach is what is largely missing in Stalin's leadership. This is a complicated question, of course, and a real, practical, historical question. Summed up briefly, it could be said that Stalin's program of all-the-time siege mentality and "war communism" was wrong, but of course it was not unconnected to the fact that most of the experience of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet Union was an ongoing state of siege and war. Indeed, it could be said that this interminable state of siege called forth the leader that it required, with Lenin's tendencies toward expediency and his disdain for ethical discourse pushed to "full integration" (to use Sartre's term in the chapter on "socialism in one country" in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* v.2). What was set aside in the process was the communist hypothesis and its development, and what filled

the vacuum left by that displacement was the idea that always finding more and more enemies of the revolution is at least “doing something.”

Of course there will be real enemies of any real revolution, but, to be simplistic about it, the communist experiment has to be based on the work of the friends of the hypothesis, not the enemies. We could say that, in doing it the other way around, always putting such an emphasis on the enemies (and thereby creating enemies in the process), Stalin let go of the communist hypothesis—or perhaps he never had much sense of it, he simply carried forward some aspects of Lenin and the October Revolution in terms of the workings of power.

I sometimes think with Stalin (and the Stalin period) the case is similar to what Donald Davidson said about truth, that there are many theories that are insightful and that help us, but no theory by itself is adequate to the phenomenon itself. However, the more important point for present purposes is that the communist project is singular and needs to be represented by an independent (even if contentious and contradictory) pole, not folded into socialism or “the left.”

In this respect it would not hurt if communists were a little more like the anarchists (and the situationists, who for shorthand are sort of anarcho-Marxists). It doesn't hurt to point out that, to the extent that there are rebellious, vital elements in the overwhelmingly deadening mix of the world today, some of the most significant and exciting elements are to be found in the broad field of the anarchists (again in a way that is contentious and contradictory, as it is and will be with all vital elements). There are not only many points on which I disagree with anarchism, there are ways in which I frankly just don't like it a heck of a lot. But I do respect and admire the way that anarchists are open to experiments in theory and practice.

In a similar vein, I don't know why we Marxists have always been so insistent on cutting ourselves off from experiments in “intentional community” and utopianism, as if we've really accomplished something by focusing entirely on pointing out the limitations of these experiments. What this approach comes to is dogmatic, anti-experimentalism.

When one looks at the different analyses and valorizations of the Events of May 1968 (in Paris), certainly it is striking that there is so much emphasis on the “festival of the oppressed” side of the rebellion, and not enough emphasis on the question of a determined fight to overturn the capitalist ruling class and system. In a sense, the “realism” of the Maoists in the later 1970s and into the 1980s was a redress of this imbalance, and then all of the workerist groups reasserted themselves as well. In their pursuit of “nomad thought” (Deleuze's term, which he uses to differentiate Marx and Freud, on the one side, from Nietzsche), there is a tendency with some post-1968 activists and theorists, especially those more on the anarchism side of things, to make a fetish of the margin. Later, this became a way to characterize “postmodern” theory (a fetish for margins and marginalization), and somehow Badiou gets lopped in with this tendency by some very careless commentators, including the authors of the RCP polemic.

For sure, if the RCP or the writers of the Badiou polemic actually cared about philosophy beyond the amount of study required to attack it they could have lopped Derrida (and numerous others, of course) in with this “margin-fetish” as well. Certainly, Derrida was quite straightforwardly concerned with the margin and the processes of marginalization, and he addressed this question on many levels. A comparison of Derrida and Badiou on this point would be productive, if we are interested in being productive.

The effect of this lopping and carelessness, about which I will say more in the final section, is to avoid two questions. First, why is it that we ought to concern ourselves, as Marx and others have, with the margins of society? Second, is anarchism the only approach to the margin, the marginalized? On the other hand, anarchism recommends itself as an approach to the margin, even to the point of what might be a fetish, that does not propose as a solution to marginalization the reconfiguration of the “center,” the “empire.” I have some disagreements with the anarchist approach to all of this, as articulated very well, for instance, in *The Political Theory of Poststructuralist Anarchism* by my friend Todd May, but I also think there is much to learn and make common cause with in these arguments.

Anarchist theory and practice has remained vital, even if part of its vitality is the fetishization of the margin (or so I would argue, but I don't want to preempt anyone who would argue otherwise). If we communists cannot take a positive hit off of this vitality, really, what good are we?

