

## High School

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so we became the Continentals. Now we'd also been rehearsing at the rec center at Live Oak, because they had a piano in there. The director of the rec center heard us and said, "Hey, I like your sound, would you guys be willing to play for this dance we're having?" We answered, "Yeah, are you gonna pay us?" And he said, "Well, we have a tight budget, but I could pay you something." So then we all got together and said, "How about a hundred bucks?" He came back with, "How about 25?" We looked at each other and said, "Okay." 'Cause any money was good then.

We rehearsed a lot for this, and we came there that night ready to do this Heartbeats' song, "You're a Thousand Miles Away," and some other tunes. As we were about to go in the rec center, this friend of Sam's who had been playing basketball was coming over to get a drink of water. And he said, "Sam, what are you doing here?" Sam said, "We're gonna sing for this dance." "You can't sing, Sam." "Yeah I can, man." So before we could go in to perform for the dance, we had to have a sing-off between Sam and his friend—they both did a Spaniels song, and after a couple of verses the other guy threw in the towel, because Sam could really sing.

Another time my younger sister got us a gig

performing at their ninth-grade dance. The other guys in the group said, "Okay man, this is your sister's thing," so they let me sing lead on one song—I think it was called "Oh Happy Day." And that was a lot of fun.

Some of the white parents just couldn't relate to this music at all. And with some there was a whole racist element in it, because it was the influence of Black culture working its way "into the mainstream." But a lot of the white youth were taking it up and were really into it, as exemplified by my older sister's junior high school class voting "WPLJ"\* as their favorite song. I think Richard Pryor made this point in one of his routines—when it's just Black people doing something, then maybe they can contain it, but when it starts spilling over among the white youth, then "Oh dear, everything's getting out of control." So there was that sort of shit, and there was a general thing among the racist and backward white kids, where listening to this music and getting into this culture was part of a whole package of "things you didn't do." They would give you shit for that, but it was just part of a whole package of everything they were down on,

\*Editor's Note: This stands for "White Port and Lemon Juice."

From Chapter Twenty-seven

## Perseverance, and Inspiration

### Disappointment, Danger, and Going Forward

Over the years and now decades, I've experienced many disappointments. Beyond personal hardships and losses, there have been real, and even profound, losses in terms of the struggle for a whole different world and better future for humanity. There have been not only twists and turns but gigantic setbacks, like the loss of China as a socialist country and base area for the world revolution. This is something that I myself, our Party, and communists throughout the world have had to confront.

Of course, there are not only difficulties but also great dangers. The people who so viciously rule the world oppress and exploit people in the most ruthless and murderous way. These are not just words that get thrown around; those are words that hardly capture the reality of the suffering that people are put through—totally unnecessarily—under the domination of this system and the way it twists and distorts the relations among people and turns people into instruments either to be used for the amassing of wealth on the part of a relative handful, or else just to be thrown onto the scrap heap like so much useless material. And there is the crushing of human potential and spirit that goes along with that. None of that has lessened. The need to do away with all that—and, from a strategic point, the basis that exists to do away with all that—hasn't been eliminated, or even lessened, despite these setbacks and even real defeats.

When I reflect on all this, I think of a conversation I had with a friend when I was a teenager. He was a little older than me, and he was going to medical school. One day I asked him what he wanted to do when he got out of medical school, what kind of medicine he was going to practice. He answered that he wasn't going to practice a particular kind of medicine, he was going to go into cancer research because he wanted to help find a cure for cancer—he believed that was not only very important but was also possible, and he wanted to make whatever contribution he could to that.

It has been many decades since that time, and while some advances have been made in treating cancer, it's still a scourge. It hasn't yet been eliminated. A cure, to put it that way, hasn't been found. But that person has been working in this field all these years, and I would never say that his efforts have been wasted just because cancer is still here. The need to eliminate cancer, or find a cure for it, if you will, is as great as ever. And, if you take a scientific approach to disease, you know that it is within the realm of possibility to find the means to eliminate this scourge on humanity and that it is worth persevering in that effort.

and all the things they'd give you shit for.

