

Introduction

A Landmark Work of Heightened Relevance

By Raymond Lotta

This new printing of *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* is a welcome event. Bob Avakian's landmark text will now reach a much wider audience in India and elsewhere. And it fills a great need in the world.

Humanity faces extreme and in many ways unprecedented problems. There are the vast oceans of poverty and chasms of inequality...the cruel and often murderous enforcement of traditional gender and sexual relations and the pervasive subjugation, degradation, and violence visited upon women, one-half of humanity...the brutal and "endless" neocolonial wars and occupations...and the rapidly accelerating environmental crisis that has the real potential, if not decisively acted on, of undermining the ecological and life-support systems of the planet. The world cries out for fundamental revolutionary change.

Yet almost every oppositional force (outside of reactionary Islamic and other fundamentalisms) accepts the current oppressive framework and the argument that we can *not*, in fact, do better than democracy. That anything else leads to horror; and that within the tenets and precepts of democratic theory itself lies the path to a better world.

Even among many who identify with communism, there is a stubborn clinging to the tenets of democracy of the bourgeois era as a necessary component of communism. Indeed, some have jettisoned much if not all of Marxism and retreated to the ideals, theorists, and horizons of democracy of the 18th century as the framework for social change.

In this context, the re-publication of *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* is exceedingly important and timely. Bob Avakian tears apart the conventional wisdom of democracy, showing how and why this is extremely confining; *and* he provides an emancipatory vision in which the assumptions of democracy are transcended.

The stakes are high. Because the horrors of the world are inextricably bound up with capitalism-imperialism, with *its* global economics based on exploitation and oppression, with *its* state power and politics that enforce and reinforce all of this, and with *its* ideology that legitimizes and rationalizes the system that is responsible for all the unnecessary misery and suffering in this world. Put differently, the issues addressed in this book have everything to do with whether the world stays the way it is...or whether humanity will transform it through communist revolution that opens up whole new vistas of freedom.

Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That? is powerfully of this moment.

About This Book and Bob Avakian's Method

This work is a detailed, systematic, and wide-ranging exploration of the roots of democracy in ancient Greece and Rome that moves through the rise and consolidation of "liberal democratic" capitalism. Avakian shows that democracy is a historically limited and socially conditioned form of class rule. He treats the particular incarnations of democracy in the United States of America (U.S.),

as well as the illusions of democracy and how they reinforce the oppressive status quo. He discusses imperialism, democracy, and dictatorship; the relationship between the relative political stability of the Western imperialist countries and the subordination of the countries of the Third World to these citadels; and the reality that the so-called “internal freedoms” of the imperialist countries rest on global exploitation and colonial and neocolonial plunder. And throughout this work, Avakian applies and upholds a powerful internationalist stand. He examines what he calls “bourgeois socialism” (pseudo-socialism that remains within the framework of bourgeois property relations and values) and democracy.

Avakian concludes the work with discussion of the particular role and content of democracy in genuine socialist revolution. He analyzes the nature of the socialist transition to communism and approaches it, above all, as a worldwide process towards a communist world. And he takes up how communist revolution – the revolution to overcome all forms of exploitation and oppression, and the very division of human society into classes, and to create a world community of humanity – moves beyond democracy to a higher form of social organization and social consciousness.

Throughout his excavation of democracy, Avakian takes on major theorists of democracy, such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Paine, John Stuart Mill, and the classic and standard arguments for democracy. He also fixes his gaze on 20th century apologists for imperialism and Western liberal democracy, notably Hannah Arendt, the prominent anticommunist theorist of “totalitarianism.” The core assumptions and arguments of these thinkers are rigorously deconstructed and radically demolished.

Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That? begins with the declaration: “In the world today, the most horrendous crimes are committed in the name of democracy.” Almost thirty years on, it illuminates the underpinnings of Abu Ghraib, indefinite detention, the predator drone, torture as “emergency measure” in India and elsewhere, and the mass incarceration of African-American and Latino youth in the U.S.

Democracy: we must do better.

As an advocate of Bob Avakian’s new synthesis of communism and as someone who bases his theoretical work on this new synthesis, I want to share with the reader some of the significance and special qualities of Avakian’s theoretical work and of his method and approach, especially as exemplified by this work.

To begin with, *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* is the most comprehensive Marxist treatment of democracy. But it is not a mere restatement or recovery of foundational principles; it is a creative, scientific deepening of understanding that enlarges and enriches Marxism.

Avakian has provided people with the conceptual tools to make scientific sense of the world of “liberal democracy”: its foundations in exploitation, its role in maintaining class dictatorship, and how democracy conditions how people think about society and the world.