The same question arises in the case of Badiou — and again we should simply be aghast at the idea of summing up the impact he is having under the term “harmful.”

(ix) Let us conclude these comments on the idea and possibility of a vital mix in a Badiouean vein, with a slightly cryptic nod toward ontology and mathematics.

The great Hazel Barnes (scholar and translator of the work of Jean-Paul Sartre) wrote, in an essay on the relationship of Sartre to materialism, “no objective state of the world can by itself evoke a revolution.” That captures Sartre's position very well. We might put a slight spin on this by saying that “no set of material circumstances or elements (including the materiality of consciousness, ideas, or language) can by itself evoke a revolution.”

It is not uncommon, as readers here will know, for formulations such as this to be used as a pretext for the abandonment of materialism. What is needed instead is a materialism that embraces the core concept of contingency, as represented in these formulations. This “embrace” is really a matter of a continual striving and not an accomplished fact—the “materialism” here is what we must try to do, in light of the materiality of cause and effect and of material phenomena that are not strictly bound by laws of cause and effect (language, consciousness, quantum effects), in the light of what Althusser called “the necessity of contingency.” It is hard for me to see that anything in revolutionary experience thus far runs counter to this, and the mistake instead has been to attempt to capture the “model” of any particular experience in terms of a simple arithmetic instead of the much more complex forms of mathematics that are required.

Materialism is difficult and complex and never finished—we have to do far better at getting our heads around this. On one plane of analysis, the difference

between materialism and idealism comes down to this: in the world seen from an idealist perspective, the aim is to establish once and for all the “system of the world”; seen from a materialist perspective the world will always generate new things, new phenomena, new questions.

Of course as theorists and activists we need to engage in the concrete analysis of concrete conditions. Indeed, as regards the emergence of many of the elements of what I am calling “postmodern capitalism” (but call it whatever you like, or don't call it anything, and the elements are still there), most “movement Marxists” (as opposed to theorists such as Jameson and Zizek) have done a lousy job with this concrete analysis. But there is also a pressing need to engage with highly abstract arguments such as found in Badiou's book, *The Concept of Model*, and in Marx's book on the calculus. We might reflect, further, on why Marx thought it worthwhile to undertake such a study; I predict that such reflection will lead to a deeper and more complex sense of materialism, a better feel for materialism.

There are of course many elements in the mix of the world today that are likely to be a part of the vital mix of tomorrow. But surely there are other things going on, not elements exactly because they haven't “congealed,” things that will surprise us. On another level, we do not know and cannot know the exact form that the intermotivation of these elements will take. There is work to do at particular “points” (as Badiou calls them), it's not a matter of disputing this. But there is also work to be done on openness and receptivity, if I can put it this way.

Or let me put this back into Kantian language. Kant said there are three basic questions in philosophy (I'm going to put them in collective terms, even though Kant stated them in the first person). The first two questions are “What can we know?” and “What ought we to do?” (Later, Kant added a fourth question, “What is humanity?,” and a fifth question, “What is enlightenment?”) Most “movement Marxism” has not only concentrated entirely on these first two questions, it has generally collapsed the second question into the first or simply dismissed it. But even many Kantians have not given sufficient weight to the third question, “For what

can we hope?" Perhaps it really is the "third" question, perhaps this question is not equivalent in philosophical weight to the first two. (I think it is clear that Kant meant the second question to be the centerpiece, that the ethical relation is what allows for the articulation of the other two questions—but that is a discussion for another day.) Perhaps. But neither is the "third question," that of hope, of openness to future possibility, dispensable or optional. (Kant's theory of understanding, imagination, and cognition comes back into this question under the heading of what might be called the "epistemology of hope.") Instead of dismissing or minimizing the significance of the question, we need to think more deeply about the ontology and epistemology of hope.

Then, accordingly, we need to develop practice that has fidelity to the future.

Friends, it has fallen to us to rethink communism and then to engage in the organization of politics on the basis of this rethinking. Being a Kantian and a Sartrean, of course I think this task "falls" to everyone—but we who have come through certain experiences of the previous sequence have a special role to play, I would say, even if part of that role is now to try to draw lines of demarcation that invite rather than disinvite. Our special role is not one of "caliber" but primarily of responsibility.

We have to regroup as we reconceive, and vice-versa. The word, "then," as regards organizational engagement should be taken as a logical operator rather than a temporal one. In other words, our actions should be premised upon thought and not simply the necessity to act. We have to learn that the vice-versa of conception and organization should not be used as an excuse to cancel thought, to cancel theoretical work. There has been far too much of this sort of thing in the history of the international communist movement.

