

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

**Q** *What is communism?*

**A** Communism is a worldwide society 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. Communism is a world of abundance where people together hold all of society's resources in common. Communism also refers to the comprehensive outlook and scientific method of the proletariat for understanding and changing the world.

**Q** *But I always hear that communism is dull and dreary.*

**A** 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. A world that takes care of the environment. That is communism.

**Q** *How is socialism different from communism?*

**A** Socialism is the crucial step in getting to communism, which has yet to be achieved in the world. A socialist revolution overthrows the capitalist class and establishes the system of political rule of the working class: the dictatorship of the proletariat. The proletariat, together with its allies making up the great majority of society, begins to transform society. Socialist revolution creates an economy based on social ownership and meeting social need. But socialism also inherits social and economic inequalities from capitalism. It still contains classes. There is still class struggle over the direction of society. And for some time, socialist societies will be confronted by hostile capitalist powers. Socialism is a historical period of continuing revolution, and the worldwide advance to communism is a complex and protracted process of revolution and counterrevolution.

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

**A** The socialist revolutions in the Soviet Union (1917–56) and China (1949–76) made tremendous advances towards a liberated world. With state power in their hands, the former have-nots 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 bourgeois and reactionary forces (in the Soviet Union in 1956 and in China in 1976).

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

**A** There is no innate or unchanging “human nature.” People's thinking, behavior, and values 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, and neither is racism or male supremacy.

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

**A** The widely promoted demonization and lies about Stalin 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, the Soviet Union was an exciting and emancipatory society. Stalin led the struggles to carry out collectivization of agriculture and to socialize the ownership of industry. The revolution created a socialist economy based on public-state ownership, social cooperation, and conscious planning. This had never been done before. Throughout Stalin's leadership, the Soviet Union faced incredible 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 Stalin also had real weaknesses. For example, as the revolution came under greater pressure in the 1930s, he 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 grew in the 1930s Stalin repressed people who were just raising disagreements and dissent. Bob Avakian points out that if the bourgeoisie can uphold Madison and Jefferson—who played pivotal roles in the bourgeois American Revolution but were unapologetic slave-owners—then revolutionaries can uphold Stalin while also criticizing and learning from his mistakes.

## 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)

*Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy*, at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)

“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)

**Q** *What about Mao's Cultural Revolution?*

**A** Mao was dealing with the problem of a new bourgeois elite emerging within 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; 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 of 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 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.

**Q** *But wasn't there great violence and weren't intellectuals and artists persecuted?*

**A** Violence was not the main feature of the Cultural Revolution. This was overwhelmingly a political and ideological struggle. And much of the violence that occurred was actually incited by opponents of the Cultural Revolution. 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; and these issues have to be handled better in future socialist societies.

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

**A** There are no longer socialist countries. The Soviet and Chinese revolutions were turned back and defeated by the guardians of the old order. But there are Marxist-Leninist-Maoist parties and organizations in many parts of the world committed to the principles of communism and building on the experience of the "first wave" of socialist revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Revolutionary Internationalist Movement brings many of these groups together. In the U.S., there is the Revolutionary Communist Party led by Bob Avakian.

**Q** *Isn't Marxism a dogma?*

**A** Marxism is a creative, self-critical, and developing science. People should check out the writings of Bob Avakian. He has been critically summing up the profound lessons of past socialist societies, analyzing vast changes in the world since, and has been extending the horizons of Marxism. He is developing a model of a vibrant socialism and communism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Q** *But isn't communism outdated—with globalization and new technologies leveling social differences and eliminating the working class?*

**A** The need and basis for communist revolution is greater than ever. The gap between rich and poor in the world has widened enormously since Marx wrote "The Communist Manifesto." The three richest Americans have assets that exceed the combined gross domestic product of the 48 least developed countries. Ten million children die each year of preventable disease and malnutrition. AIDS plagues the world while pharmaceutical companies guard their intellectual property rights and profits. An

exploited working class is definitely not disappearing, including in the U.S. Look at the labels on your sneakers and shirts, or at the components of your computer. They are produced by exploited and superexploited labor in all corners of the world.

**Q** *How can communism be relevant to a wealthy and advanced technological society like the United States?*

**A** America has a large middle class. But for many, life is alienating; and the system thwarts people from applying their skills and expertise to benefit society and humanity. Hurricane Katrina revealed the deep faultlines of class exploitation and racial discrimination in the U.S. America is a society with many impoverished (40 million) and working poor...a society with horribly inadequate and unequal health care...a society with a prison system that warehouses huge numbers of young Black and Latino men. For all its advanced technology and store of knowledge—the system can't mobilize people to deal with basic problems like hurricane disaster relief. And it has a president who doesn't even accept evolution as a scientific fact!

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

**A** 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.

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

**A** 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 speculative real estate markets will be ended; and decent housing for those previously on the bottom of society will be a priority.

**Q** *Will there be democracy and elections under socialism, and will dissent be allowed?*

**A** There will be real and unparalleled democracy for the masses of people. There will be dictatorship over the old exploiters and those organizing to overthrow the new system. This dictatorship of the proletariat gives the masses the right and the ability to change the world and participate in society in an all-around way. Communist leadership will unleash diverse thinking and action from the bottom up and everywhere else. It will foster dissent, including opposition to the government itself, and provide the means for such viewpoints to be heard. Elections will have a role as one way of selecting and developing leadership, and keeping it accountable to the masses. 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 firm and visionary leadership to enable the masses to hold on to power and to guide the challenging and liberating struggle to get to a communist world: where the division of people into ruler and ruled, and between leaders and led, is finally overcome.

SettheRecordStraight@hotmail.com  
Set the Record Straight, P.O. Box 981, Chicago, IL 60690-0981  
www.thisiscommunism.org  
Set the Record Straight is a program of the International Humanities Center,  
a nonprofit organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code.