There is the testing of ideas and theory against reality, and an insistent and persistent probing of the deep structure and dynamics of reality – whether we’re speaking of the American Revolution or of the Soviet Union in the period of collectivization and, later, going into World War 2.

Avakian works to demarcate between communism as a living, critical, and revolutionary science serving the emancipation of humanity, and other programs and outlooks that cannot. There is, at the

same time, an openness to go deeply into other views and currents of thought, both to see what might be learned and also to reveal the epistemological frameworks and class outlooks guiding these theories (the discussion of John Stuart Mill in this work is a good example).

There is also here, and this is a hallmark of the new synthesis, a scientific spirit of interrogating the experience and previous understanding of communist revolution. Not standing pat or falling into complacency. Marxism, Avakian emphasizes (invoking a phrase from Mao) is a “wrangling-ism.”

And not least: as a thinker and visionary leader of a vanguard communist party that is preparing the ground for revolution, right within the country that today remains the world’s most powerful imperialist power – and doing so with the aim not just of lifting the burden of exploitation and oppression from masses of people in the USA itself but, above all, contributing in as great a way as possible to the process of revolution and the advance to communism throughout the world – Avakian combines a profound grasp of the dialectical materialist outlook and method, as well as the practical realities of revolution, its very real difficulties as well as its actual possibilities, and a scientifically-grounded and sweeping sense of imagination. This is tremendously in evidence in the concluding chapter of this work, where he scientifically and poetically envisions (and, yes, imagines) some features of future communist society.¹

Avakian compels the reader to think in new ways about the world. He indicates new horizons for communist theory. He puts before people new challenges, questions, and contradictions. This is about understanding how the world really is and how the world can actually be radically transformed.

Some Background to the Text

Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That? was first published in 1986. Avakian wrote this text against an international backdrop of intensifying rivalry between the U.S.-led imperialist and Soviet-led social-imperialist blocs. The U.S. ruling class under Reagan had been ramping up its ideological offensive around “Western democracy” as the “bulwark” against Soviet “totalitarianism.” This was also a time when various “socialist” theorists seeking to “reinterpret” Marxism as a “radical democratic discourse,” and to turn the socialist project into the linear extension of democracy, were gaining some traction under the banner of a “crisis of Marxism.”

In his 2005 memoir *From Ike to Mao and Beyond*, Avakian spoke to the purpose and significance of this book. Some of his reflections are a useful point of departure:

[B]ecause it is such a big question in the U.S. but also more broadly in the world as a whole, I focused on the question of democracy. I wrote a book with the deliberately provocative title, *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?*, which put democracy in its historical context and analyzed the actual content of different kinds of democracy throughout history. I went back to ancient Greek and Roman societies, which were democracies for a small sliver of society but were founded on the enslavement and exploitation of the majority of people in those societies, and I took that up to the present and showed how the “great democracy” of the U.S. is not some classless, pure democracy, but is a system of rule, and of democracy, that is also based on the exploitation and oppression of masses of people, not only in the U.S. but throughout the world. In other words, this is a democracy that is founded on and serves the capitalist and imperialist system and the ruling class that presides over and benefits from that system.

I took on a lot of the popular misconceptions and illusions about democracy and showed how, in fact, the vaunted “American democracy” has a definite social and class content – it is *bourgeois* democracy, and in fact a form of bourgeois dictatorship, an oppressive system of rule in the interests of the bourgeois ruling class and the capitalist system of exploitation. *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* showed that, in order to put an end to all systems and relations of oppression and exploitation, it is necessary to transcend all states – in other words, all dictatorships – and eventually get to a classless society where we would no longer need, and would have transcended, the institutions and formal structures of any kind of democracy, and where the people themselves would be able to handle their affairs collectively without the need for one part of society to exercise democracy in its ranks while it exercised dictatorship over the rest of society.²

Now conventional wisdom holds that democracy and dictatorship are the complete opposite of each other: where there is democracy, there is not dictatorship; where there is dictatorship, there is no democracy. Avakian reveals from various angles that democracy is a form of dictatorship.

The universal proclamations of justice, democracy, and equality are shown to mask and rationalize profound inequality in a capitalist system of production relations, founded on the separation of the mass of producers from the means of production...and in the case of the U.S., outright chattel slavery. At the same time, Avakian demonstrates that the recurrent idealization of bourgeois society as a society composed of atomized individuals interacting with each other as self-determining units whose individual sovereignty is to be protected by the state – this idealization has a real economic-social foundation. It is a representation of society that corresponds to the world of commodity production and commodity exchange, with the right to property, bourgeois property, standing as the foundational and core right, and the labor power of masses of proletarians itself reduced to a commodity, to be sold to and exploited by capital.