Knowing when to act decisively is, as Lenin said, an art, rather than a science. Creating the organization of politics has its own scientific side, so to speak—it depends on investigations and developing roots among the masses. It is not clear that this has ever really been done on any kind of significant scale in the United States, when it comes to communism, as opposed to

economistic socialism. It is very much worth exploring the fact (as I mentioned in the third part of section 9) that it could well be that the closest we have come to "mass communist experiences" in the U.S. are certain religious-communitarian experiments. We need to get beyond the kinds of political and ideological blinders that keep us from exploring this experience.

Why is communism the one "idea" in philosophy? Put even more broadly: Why is it humanity's one "idea"? Because this idea is instantiated in every moment when the possibility of a flourishing human future is opened up. Because in absence of this idea there is no "human future" and no "social future," no future of the "truly social society," and therefore no future for humanity. For my part, I see no future of human flourishing that is not at the same time the mutual flourishing of humanity with the other creatures and even the trees, rhizomes, rivers, oceans, and mountains, of this world. I don't see how we could say a society is flourishing, or that it is communism, as long as the fantastic cruelties of the global industrial food-animal production system continue.

To put a Sartrean twist on things, communism is the defining project of humanity.

This is heavy stuff, the call of the future is a call to responsibilities that are immense and difficult, because they are infinite. We must do our work and do it well; even while this work can be a hard burden, it is also an immense privilege to do what we can to answer the call of the future.



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## *Appendix:*

### **Dear Professor Badiou: About the RCP Assault on Alain Badiou, Philosophy And (Ultimately) Communism Itself**

*By Bill Martin*

Before we say more about this RCP polemic (“Why Alain Badiou is a Rousseauist... And Why We Should Not Be”) the first thing that needs to be said is that its guiding principle is:

“Who needs this shit? Bob Avakian has the New Synthesis, and that’s the end of the matter. Either get on board with that or you’re going down the wrong road.”

The second harsh thing that needs to be said is this polemic is an act of stupidity and irresponsibility against communism itself.

It is also an act of stupidity and irresponsibility against philosophy, theory, and critical thought. And we need to understand better how an act such as this, in being such an act against philosophy, etc., is an act against communism.

None of this, absolutely none of this, has anything to do with whether the polemic (or Bob Avakian) is right and Badiou is wrong on any particular point.

Neither should we get caught up too much in taking the polemic as setting any kind of agenda for the discussion of Badiou’s work and the ways that this work might help us in reconception and regroupment. There are plenty of good commentaries on Badiou’s work out there that do not deign to only, finally, notice the work of this outstanding philosopher and “post-Maoist” of our time when it comes time to knock him down, and with no appreciation whatsoever for the openings that he has created.

It may seem insignificant, or far less significant, to discuss this polemic, or Badiou’s philosophy, much further in light of the even more recent discussions around Nepal (basically, the Nepal material coming a couple of weeks after the polemic). But there is a sense in which this is all of a piece, the piece being not BA’s

New Synthesis, and, furthermore, other things lighting up the sky, such as the Idea of Communism conference, and developments in Nepal, and, for that matter, the fact that the Bush regime was “driven out” without the central role being played by Bob Avakian (BA), the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), or World Can’t Wait (WCW), and none of these things are foregrounding the New Synthesis, either. The narrow world of the RCP is closing in upon itself even further, and there is an inability to ask why this happening; instead there is an essentially conservative, capitulatory reaction.

This polemic ought to make those of us who care about the future livid.

It’s just worse-than-worthless stuff when all you can do with contemporary philosophy is to jump out with a polemic that is motivated by no kind of actual intellectual or even political curiosity. Not all of us find Badiou’s ideas exciting, important, and even exhilarating, but some of us do (and I do). But what is more at stake is that the perspective behind this polemic is one where that would not even be a possibility, it is ruled out in advance. And that is deplorable, and it should be called out for being the complete crock of shit that it is.

As for lessons that we ought to learn from this, among those of us who are looking for the next steps in Marxism, and even the next steps in Maoism and post-Maoism, I want to take this moment to state this in a sharp and harsh form. Not everyone here is going to be convinced by my claim that we still have much to learn from Immanuel Kant. Not everyone here is going to be convinced by Badiou’s philosophy, and its sense that we still have a good deal to learn from Plato, Spinoza, and Rousseau. But for the people who simply dismiss

this idea, that we still have much to learn from philosophers who came before Marx, these people in essence are dismissing the communist project.

