

*From Set the Record Straight*

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

# What Is Communism? What Is its Real History? What Does It Have to Do with the World Today?

### *What is communism?*

Communism is a world community of humanity in which all classes and class distinctions have been overcome; all systems and relations of exploitation abolished; all oppressive social institutions and relations of social inequality, like racial discrimination and the domination of women by men, put an end to; and all oppressive and backward ideas and values cast off. Communist society will be guided by the principle of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.” There will be a shared material wealth, and people, together, will hold society’s resources in common and act as caretakers of the planet. In communist society, there will no longer be a state that enforces the rule of one class over another, though there will be forms of government to coordinate the common affairs of society.

Communism also refers to the science of understanding and changing the world that Karl Marx founded and that has developed through Lenin and Mao and Bob Avakian.

### *But isn’t communist society dull and regimented?*

Imagine a society where people consciously learn about and transform the world...where people are no longer imprisoned by the chains of tradition and ignorance...where people not only cooperatively work to produce the necessities of life, but get into art and culture and science—and have fun doing it...where the scientific outlook and the flight of imagination strengthen and inspire each other...where there is unity and diversity, far-ranging debate, and ideological struggle over the direction and development of society—but no longer stamped by social antagonism...where people interact with each other based on mutual respect, concern, and love for humanity...where people value, protect, and enhance the natural world of which we are part. This is communism.

### *What is socialism and how is it different from communism?*

Socialism is the crucial step in getting to communism. A socialist revolution overthrows the capitalist-imperialist class and its dictatorship over society. Socialist revolution establishes a new state power, a new system of political rule and governance: the dictatorship of the proletariat. The formerly oppressed and exploited, together with the broad middle classes and professionals making up the great majority of society, begin to transform society and to take increasing responsibility for the direction and administration of society. Socialist revolution creates an economy based on socialist state ownership and planning that serves the advance of the world revolution...that functions to meet social need and promote the all-around development of the individuals who make up society...and that interacts with nature in a sustainable way.

But socialism also inherits social and economic inequalities, and commodity-money relations, from capitalism. It still contains classes. There is still class struggle over the direction of society. New capitalist forces will seek to reverse the revolution. And for some time, socialist societies will be confronted by hostile capitalist powers. So socialism is not just a system—it is also a historical period of transition between capitalism and communism. It is a period of continuing revolution and people ever-more consciously transforming society and themselves as part of the worldwide advance to overcoming the division of society into classes and achieving communism: that world community of freely-associating human beings.

### *Socialism might be good as an idea but has it really worked in practice?*

The first socialist revolutions—in the Soviet Union, from 1917 until its defeat in 1956; and in China, from 1949 until its defeat in 1976—made tremendous advances towards a liberated world. With state power in their hands, the former have-nots, in alliance with broad sections of society, were taking hold of and transforming society. The rule of profit and exploitation was ended. Basic social needs were met. Life expectancy in Maoist China doubled between 1949 and 1976, from 32 to 65 years. Unprecedented strides were made in uprooting the oppression of women and minority nationalities. These revolutions did not fail but were defeated by new bourgeois-capitalist

forces that had considerable strength and influence. Secondly, these revolutions had shortcomings that contributed to their defeat.

***Won't socialism or communism come up against the realities of human nature and selfishness?***

There is no innate or unchanging “human nature.” People’s thinking, behavior, values, and our very conceptions of “human nature,” are shaped by the economic structure and corresponding institutions and culture of a given society. Ancient Greek society and America’s “founding fathers” regarded slavery as perfectly “normal.” Capitalism is organized around the private accumulation of profit and economic competition. Selfishness, greed, and individualism are rewarded by the workings of capitalism and promoted by the institutions of capitalist society. They are not “hard-wired” into our genes, nor are racism and male supremacy embedded in some “evolutionary psychology” of our species.

***Hasn't the communist movement produced dictatorial figures like Stalin?***

The widely promoted demonization of Stalin and the incredible lies about the Soviet Union in the Stalin period stand in the way of gaining a real understanding of the historical role that he played and the great accomplishments of the Soviet Union. After Lenin’s death in 1924, Stalin assumed leadership—and in the decade that followed, Stalin led the struggles to carry out collectivization of agriculture and to socialize the ownership of industry. The revolution created a socialist planned economy, something that had never been done before. There were important social struggles waged against Russian chauvinism and the oppression of women. Throughout Stalin’s leadership, the Soviet Union faced enormous pressures: counterrevolution, encirclement by hostile imperial powers, and invasion by the Nazis during World War 2. Stalin led people to stand up to this. But in the years leading up to World War 2, Stalin relied less and less on the conscious activism of the masses and more and more on administrative measures. It was necessary to suppress counter-revolutionary forces, but as threats to the revolution grew in the mid- and late 1930s, Stalin repressed people who were just raising disagreements and dissent.