Clarity About Democracy and the High Stakes

The argumentation of *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* takes on heightened relevance today, where the intellectual-political landscape is dotted with widely heralded, ostensibly “radical” thinkers like Michael Hardt (co-author of *Empire*) who look to Thomas Jefferson – the unapologetic slave-owner and defender and architect of the expansion of slavery – for inspiration.³ Or the figure of the French philosopher Alain Badiou: finding in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau a framework or baseline for a politics governed by an “egalitarian norm.”⁴

Jefferson is a target of searing and trenchant analysis. Among other points in this extensive discussion, Avakian tears apart and gets at the class-based reality of Jefferson's notion of the right of revolution against tyranny, an element of Jeffersonianism that not only Hardt but also “radical” cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek finds occasion to celebrate.⁵

Avakian also drills down into Rousseau's vision and political philosophy – what is claimed by many of Rousseau's current-day adherents to be a prototype of a modern politics of “direct democracy.” Avakian reveals that this social model is not only locked into the idealized world of petty commodity producers but also dripping with patriarchy and patriotism.

Badiou, it should be noted, is emblematic of those who at one time considered themselves Maoist supporters of communism but who in the face of new challenges following the defeat of socialism

in China in 1976 have retreated to *before* Marx and scientific socialism-communism. Theirs has been a project of formulating an “idea” of communism whose politics operates within a universe of democratic-egalitarian ideals and which, particularly in Badiou’s case, rests on the conclusion that “the age of revolutions” is over.⁶

In South Asia, similar theoretical-political trends have expressed themselves, though in somewhat different circumstances and with particular forms.

There is Baburam Bhattarai, a top leader of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), who in the early 2000s began arguing for “multi-party democracy” and elections as the way to legitimize any socialist society and vanguard leadership. But such multi-party democracy has in fact proven to be a fine and effective vehicle for the domination by the bourgeoisie and other reactionary classes. On the basis of this kind of “rethinking” by Bhattarai and others in top leadership of the CPN (Maoist), the goal of a (bourgeois) democratic republic came to replace the goal of the revolutionary struggle to overthrow imperialist domination and reactionary rule in Nepal; and, at the very point when the question of seizing power and revolutionizing society was acutely posed there, the revolution was thrown away – in a miserable exchange for the right to take part in the bourgeois parliamentary process and the governing of society under the continuing rule of Nepalese and international exploiters.⁷

In India in recent decades there has been the case of K. Venu, formerly the leader of a Maoist formation, the Central Reorganization Committee, Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), a part of the Naxalbari trend. Venu had authored a work in 1990 arguing that, once the dictatorship of the proletariat is established, the essential thing in the advance to communism is the extension of democracy – formal democracy – rather than the continuing struggle to transform and revolutionize all of society, including very importantly the thinking of the people.

Extending the basic principles that inform *Democracy: Can’t We Do Better Than That?*, and applying them specifically to Venu’s arguments, Avakian wrote a thorough, penetrating critique: “Democracy: More Than Ever We Can and Must Do Better Than That.” It laid bare how Venu’s arguments represented an abandonment and betrayal of revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the goal of communism.⁸ And, as it turned out, it wasn’t long before Venu initiated the dissolution of the organization he had headed and in fact abandoned the revolutionary struggle.

In *Democracy: Can’t We Do Better Than That?* and other works, Avakian speaks to the reality that there is a still-important democratic component to revolutions in the oppressed nations of the Third World leading to socialism. This gets focused up, on the one hand, in the need to break free of and rupture with imperialism in order to achieve genuine national liberation; and, on the other, in the need to carry out deep-going social revolution that includes overcoming and transforming remaining pre-capitalist economic and social relations (and defeating the domestic class forces that represent and uphold all of this). Clearly, the forms of existence, or even continued existence, of such relations vary considerably among the oppressed and dependent countries. But, overall, there remain democratic tasks to be carried out in and serving the revolutionary framework of achieving socialism as a transition to communism.

In 2004, Avakian concisely formulated essential points about democracy, concentrating and building on what is in this book:

In a world marked by profound class divisions and social inequality, to talk about “democracy” – without talking about the *class nature* of that democracy and which

class it serves – is meaningless, and worse. So long as society is divided into classes, there can be no “democracy for all”; one class or another will rule, and it will uphold and promote that kind of democracy which serves its interests and goals. The question is: *which class* will rule and whether its rule, and its system of democracy, will serve the *continuation*, or the eventual *abolition*, of class divisions and the corresponding relations of exploitation, oppression and inequality.⁹

Yes, we are dealing with abstract theory. But it is theory that has direct relevance to whether or not truth, the truth of society and the world as they really are, will be confronted...and whether or not revolution, truly emancipatory revolution, will be made.