Avakian's *Away With All Gods!* is a fantastic display of contempt for intellectual work, an approach proudly defended in the recent excerpt of a talk by BA ("On the role of communist leadership ...") where he defends his "methodology" of self-referencing and talks about all of the books that he has read. This polemic on Badiou furthers this contempt.

I'll just put things very simply: communism is good, and nothing good can come from such an approach, whether this approach is applied by the RCP or by other know-nothing, anti-intellectual "socialists."

But I will save the larger development of these arguments for other posts. Among other things I will argue that "enough of Badiou is right" (and that we communists would be very irresponsible in not taking up these ideas), while I also have some questions for Badiou on points where I disagree with him or perhaps simply do not understand him.

One reason why I will save these arguments for other posts and other topics is that I think our main response to this polemic ought to be,

"Dear Professor Badiou, we hope that you will not think, if you even happen to see this RCP Polemic, that it represents the views of all revolutionary communists in the United States; unfortunately, however, the main trend of Maoism in the U.S. has come to this sorry state and dead end. Fortunately, there are some ideas in your philosophy that will help us understand this point of saturation and even 'disaster,' and we also are open to exploring your philosophy, and the theoretical work of others, in attempting to forge a path beyond this impasse. Thank you for your outstanding contributions."

## Rearguard and Ugly

One assumes that this polemic was put together by a writing group; I suppose it doesn't really matter, though I bristle a bit at the fact that it is put out there "anonymously," that seems a bit smarmy to me. The timing of the thing is clearly meant to be coincide with the Idea of Communism conference, where Badiou was

something of the centerpiece, though of course there were other important thinkers there as well. What an ugly thing to do, and what a rearguard sort of "contribution" to this whole scene. I have not yet heard any reports of the presentation that Raymond Lotta made in London at the time of the conference, does anyone know if what was presented was some version of this polemic? Again, very rearguard and ugly.

When I had my massive argument with the person I have previously referred to as a Leading Party Member at the end of May 2008 (as described in my first Kasama post, "Going forward from here"), I continually challenged this person to just come out and say that the history of philosophy prior to Marx is basically worthless, and that philosophy outside of the narrow MLM/BA canon is worthless. I was begging this person to come to his senses in terms of basic intellectual integrity. This polemic, unfortunately, is some kind of answer on these issues.

Certainly one could say, "they know not what they do"—or, again, to put it harshly, they don't have a bloody clue.

But BA and the remaining members of the RCP, if they weren't just sycophants to begin with (for it is very clear that the idea that "Communists are rebels" was dropped from the program some time ago), have willfully placed themselves beyond the possibility of getting a clue. I have respect for what some of these people used to be, and I still have some (sentimental perhaps) hope and wish that some of these people will break with their present, ever-deepening impasse, but perhaps those who have remained have just decided that all they know to do at this point is to go down with the ship.

As a general point, and in the context of some of the study some of us have recently undertaken on the work of Louis Althusser, we might discuss further whether the "polemical mode" is a good way to carry forward work in philosophy or in other intellectual endeavors. Ironically, Badiou defends the role of polemic, and he cites Kant in this. I recognize that sometimes it is necessary to engage in a "war of ideas" (polemos is the Greek word for "war"), and certainly I think it can be good to present certain ideas with a certain "edge."

At the very least, however, one might think that there is something wrong with the initial engagement with a major figure taking this form, starting with a typically ridiculous title of the form, “N is an x, and we shouldn’t be that.” Again, deplorable.

This polemic, however, is not only an initial engagement with Badiou, it is the first extended engagement with any major figure in the history of philosophy or contemporary philosophy in many years. This in itself is a statement on philosophy.

The term, “engagement,” is used loosely here, especially as the whole point of the polemic is to ensure that people who probably hadn’t even heard of Badiou until quite recently are inoculated against any impulse toward actual engagement with Badiou or any other major figure in philosophy.

This is also the whole point of the labeling (“Rousseauist”) in the title of the polemic—since we especially know there is nothing to be learned from any philosopher before Marx. Furthermore, how can there be an engagement, when the whole approach is “shut it down,” rather than “open it up”? Again, it is a very conservative reaction, and indeed it is also merely a “reaction.”