Besides singing doo-wop, I was in the glee club in school. When I was a senior, the glee club teacher talked me and three other guys—two of us Black, two of us white—into doing a barber-shop quartet song for the talent show. And we did it—with our own little touch to it. Another time, when I was sixteen or seventeen, I went to a Giants baseball game. Right before the game starts they always have the national anthem, and I was still somewhat patriotic—I wasn't super-patriotic, but I still thought this was a good country overall, even though I was very angry about discrimination and segregation and racism and all that. So we all stood up for the anthem and, for whatever reason, I started singing along. The song finished and this woman in front of me turned around and said, "You know, you have a beautiful voice." I've often thought back on the irony of that.

But it wasn't very long before I quit singing that. Later, when I would go to ball games and they would play the national anthem, I would stand up and sing, as loudly as I could, a version that someone I knew had made up: "Oh, oh Un-cle Sam, get out of Vietnam. Get out, get out, get out of Vietnam..."

oppression and exploitation and all the unnecessary suffering and destruction that goes along with them. I have learned that more and more deeply through all the twists and turns and even the great setbacks, as well as the great achievements, of the communist revolution so far, in what are really still its early stages historically.

### Being Sustained

And there *have* been great achievements, in what is actually the very brief and beginning experience of socialism and the advance toward communism. Whenever the masses in any part of the world rise up, even spontaneously, and especially when they do so with communist leadership, this is a source of tremendous inspiration and shows once again the potential for this whole revolutionary struggle and transformation of society and the world. This is a very powerful and sustaining thing when combined with an increasingly deepened grasp and application of the scientific outlook and method of communism.

As I spoke to earlier, since being forced into exile more than two decades ago, I have continued to give ideological and political leadership and direction to the RCP. I have studied and written extensively on profound problems and challenges confronting communists throughout the world in regrouping and carrying forward the revolutionary struggle in the face of truly devastating losses that have been experienced, above all the revisionist coup and capitalist restoration in China. I have continued to dig into the experience of the proletarian revolution and of the socialist societies that were brought into being in the twentieth century, in the Soviet Union and China, seeking to draw crucial lessons from both the positive but also the negative aspects of all this, and focusing in particular on the questions: How can the masses of people truly become the masters of society and of the state while at the same time advancing toward the ultimate abolition of the state, together with the abolition of all exploitative and oppressive divisions and social inequalities? And what is the relationship between the masses of people and revolutionary leadership in that process?

I have also focused attention on the monumental and unprecedented transformations that are going on throughout the world today and their implications for the revolutionary struggle—in particular the massive uprooting and migration of millions of peasants from the countryside to the urban areas each year throughout the Third World, with the new situation emerging where half of the world's population now lives in urban areas, with huge numbers of them in swelling shantytowns amidst tremendous poverty. I have continued to grapple with social, political and

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# THREE ALTERNATIVE WORLDS

This selection appears in the book *Bob Avakian: Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy*, published by Insight Press.

As the world exists today and as people seek to change it, and particularly in terms of the socialist transformation of society, as I see it there are basically three alternatives that are possible. One is the world as it is. Enough said about that. *[laughter]*

The second one is in a certain sense, almost literally and mechanically, turning the world upside down. In other words, people who are now exploited will no longer be exploited in the same way, people who now rule this society will be prevented from ruling or influencing society in a significant way. The basic economic structure of society will change, some of the social relations will change, and some of the forms of political rule will change, and some of the forms of culture and ideology will change, but fundamentally the masses of people will not be increasingly and in one leap after another drawn into the process of really transforming society. This is really a vision of a revisionist society. If you think back to the days of the Soviet Union, when it had become a revisionist society, capitalist and imperialist in essence, but still socialist in name, when they would be chided for their alleged or real violations of people's rights, they would often answer "Who are you in the West to be talking about the violation of human rights—look at all the people in your society who are unemployed, what more basic human right is there than to have a job?"

Well, did they have a point? Yes, up to a point. But fundamentally what they were putting forward, the vision of society that they were projecting, was a social welfare kind of society in which fundamentally the role of the masses of people is no different than it is under the classical form of capitalism. The answer about the rights of the people cannot be reduced to the right to have a job and earn an income, as basic as that is. There is the question of are we really going to transform society so that in every respect, not only economically but socially, politically, ideologically, and culturally, it really is superior to capitalist society. A society that not only meets the needs of the masses of people, but really is characterized increasingly by the conscious expression and initiative of the masses of people.