That is what hangs in the balance. That is why the theoretical work of *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* takes on heightened relevance at this juncture.

A Major Change in the World: The Collapse of the Soviet Bloc

Avakian devotes a significant section of the chapter “Bourgeois Socialism and Bourgeois Democracy” to the political structures of the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe. *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* was written before the collapse of the Soviet-led social-imperialist bloc in 1989-91. And one of the aims of the book when it was originally published was to analyze the particular variants of democracy that existed in those countries.

Avakian characterized the Soviet system as “revisionist democracy” – revisionism meaning capitalism in “communist” disguise. This was an important, accurate, and highly controversial analysis at the time. The rigor of the analysis stands the test of time. There is much to learn from: both in how Avakian applied himself to analyzing certain novel developments and features of these revisionist countries that did not fit the standard (formal) paradigms of capitalism and its political structures, phenomena which were causing political confusion; and in how he showed what was in common between these countries and capitalist societies in general, laying bare the capitalist content of the system in the Soviet Union and its essential identity with the West.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet social-imperialist bloc in 1989-91, and with the imperialists seizing on the occasion to trumpet the “demise of communism,” Avakian would extend the analysis: no, this was not the unraveling and rejection of real communism but rather a situation of “revisionism becoming more *openly* bourgeois.”¹⁰

A Polemic of Great Moment: Hannah Arendt and the Theory of “Totalitarianism”

This chapter “Bourgeois Socialism and Bourgeois Democracy” contains a major polemic against Hannah Arendt’s work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. It is difficult to overstate the wide and reactionary influence of the theory of “totalitarianism.” It is in fact the dominant *mode of thinking* in broad academic and political circles. This is so especially, or at least, in the U.S. And even for those, including among radicalized youth, who may not be consciously aware of or familiar with “anti-totalitarian” theory...its assumptions and conclusions, precisely because they are so widely propagated and coincide with the illusions of bourgeois democracy, are often taken as givens.

The theory of totalitarianism equates Stalin (and Mao) with Hitler, communist ideology with Nazi ideology, and the dictatorship of the proletariat with fascist regimes – this is very much part of the conventional wisdom of our times. Yet this grotesque distortion goes largely unexamined and unchallenged.

The imperialist ideological mantra is that any attempt to radically transform human society (i.e., bourgeois society) and people's values and outlook (i.e. bourgeois values and outlook) will, and can only, lead to "totalitarian nightmare."

Herein lies the enormous importance, relevance, and uniqueness of Avakian's treatment of this theory: there is no comparable critique of Arendt of this force and sweep.

Avakian observes that while the theory of totalitarianism originated in the early 1940s, it became more influential and useful to the Western imperialists later, including in the period when U.S.-Soviet rivalry was intensifying in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But since the collapse of the Soviet bloc, which occurred five years after the original publication of this book, yet more life has been breathed into this doctrine! This is bound up with the imperialist ideological offensive against communism that went to a whole new level right after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and that has continued in high gear. And, as an important part of this ideological offensive, Arendt's work and outlook have been pressed into service.

But the renewed influence of "anti-totalitarian" theory is also a function of the appropriation of Arendt by sections of self-described left intellectuals who take her argument that "political freedoms" are best served by liberal capitalist democracy to theorize a politics of "extending" democracy within the "spaces" of modern capitalist society. While the gruesome machinery of imperialism hums in the background, crushing lives and spirits...while revolution is ruled out of order.

Avakian's critique needs to be read and studied closely. It is a powerful intellectual-ideological tool for scientifically understanding and refuting the anticommunist theory of totalitarianism and countering its poisonous and paralyzing ideological effects. Again, the stakes are high. Will people settle for this world of horrors, or raise their sights to a radically better and different world?

A New Synthesis of Communism

Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That? stands on its own. But from the present vantage point, this work, with its analysis of democracy and of socialist and communist society, must also be seen as part of a larger and historic project of more than three decades of work: Bob Avakian's forging of a new synthesis of communism.

Here it is necessary to step back. In 1976, socialism was reversed in China, this just two decades after the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union in the 1950s. The first wave of socialist revolutions had come to an end. There were no longer any socialist states in the world. In the face of this enormous historical setback, in the face of big questions posed by the end of this first stage, and in the midst of attacks and slanders directed against this experience (all too often uncritically accepted)...a truly scientific summation was essential for a new advance of the communist revolution. And not only had these monumental revolutions met defeat, but massive changes had also taken place in the world – creating many new horrors and throwing up new challenges to making revolution in the contemporary world.