While I’m laying it on, let me characterize the foregoing in two further ways:

First, if you have to jack yourself up to believe that you are really the only person or group putting forward the only really new and revolutionary synthesis, then you will get into a mindset where, frankly, you wouldn’t be able to recognize something new and valuable even if it bit you on the ass. Indeed, other new things will appear merely threatening.

Second, one place where Bob Avakian is a lot like Stalin, and less like Marx, Lenin, and Mao, but also a lot like other trends of economistic Marxism, is in viewing the whole history of philosophy as one big pile of crap. Again, this is represented very well by the fact that Badiou is now being discussed with people who only recently heard of Badiou, by people and for people who wish they never had heard of Badiou. It is simply orthodoxy and economism, and we would do well, even those of us who don’t want to spend much more time discussing Bob Avakian or the RCP, understanding

how this is the case and what sorts of dynamics lead in this direction.

## Asked To Engage He Who Does Not Engage

With this polemic, we are once again being asked to engage with he who does not engage. There are two related points to be raised here, as concerns how the rest of us who are attempting to reconceive and regroup should proceed.

First, I think there is a real question of “standing” that ought to be addressed. For one thing, it is clearly the point of this polemic that it doesn’t really matter what Badiou thinks, or what he has to offer, or what questions he opens up; the real deal is that BA has laid down the new science, there for the taking. Now, whoever wrote this polemic did a little more homework than BA generally does (which isn’t saying much, and there is more to this than just a long list of books one has read), but the point is the same: Badiou is wrong because Avakian is right.

But this leads to the second point:

If Badiou is wrong, he is wrong in his many systematically developed books, and in his systematic, rigorous, and expansive written work (this is a repetitive way of making the point, but I not only want to make the point, I want to rub it in).

If BA is “right,” he is right in his mostly non-systematic, non-rigorous, self-referential talks. I used to think this was acceptable (though not preferable) up to a point, when there seemed to be a context for it, a Maoist current that was opening itself up to learning from many sources.

To the extent that was ever a reality, it was shut down, and then one finds oneself going back to works such as the *Democracy* book and others from that period, and asking why we should spend any time with them when there are other works by figures such as Sartre, Althusser, Derrida, and Badiou (and many more) that give us more than enough to do.

So, now, it seems we need to have a discussion of the ideas of Badiou. And, for that matter, especially thanks to the ideas and provocations of Badiou and Zizek, here is the possibility for breaking through

with the idea of communism! Who should get a seat at the table of these discussions? On what basis would we say anymore that BA or others from the RCP have anything to contribute? The way that they think they can just come into debates where they have made no substantive contribution and have shown no ability to learn from others (and to apply the “John Stuart Mill principle” and all of the stuff that at least looked good in those Skybreak essays) looks to everyone else to be simultaneously silly and authoritarian. Nothing good can come of this approach—and, again, communism is good.

For our part, let’s do engage with others and give them a good reason to engage with us.

## Needing to Reconceive and Regroup

Simply in recognizing that revolutionary communism needs to reconceive and regroup an advance has been made.

The RCP reached a point where, in order to continue to make a contribution, it needed to make a fundamental advance, and it was not able to do this. The main reason for this is objective, in the sense that they were working from within a paradigm that was played out. But there are some subjective factors as well, which shaped the inability to break with an exhausted paradigm. In grappling with the “communist hypothesis” we need to go further in understanding these dynamics.

My point, regarding intellectual work, is that there is a model here that has to be negated—and I frankly wish that some of the people who post at Kasama would go further in negating this model. Certainly we don’t want to shut down the enthusiasm anyone, anyone whosoever, might have for contributing to the theoretical project. At the same time, we need to be able to carry forward theoretical work on a high level, informed by contemporary developments and analyses.

I still think there is something to Engels’s formula of the most advanced “socialist” experience—under which he also included syndicalism and utopian communitarianism, philosophy, and political economy, just leaving aside the French, German, and English parts; what he called “English” was for the most part actually Scots, anyway!

This is a hard nut to crack, it’s not clear that it’s ever really been done. We need to think more about why it might be significant that BA and the RCP did pretty well, and sometimes very significantly well, with at least some aspects of the “French” and “English” parts of this work (the summing up of experience and political economy), but for the most part very poorly with the “German” (philosophical) part, and indeed worse than poorly for the most part, seeing the work of historical or contemporary philosophers as mostly something against which to erect barricades. The present barricade, and its circumstances (where the polemic against Badiou is in some sense also a polemic against the Nepali Maoists), is again representative of foolishness and irresponsibility and a merely reactive mindset, but we would be remiss if we don’t take this opportunity to learn some lessons about methodology and the role of philosophy in anything that might really be a new synthesis.