This is a more fundamental transformation than simply a kind of social welfare, socialist in name but really capitalist in essence society, where the role of the masses of people is still largely reduced to being producers of wealth, but not people who thrash out all the larger questions of affairs of state, the direction of society, culture, philosophy, science, the arts, and so on. The revisionist model is a narrow, economist view of socialism. It reduces the people, in their activity, to simply the economic sphere of society, and in a limited way at that—simply their social welfare with regard to the economy. It doesn't even think about transforming the world outlook of the people as they in turn change the world around them.

And you cannot have a new society and a new world with the same outlook that people are indoctrinated and inculcated with in this society. You cannot have a real revolutionary transformation of society and abolition of unequal social as well as economic relations and political relations if people still approach the world in the way in which they're conditioned and limited and constrained to approach it now. How can the masses of people really take up the task of consciously changing the world if their outlook and their approach to the world remains what it is under this system? It's impossible, and this situation will simply reproduce the great inequalities in every sphere of society that I've been talking about.

The third alternative is a real radical rupture. Marx and Engels said in the *Communist Manifesto* that the communist revolution represents a radical rupture with traditional property relations and with traditional ideas. And the one is not possible without the other. They are mutually reinforcing, one way or the other.

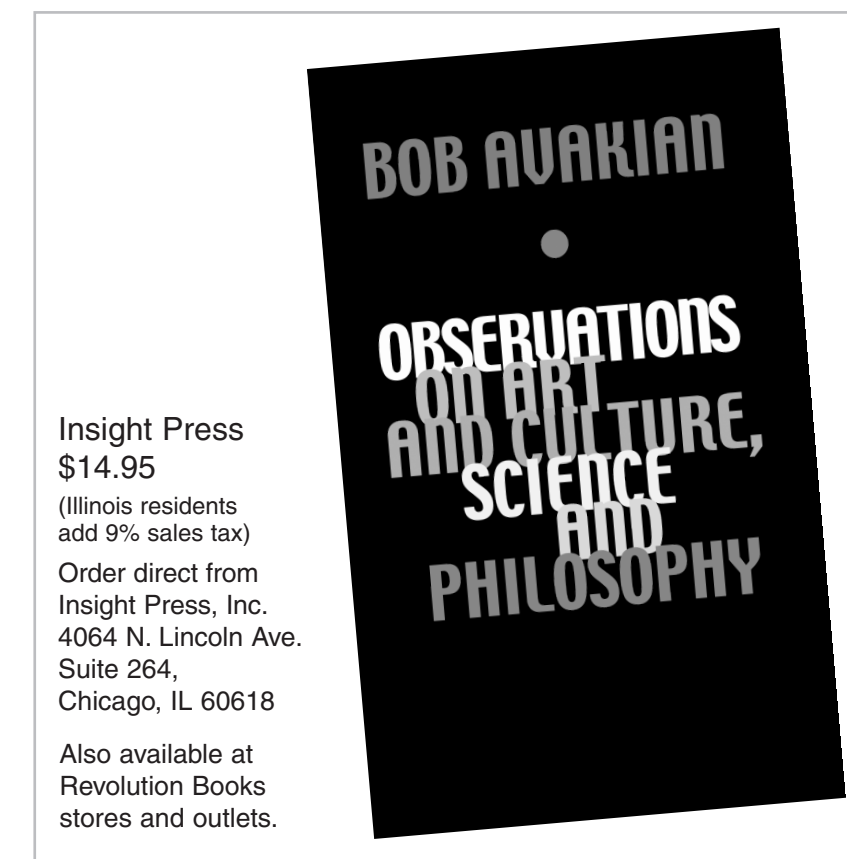
If you have a society in which the fundamental role of women is to be breeders of children, how can you have a society in which there is equality between men and women? You cannot. And if you don't attack and uproot the traditions, the morals, and so on, that reinforce that role, how can you transform the relations between men and women and abolish the deep-seated inequalities that are bound up with the whole division of society into oppressors and oppressed, exploiters and exploited? You cannot.

So the third alternative is a real radical rupture in every sphere, a radically different synthesis, to put it that way. Or to put it another way, it's a society and a world that the great majority of people would actually want to live in. One in which not only do they not have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, or if they get sick whether they're going to be told that they can't have health care because they can't pay for it, as important as that is; but one in which they are actually taking up, wrangling with, and increasingly making their own province all the different spheres of society.