The great need for communism was posed anew. But if new challenges are to be met, the theory and practice of communism must advance.

Bob Avakian took on this responsibility, and he has developed a communist body of work and a

method and approach that responds to the great need.

One big question that had to be addressed was that of democracy. Avakian identified a tendency to conflate the communist project with the democratic project through most of the history of the international communist movement. In fact, what we are increasingly witnessing today is the dividing out of what had been the communist movement on this question of democracy in particular (along with other decisive questions as well). Indeed, confusion, if not willful ignorance on the question of democracy, is a major fetter on the advance of revolution in today's world.

In forging the new synthesis of communism, Avakian has summed up the great breakthroughs as well as the shortcomings and problems of the first wave of communist revolution. He has drawn from diverse spheres of human endeavor and understanding. He has taken the measure of the big changes in the world.

Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That? was an important step in the development of the new synthesis. A critical component of this new synthesis, and a salient feature of this book, is internationalism. On the one hand, in his work Avakian has made a further analysis of the material basis for internationalism and why, in an ultimate and overall sense, the world arena is most decisive, even in terms of revolution in any particular country; and, on the other, he has developed new understanding of the primary responsibility of any particular socialist society to be a base area for the advance of the world revolution.

Another crucial dimension of the new synthesis is a far greater appreciation of the role and importance of dissent and intellectual ferment in socialist society, not as something just to be allowed but something to be actively fostered within the context of, and as a key part of fundamentally strengthening and furthering, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the continuing socialist transformation of society, and the revolutionary struggle throughout the world toward the ultimate goal of communism. Elements of Avakian's re-envisioning of the socialist transition to communism are explored in the book.

The new synthesis of communism that Avakian has brought forward is, as summarized in *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage – A Manifesto From the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA*, analogous “to what was done by Marx at the beginning of the communist movement – establishing in the new conditions that exist, after the end of the first stage of the communist revolution, a theoretical framework for the renewed advance of that revolution.”¹¹ It is a framework that enables communist revolution in today's world to go further and to do better. It puts communism on a more scientific and more emancipatory foundation.

So, as to the question: “democracy: can't we do better than that?” The answer is yes, we must. And on the basis of the new synthesis of communism, we can.

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Footnotes

1. This envisioning has infused and informed the *Constitution for the New Socialist Republic in North America (Draft Proposal)* published by the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2010).
2. Bob Avakian, *From Ike to Mao and Beyond: My Journey from Mainstream America to Revolutionary Communist, A Memoir*, Chicago: Insight Press, 2005, pp. 426-27.
3. See Michael Hardt, “Take the Revolutionary Road,” *The Guardian*, 4 July 2007; and Thomas Jefferson, *The*

Declaration of Independence, Introduction by Michael Hardt; London: Verso, 2007.

4. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, “Meditation Thirty-Two: Rousseau,” London: Continuum, 2007, especially, p. 347.

5. Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*; London: Verso, 2011, p. 392.

6. For discussion and critique of Badiou, see the polemic “Alain Badiou’s ‘Politics of Emancipation’: A Communism Locked Within the Confines of the Bourgeois World,” by Raymond Lotta, Nayi Duniya, and K.J.A., in *Demarcations: A Journal of Communist Theory and Polemic*, Issue No. 1, Summer-Fall 2009 (www.demarcations-journal.org).

7. The Revolutionary Communist Party, USA has analyzed the revisionist line of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and how that line is expressed in the positions of the CPN(M) on democracy, especially so in the writings of Bhattarai, in a series of letters under the title “On Developments in Nepal and the Stakes for the Communist Movement: Letters to the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, 2005-2008 with a Reply from the CPN (M), 2006,” available at revcom.us.

8. Bob Avakian, “Democracy: More Than Ever We Can and Must Do Better Than That,” *A World To Win*, No. 17, 1992, pp. 32-72; also available in Bob Avakian, *Phony Communism Is Dead...Long Live Real Communism*, Second Edition; Chicago: RCP Publications, 2004, pp. 125-243.

9. Quoted in the *Constitution of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA*; Chicago: RCP Publications, 2008, p. 4, available at revcom.us.

10. See Avakian, *Phony Communism Is Dead*, Second Edition, p. 9.

11. *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage—A Manifesto From the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA*, Chicago: RCP Publications, 2009, p. 24, available at revcom.us. Chapter IV of this document contains a concise characterization of the main elements of Avakian’s new synthesis of communism.