There were serious problems in how Stalin understood the nature and goals of socialist society, and in his methods of leadership. Bob Avakian points out that if the bourgeoisie can uphold Madison and Jefferson—who played pivotal roles in the bourgeois American Revolution but who were unapologetic slave-owners—then revolutionaries can uphold Stalin while also deeply criticizing and learning from his mistakes.

***Wasn't Mao's Cultural Revolution really a fanatical purge?***

Mao was dealing with the problem of a new bourgeois elite emerging and concentrated within the top levels of the Communist Party. They wanted to bring back capitalism, seizing on bourgeois aspects in society. For instance, on the eve of Cultural Revolution, many factories still had systems of one-person management and competitive bonus systems that pitted workers against each other; and educational and health resources were concentrated in the cities. Mao called on people to rise up against oppressive leaders and institutional structures. Hundreds of millions of workers and peasants were debating questions about the direction of society, criticizing out-of-touch officials, forging more participatory forms of management and administration, and entering into the realms of science and culture. The divisions between mental and manual labor and between urban and rural areas were being broken down. Middle-school enrollment in the countryside rose from 15 million to 58 million. The Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 had coherent and liberating goals: to prevent the restoration of capitalism; to revolutionize the institutions of society, including the Communist Party; and to challenge old ways of thinking—in short, to carry forward and deepen socialist revolution.

***Wasn't there great violence and weren't intellectuals and artists persecuted during the Cultural Revolution?***

Violence was not the defining feature of the Cultural Revolution. Its main forms of struggle were mass criticism, mass political and ideological debate, and mass political mobilization. Much of the violence that occurred was actually incited by opponents of the Cultural Revolution, especially those capitalist roaders in leading positions of the Communist Party and who were coming under criticism.

Artists and intellectuals were not persecuted as a social group. They were called on to integrate with and learn from the laboring masses, especially in the countryside. Exciting efforts were made to create revolutionary culture and works of art that could serve as models. Secondly, there were mistakes and errors in how artists and intellectuals were treated; there was a constricted view of the role of art and culture in society, particularly art which expresses dissenting views about socialist society.

***Where can you find socialism in the world today?***

There are no longer any socialist countries in the world. With the defeat of the Chinese revolution in 1976 by new capitalist forces, the first stage of communist revolution came to end.

***So history has passed communism by?***

No. Communism is relatively new historically. It is a far-reaching, unprecedented revolution that aims to uproot all oppression and exploitation. Today, there is a monumental challenge to initiate a new stage of communist revolution that can go further and do better than the Soviet and Chinese revolutions.

Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, has summed up the overwhelming achievements, but also the problems and shortcomings, of the first stage of communist revolution. He has drawn from different spheres of human endeavor, in the arts and sciences and intellectual life. He has brought forward vital new understanding and the necessary framework to make a truly emancipating revolution in today's world. As a result, there is a new synthesis of communism. *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage, A Manifesto from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA* provides a concise account of the first stage of communist revolution, what this new synthesis is about, and the ideological challenges of making communism a real force in today's world.

***Weren't the revolutions in Russia and China really about modernizing or industrializing economically backward countries?***

The first socialist revolutions did take place in societies that were relatively backward—and these revolutions had to overcome poverty and underdevelopment. But the Russian and Chinese revolutions were fundamentally about creating liberatory societies free from exploitation and oppression.

***How is communism relevant to a world of advanced technology where the working class is “disappearing,” and to a relatively wealthy country like the U.S. with a large middle class?***

We live in a world where some 30,000 children die each and every day of preventable disease and malnutrition...a world in which women are subordinated, degraded, and trafficked...a world of brutal imperial wars...a world where technology that could help solve problems is harnessed to profit, used to control people, and serves the high-tech military arsenals of imperialism. The capitalist-imperialist system is literally destroying the ecosystems of the planet. This is a world that cries out for revolution.

A country like the U.S. has deep fault-lines of class exploitation and racial discrimination. There are many impoverished (over 40 million) and working poor; there is terribly inadequate and unequal health care; and every 15 seconds a woman is battered. Yes, America has a large middle class. But for many professionals, life is alienating, and the system thwarts them from applying their skills and expertise for the benefit of society and humanity. As for the proletariat, it is not vanishing. Look at the labels on your sneakers and shirts, look at the components of your computer or cell-phone—they are produced by exploited and super-exploited labor in all corners of the world.