Achieving that kind of a society, and that kind of a world, is a very profound challenge. It's much more profound than simply changing a few forms of ownership of the economy and making sure that, on that basis, people's social welfare is taken care of, but you still have people who are taking care of that *for* the masses of people; and all the spheres of science, the arts, philosophy and all the rest are basically the province of a few. And the political decision-making process remains the province of a few.

To really leap beyond that is a tremendous and world-historic struggle that we've been embarked on since the Russian revolution (not counting the very short-lived and limited experience of the Paris Commune)—and in which we reached the high point with the Chinese revolution and in particular the Cultural Revolution—but from which we've been thrown back temporarily.

So we need to make a further leap on the basis of summing up very deeply all that experience. There are some very real and vexing problems that we have to confront and advance through in order to draw from the best of the past, but go further and do even better in the future.



Now I want to say a few things in this context about totalitarianism. Just as an aside here, I find it very interesting that you can read innumerable books delving deeply into the psyche of Stalin or Lenin or Mao—"What went on in the deranged minds of these people *[laughter]* that led them to think they could remake the world in their maddened image *[laughter]* and led them, in the name of some greater moral good, to bring great catastrophe on the humanity that they were affecting?" I don't know how many books I've seen like that. I have never yet seen—maybe there are some, but I have never seen—a study of the deranged psyche of Thomas Jefferson *[laughter]* or George Washington: "How is it that a person could come to believe in their own mind *[laughter]* that they were benefiting not only humanity in general, but other human beings whom they owned? *[laughter]* What depth of psychological derangement must be involved in that? *[laughter]* What is more totalitarian than actually owning other human beings?"

Or what about the study of the depths of the depraved minds of Lyndon Johnson or Ronald Reagan *[laughter]*, who murdered millions of people, including vast numbers of children? "What must have gone wrong, somewhere in their childhood or somewhere else in their lives? *[laughter]* What demented ideas must they somehow have internalized that led them to believe that in the name of the shining city on the hill, or whatever *[laughter]*, they had the right and the obligation to slaughter thousands and millions of innocent people?"

I have never seen those studies. Certainly I haven't read about them in the *New York Times Book Review* section. *[laughter]*

Still, there are some real questions that are raised about totalitarianism by the ideologues and the "intellectual camp followers" of the imperialists that do need to be taken on. In particular, they make the charge that in a society which they call totalitarian, but which is in reality the dictatorship of the proletariat, there is first of all an official ideology that everyone has to profess belief in, in order to get along in that society. And there is an official politics that everyone has to be involved in, in order to get along in that society and not get in trouble. Well, what about this?

Fundamentally, this is a distortion of what has gone on in socialist societies: why these revolutions were necessary in the first place and what they were seeking to accomplish and to overcome, and how they were going about doing that. The reality is that, for the great masses of people in capitalist (and certainly in feudal) society, they are barred from really being involved in any significant way in official politics and the politics that actually affect the affairs of state and the direction of society. And they are indoctrinated with an outlook and methodology and ideology that prevents them—discourages them and actively obstructs them—from really understanding the world as it is and changing it consciously. And that is what socialist revolutions seek to change, as well as bringing about fundamental changes in the economy and the social relations.

But what about this question of official ideology that everyone has to profess? Well, I think we have more to sum up about that from the history of socialist society and the dictatorship of the proletariat so far.

With regard to the question of the party, I think two things are definitely true. One, you need a vanguard party to lead this revolution and to lead the new state. Two, that party has to have an ideology that unifies it, an ideology that correctly reflects and enables people to consciously change reality, which is communist ideology.

But, more broadly, should everyone in society have to profess this ideology in order to get along? No. Those who are won over to this ideology should proclaim it and struggle for it. Those who are not convinced of it should say so. Those who disagree with it should say that. And there should be struggle. Something has to lead—the correct ideology that really enables people to get at the truth, and to do something with it in their interests, has to lead; but that doesn't mean everyone should have to profess it, in my opinion. And this is just my opinion. But it's worth digging into this a bit, it's worth exploring and wrangling with the question. □