## Not a Deep Enough Break

By way of conclusion, we might spend a moment with at least one little part of the polemic, the part that sets out three possibilities for the next wave of revolutionary activity.

What are the correct and incorrect lessons to be drawn from the rich experience of this first wave of socialist revolutions? What is the framework for the new stage of communism, for going forward in this project for the emancipation of humanity? Is Marxism, communism, still valid as a science? In the most fundamental sense, the question comes down to this: can you make revolution in today’s world, a genuinely emancipating communist revolution—or is that not possible, or even desirable, anymore?

As described in *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage, A Manifesto from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA* there are three main and essential responses to this moment.

First, there are those who religiously cling to the experience and theory of the first wave of socialist revolution of the 20th century—not summing up problems and shortcomings, not moving forward, but circling the wagons.

Second, there are those who reject real scientific analysis of the contradictions of the socialist transition and distance themselves from the unprecedented breakthroughs in human emancipation represented by the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions. They look for inspiration and orientation even further back into the past—to the 18th century and the proclaimed democratic and egalitarian ideals and social models of the bourgeois epoch and to theorists like Rousseau, Kant, and Jefferson. In some cases, they discard the very term communism; in other cases, they affix the label “communism” to a political project that situates itself firmly within the bounds of bourgeois-democratic principles.

Third, there is what Bob Avakian has been doing. He is not only the leader of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, which has its sights set on the revolutionary seizure of power and the radical transformation of society, but is also a visionary theorist. Since the defeat of the Chinese revolution in 1976, he has been applying himself to the challenges of making revolution in today’s world, acting on the understanding that communist revolution is the only way out of the madness and horror that is social existence on this planet. (pp.2-3)

Let’s take this in the order first, third, and second; in other words, first the dogmatists, then BA, then Badiou.

The problem is not really that there are a lot of people out there simply clinging tenaciously to the Soviet and Chinese experiences (or Cuban, Algerian, etc., for that matter). The way this first category should have been framed is that there are many socialists who sum up the first wave of proletarian revolutions as showing us that it is a mistake to try to break with an economist perspective, and that what we need instead is a better worked-out version of such a perspective.

I’ll deal with these questions at length in a discussion of economism, but let us say that we know this perspective well in the interventions here at the Kasama site, most eloquently developed by Carl Davidson and most systematically developed in the work that Carl repeatedly recommends, that of David Schweickart. I know Prof. Schweickart fairly well, he is not a dogmatist, in fact he is a very sophisticated thinker—

and I want to add that he is, in my experience, a kind and caring person. I could see some of his economic models as playing a helpful role in a socialist society, but, again, I will take that up at length in my post on economism. But the point is that Prof. Schweickart is an avowed utilitarian, he affirms many John Stuart Mill principles.

Apart from discussing these issues more directly, the main point is that BA’s New Synthesis doesn’t really break with it.

In terms of continuity and discontinuity, the NS is more continuous with the experiences of the first wave (as is said directly in the polemic: “principally continuity”), and it doesn’t give us enough that is either new or a synthesis. Again, I would say that BA was up against an objective arc or trajectory and its exhaustion, and up against certain subjective factors, including a certain anti-intellectualism and intellectual laziness hiding behind a shallow critique of “academic niceties.”

If BA really had a new synthesis, he ought to be able to enter into fruitful conversation with others who are also attempting to forge ahead, but clearly he is not able to do this. Instead, he clings tenaciously to what he knows or thinks he knows, and after awhile it is all so swirled up in a sea of self-references that no one ought to consider what is coming out of the process a “theoretical project,” quite apart from academic niceties.

More to the point—because I do think Avakian is a smart guy, that’s not what’s at issue—is a certain habit of mind, reinforced over many years of experience in the RCP, and many decades of experience in the ICM, that prides itself on narrowness in the name of materialism. Not to get all psychoanalytic or even new-agey here, but there is a pathology to grabbing too hard, and there is a need, for the sake of both materialism and emancipatory projects, to let go a bit.