The need and basis for communist revolution is greater than ever. The development of human society, of technology, scientific know-how, and the skills, creativity, and determination of people open the possibility for humanity to get to a whole other place: to move beyond exploitation and scarcity. With Bob Avakian's new synthesis, there is a viable and liberating alternative to the horrors of the world, a way to overcome poverty, oppression, and inequality that also unleashes creativity and ferment and experimentation, a pathway for creating a world in which human beings can truly flourish. And there is a strategy and the leadership to make this kind of revolution.

***Will people be able to practice religion under socialism?***

Yes. People will have the right to worship and hold religious services (and the right not to believe in god). But the schools, and the government generally, will promote a scientific-materialist understanding of the natural world and of human society. People will not be forced to give up religion, but there will be society-wide ideological struggle to help people voluntarily cast off enslaving religious belief.

***Will people still have personal possessions under socialism?***

Yes. But socialism will not be the “consumer society” we live in today. For example, it will move away from an environmentally destructive “automobile culture.” People in the working and middle class will have the right to live in the homes they currently occupy. But segregation and real estate markets will be ended; and decent housing for those previously on the bottom of society will be a priority.

***Will there be democracy and elections under socialism? Will protest and opposition be allowed?***

The *Constitution for the New Socialist Republic in North America* that is based on Avakian's new synthesis sets out the legal and political framework for a vibrant socialist society. There will be real and unparalleled democracy for the masses of people. There will be dictatorship over old and new exploiters and those actively organizing to overthrow the new system. Democracy in socialist society will empower people to transform social-economic-political relations and institutions and values, to join collectively with others to change the world, and to take increasing responsibility for the direction of society. Protections of speech, assembly, and so forth, and against abuses of individuals by the state, will be safeguarded. Individual rights will flourish far beyond what is formally contained in and actually allowed by the capitalist Bill of Rights. Dissent, including opposition to the policies of and to the socialist system itself, will not only be allowed but actively fostered. The new socialist state will provide the means and resources, in media and elsewhere, for diverse viewpoints to be heard; and people will have the right and ability to mobilize around these ideas, including through demonstrations, the right to strike, etc. Socialist society will be one of great contestation, ferment, and upheaval.

Elections will play a role in socialist society: in selecting representatives to organs of governance and in furthering societal debate through the promulgation of diverse views and programs on society and politics. But one thing that will not be up for vote is whether society should go back to capitalism. A revolution to completely change society requires dedicated and visionary communist leadership—and communist leadership will play a special role in socialist society—to enable the masses to hold on to power and to guide the challenging, tumultuous, and liberating struggle to get to a communist world. When communism is reached, the division of society into ruler and ruled and the need for any kind of institutionalized leadership will finally be overcome.

***If communism is everything you say, why do so many people reject it?***

There are two interconnected reasons for this. First, the loss of socialism in China has meant that there is no longer a living and exciting embodiment of what a better world could be like. Second, since the defeat of socialism in China, communism has been under relentless ideological assault. The powers that be and their ideologues have never let up in their vilification of communism...have never let up in spreading lies and distortions about communism...have never let up in telling people that “there is no alternative to capitalism, this is the best of all possible worlds.” For 35 years, this “ideological counterrevolution” has contributed to widespread misunderstanding of what communism is and to a lowering of sights. Many young people know nothing about the true of history of communism. Many intellectuals, who at one time were engaging with communism, have themselves bought into these distortions. It's as though, instead of being able to take a class and learn about the science of evolution, you were being taught “creationism,” and that was all that was being taught. The situation is not far from that, when it comes to communism.

It was not always this way. During the 1960s until 1976, when China was socialist, it was a source of inspiration to liberation movements in different parts of the world. Radical students and revolutionary-minded forces like the Black Panther Party looked to revolutionary China. Progressive-minded people in the sciences, in health care, in the arts were positively influenced by the revolutionary transformations in Maoist China, and many intellectuals were taking up and encouraging debate about Maoist ideas.

**Welcome to Set the Record Straight. We are taking on the distortions and lies  
about the first stage of communist revolution and letting people know  
about Bob Avakian's new synthesis of communism.**

**To Learn More About Socialism and Communism  
Read the Writings of Bob Avakian**

“Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism,” at [revcom.us](http://revcom.us)  
*Phony Communism Is Dead... Long Live Real Communism*, at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)  
*Basics from the talks and writings of Bob Avakian*, at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)  
DVD: “REVOLUTION: Why It's Necessary • Why It's Possible • What It's All About” at [revolutiontalk.net](http://revolutiontalk.net)  
Recent talks by Bob Avakian at [bobavakian.net](http://bobavakian.net)

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