It has been pointed out to me by Kasama Project people who were closer to the RCP than I was that this mindset is also linked to failure, and that it represents a kind of capitulation:

“If we can’t do anything else, we must at least promote the work and leadership of Bob Avakian well.”

## Is Our Needed Synthesis a Philosophy or a Science?

Once again let us underline two questions about science, or perhaps three.

What would Marxism be as a “science,” especially given how much science has been done since the time of Marx? (Incidentally, it is important that, among the figures mentioned in the polemic that Badiou is “going back to,” we do not find Georg Cantor; perhaps this will be found in a subsequent installment of the polemic, but surely this would complicate simply summing up Badiou as a “Rousseauist”?)

What is “science,” exactly, and does it give us everything, in every way, that we need for revolutionary communist theory and practice? For example, are there real ethical questions, and is there a science or a purely scientific mode of inquiry that gives us the answers to such questions? What about questions of art? Is art a substantive part of the human experience and possibilities for liberation and flourishing? Can questions of art and aesthetics be sorted out in a purely “scientific” way?

Lastly (among these questions), and the only point in having to say this once again is that the RCP keeps putting it forward as if they are really saying something, you don’t get to science, systematicity, rigor, or vision by declaration or fiat. There have been many insights over the years from Bob Avakian and the RCP, and some good historical analysis, some of it even path-breaking, and some good work in political economy; I don’t see the point in minimizing these things, though they meant one thing in the context of an organization and activism that had some vibrancy to it, and they mean another thing in the context of an organization and leadership that was not able to make the necessary transition to a new level of theoretical and practical activity.

Does anyone doubt that the reason for “science and vision by declaration” is that this whole “new synthesis” hasn’t really come together?

Furthermore, and perhaps again to wax a bit psychoanalytic (superficially so, I realize), isn’t this the real motivation for tearing Badiou down, that BA doesn’t really have the new synthesis, combined with an abid-

ing faith on the part of BA and those who remain in the RCP that only BA could have it.

Thus this dismal, grind-it-out-to-the-verdict, proof-texting and cherry-picking polemic against Badiou. This should make us angry, livid even, but it is also just sad.

However, even while we are correctly expressing anger at this stupid irresponsibility, let us underline one methodological point that needs much more discussion, and again it has to do with philosophy.

In the final analysis, is our Marxism, or better our revolutionary communism, our needed new synthesis (or even simply our new patchwork or “crazy quilt” of analyses that speaks to the way the world is today) that is going to help us radically change the world, a philosophy or a science?

We need science, we need scientific work and many avenues of scientific investigation (in other words, we need not only science, we need the many different sciences, plural)—does anyone really dispute that? But do we need art (and, again, the many different fields of artistic endeavor, and even the many fields of art theory and criticism)? Do we need love? Do we need politics, especially where the emergence of a true event in politics is something in the manner of an intervention, one that is essentially (if also in some sense not “absolutely”) underdetermined?

We could have a very fruitful debate around whether these are the only categories where events are possible, and so on, though of course we won’t have any such discussion in the case where our only interest in Badiou’s philosophy is to shut it down. Badiou’s work does a great deal more to help us with these issues than does chanting the mantra of “science” with very little (if any) real science to go with it.

The larger point is that the core of a truly new synthesis needs to be philosophy, not “science,” and, if you do it the other way around, you will not only be anti-philosophical and dismissive of the contributions of philosophy and philosophers (including, ultimately, the philosophical contributions of Marx, Lenin, and Mao — because, once you have the new science, you can kick away the old science), you will not understand the contributions of science in the proper context, either.



## Bad Methodology

In the paragraph that goes more directly to Badiou, we see the usual use of the term “like.” This betokens very bad methodology. “Theorists like Rousseau, Kant, and Jefferson,” as with other non-helpful groupings such as “postmodern philosophers like Derrida” (or is it like “the Derridas”?), is just a way of not having to do some philosophical work and grapple with ideas.

Of course, it all works fine if we’ve already got the assurance that no thinkers before Marx have anything to teach us, and especially no philosophers since Marx have anything to teach us if they are outside of the narrow MLM/BA canon.

Anyone who has read Badiou knows that he hasn’t distanced himself from the Bolshevik Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, the Cultural Revolution, or Lenin or Mao.

Indeed, some of his ideas are very helpful for understanding what it might mean to say that these contributions are “saturated” and that it is time for a new synthesis, without setting aside a basic fidelity to these experiences. There is still a difference between what can be carried forward in our present efforts, and that which was not revolutionary to begin with.

As for analyzing the experience of the first wave, sure, I have some questions for Badiou’s particular claims and his broader framework, but there is a lot to be learned from it, too—just as, for instance, there is a lot to be learned from Sartre’s analysis of the Stalin period in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Vol. 2, and in the remarks on “survivals” in Althusser’s *For Marx and Reading Capital*. And there is a lot to be learned on this point from Mao’s *Critique of Soviet Economics* and Avakian’s *Conquer the World*?

But isn’t the point that we need all the help we can get in understanding the horrible mess that socialism became under Stalin, and that people of good will should come together on this work? We need to understand better why it is significant that this polemic contains not the least bit of good will.

The approach of this polemic instead reminds me of those so-called “Christians” who are mostly concerned with identifying the people who are going to hell, and I can’t help but recall BA’s bizarre piece on how “most

of the time, even communists aren’t communists.” He didn’t mention himself in that regard, and the implication is that, all alone in this world Bob Avakian is the one communist who is a communist all the time, and he is the thread by which communism hangs in our time. It should go without saying that, if you begin with such a standard, no one else is going to measure up. But then you find yourself saying “we” shouldn’t be “Rousseauists” to people for whom the question means nothing, because it is ruled out in advance that there might be some reason to read Rousseau today. Nothing good can come from this.

It’s silly, anyway, to mainly identify Badiou with Rousseau—for the crime of thinking we might still learn a thing or two from Rousseau (and as if Marx didn’t)—when he is most often identified with Plato and the fulfillment of a certain “dream” of Plato by Cantor and the development of set theory and the idea of infinity.

How Badiou’s view that “mathematics is ontology” could be materialist or Marxist is an interesting question. It’s a question that I’m still trying to understand myself—and when I encounter some of these very smart people who are working in a concentrated way in Badiou’s philosophy, or, for that matter who have worked in set theory and mathematics more generally, I ask for their help in getting some insight into this question.

One important point is that W. V. Quine (no Marxist, for sure!) argued that sets have to be accepted into ontology because sets are necessary for doing scientific work. However, one thing that I would say is materialist about what Badiou is doing here (and Quine for that matter) is that his proposals open many questions, whereas Avakian’s half-baked, fragmentary, positivist, “truth is correspondence with reality” line not only shuts down questions, that is its aim.

We can argue with Badiou’s ideas, that’s part of what makes them materialist. There’s no arguing with BA’s crude notion of truth, with which he is “intoxicated” (as he put it), that’s what makes his theoretical enterprise “idealist,” and not in any good way. There is nowhere to go from there, and the people who are persisting in this line are indeed going nowhere.

## Is Badiou a “Marxist”?

Well, members of L’Organisation Politique, of which Badiou is a leader, are referred to as “Modern Marxists.” It’s true that Badiou’s Marxism might be called one of “pure politics,” as Slavoj Žižek puts it in *The Parallax View*. Badiou’s rejection of economism goes so far as to reject the whole language of “interests,” a language that motivates most of what calls itself Marxism, including that of Bob Avakian. But wouldn’t we want to engage with this argument in a non-sectarian way, especially if we are interested in a non-economistic Marxism?

Is Badiou a “Maoist” or “post-Maoist”?

Bruno Bosteels makes a convincing case for the latter in his article, “Post-Maoism: Badiou and Politics.” Certainly Badiou continues to refer to various points in his philosophy that he takes to be “profoundly Maoist,” and his philosophy gives us a philosophical basis for both retaining a fidelity to Mao and the experience of Maoism and for recognizing that “it is absolutely necessary to invent a new political discipline.” This last is from the conclusion to an interview with Tzuchien Tho, conducted for the 2007 publication of *The Concept of Model*, in English translation, almost forty years after its original publication in French; the entire interview is very good, but of particular significance to our present concerns is this concluding section, where Badiou goes from discussing mathematics as ontology to answering the question, “Is there a Maoist theme there?” Badiou responds, “Yes, Maoist in a very deep sense.”

But again, the point is not simply whether we agree or not at every point with how Badiou develops these themes; there are many, Maoist or otherwise, who would take issue with the analysis that follows Badiou’s affirmation of a very deep Maoist theme. However, the real question is this: beyond Marxism or Leninism or Maoism, Badiou is working toward a renewal of the communist hypothesis. If we care about communism, we need to engage productively and critically with this work. Why would we not want to do this?

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