

More on Choices... and Radical Changes

by Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA

Introductory note: These are comments by BA that were part of a discussion with people that went deeply into the questions of why people oppressed under this system often get caught up in things like crime, who and what is fundamentally to blame for this, and what is the way forward out of this situation. Comments from people in the discussion are in double brackets.

BA: I know by what was reported to me, and I hope I'm not out of line here. [laughs] But I know, for example, over the informal discussion, there was some question from people about what I was just saying, like whether it's true that it's the system's fault that people get into crime or whether it's people making bad choices. I know that this has come up so I spoke to that some but if people have something they want to throw in about that, either disagree with what I'm saying or ask more about that, it would be good. I know, for example you[...] brought this up, right? That people make these bad choices, am I right about that?

[[“Yeah, like, murderers, that's they choice, it's not the system to kill somebody. But they go out and kill somebody just to get a hit, or get anything. The system don't tell them to do that, that's by choice. Then they get caught up and they go to jail, stuff like that. And I'm like, I don't get it how people say it's the system.”]]

BA: Okay, I think that's a good question, I think it's a question that a lot of people have, even if they don't like the system.

Look, I think you're right that obviously people do make a choice, in the more narrow sense people do decide to do something or not to do it. It's not like, in most cases at least, somebody literally puts a gun to their head, says you have to go out and rob somebody, you have to go out and rape somebody, you have to go out and kill somebody. That's true.

But the point is the reason why we say that it's the system in a more basic sense is because, both in terms of the conditions people find themselves in that aren't of their own choosing, and in terms of the ideas that are out there in society that influence people, those things are not things that people thought up all on their own, those are things that come from something bigger than people—namely from the system.

In other words, the idea that you should get yours, and get over on other people, is an idea that has a lot of influence on people. But it is not just something people thought of on their own, that is the culture that we get from the popular... the TV programs, the music, all the things that are promoted encourage people to think in that kind of way.

Now if you are a stockbroker, and you work on Wall Street in New York, you do that by high level swindling and manipulating the stock market to get more money for yourself, or just undercutting other people in billion-dollar deals. And very rarely do you get caught for doing that and sent to prison

for doing that. It's not even always illegal what those people do, they just engage in a lot of high financial speculation and manipulation to make a lot of money off the misery of people who are being exploited to create that wealth in the first place. But that's the mentality: make as much money as you can, get over on other people any way you can.

But if you are in a position to be a stockbroker then you can do it in a big-time way and you're called a role model. [appreciative laughter] You're held up as what people should try to be like.

But if you are on the street and you don't have any way, you don't have a background in knowing all about the stock market and everything else, but you have the same kind of thinking that's been instilled in and influences your mind, then you're going to go out and rob somebody because that's the thing that you can do, or you can sell them drugs.

[[Because they can get away with it?]]

BA: Not because they can get away with it, but because that's what is available to you, if you have the way of thinking that the idea is to get as much as you can get by getting over on other people. You can't become a big-time stock trader if you don't have the background to do that. They're not going to let you just walk up in there and start manipulating stocks, right? [laughter] But you can rob somebody on the street.

[[Yeah, I'm understanding what you are saying now.]]

BA: Okay, so you can rob somebody, right? Now am I saying it is right to rob somebody? Absolutely not. But what I'm saying is if you're influenced by the way that the culture and all the popular stuff on TV and the music and everything tells you you ought to be trying to get rich and get over on other people. If you get influenced by that and you say that's the way the game is played, so I'm going to do my thing in it, right, then you are going to do what you can do. If you can't be a stockbroker... if you can't be some other person, a banker, who loans money to somebody to buy a house knowing that they can't pay back the loan, and then forecloses on the house and sells it again, does the same thing again and again... If you can't make your money that way, but you got the idea in your mind from the whole culture out there that the thing to do is to get over on other people, and get money any way you can, then you'll do what you can do, which is to stick up somebody, or to sell some drugs, or to pimp out a woman and beat her down when she tries to get out of it, and so on.

Now did you make a choice to do that? Yes, you did. But why?

First of all, where did the ideas come from that told you that that was the kind of thing you should do? You didn't just

wake up one day and have those ideas. Those ideas are coming at you from every direction in the society.

Second of all, why did you have the choice of sticking up somebody instead of being a banker loaning people money? Because you came up in a certain situation that wasn't of your own choosing. You were born into a certain situation that you were faced with from the moment you slipped out of your mother's womb. That's what's the conditions that you were in. And if you are of a certain color or a certain situation, you are going to have a very hard time getting out of that. Yeah, you could become a rapper, or you could become a basketball player, but they never tell us—but think about it—how many people who are really good at rapping, or how many people who are really good, let's say, high school basketball players, make it into the big time? One out of a thousand? One out of ten thousand, probably more likely, one out of one hundred thousand, maybe? Not very many people can get out of those situations by going into hip-hop or going into basketball or football or whatever.

So, there you are, and you didn't choose these circumstances you're in but you have got this influence of “okay I gotta get over,” so you do what you can. You can hear people say that, “I gotta do what I gotta do, I gotta do what I can do.” Because they have been poisoned with the ideology—in other words, the way of thinking—of the system and so they do what is available to them to do.

Now, is that bad? Of course it is. It's bad for the people. It's bad for the person who does it. And it's bad for the kind of world we want. And it's bad for the revolution we need to get to the kind of world we want. So do we have to struggle with people about that? Of course.

But if we don't give them a sense of a larger thing that this could be all about. If we don't give them the sense that the world could be a whole different way, and that their circumstances could be a whole different way, that they could be actually using their creativity and their daring and other things to help make a revolution to get to a whole different kind of society where people like them and many, many others could be actually using their abilities to make a better society, then it's very likely they are going to fall back into what they know how to do.

So this is the way we talk about it's the system's fault. It is not that the system literally put a gun in their hand, but it put the idea in their head of what life should be all about, and it put them in conditions where taking a gun in their hand makes a certain amount of sense, if you're going from the idea of what the system tells you you ought to be going from.

So it's not that this is a way of “excusing” what people do.

It's not that it's all right to do it. It's not like we're saying “Oh well, you didn't have any choice.” You know, it wasn't your fault, in the sense that you couldn't have done anything else. Yeah, they could do something else, but not as long as you are under the rule and playing by the rules of this system. You are not very likely to find a better choice for millions and millions of people.

That's what I meant by saying that this conservative writer said that if you're in that situation, it makes sense to go into crime, it makes more sense than trying to get a job at McDonald's.

Now, we need a different society where it doesn't make sense for people to go into crime and rip other people off. Either the people on the very top—we need to get rid of all that. But also the people on the bottom who get caught up in all of this. We need to change all that so we don't have people on the top and people on the bottom like this anymore.

So that's why I say it's the system, not in the sense that the people don't have any responsibility, but in the sense that they're being influenced and their way of thinking is being shaped by a system that then leaves them almost no other options once it's convinced them through its culture and everything that this is the way that you have to try to live.

You do find people saying, “You know, I've got a wife and kids,” or “I got a family I gotta support,” or “I have my mama,” or “I have my kids and what am I going to do out here?” So we need to have a whole different world where that isn't the situation that people are in.

Does that make any sense?

[[yes]]

BA: But???

[[no but...]]

BA: I am just saying, is there something I am missing with this? Is there something I'm skipping over that is part of the picture that we need to think about?

I don't want to go on and on with this, but I do think maybe if we come across as saying in a kind of a simple-minded way “it's the system” as if people are just machines that don't have any mind of their own, then that would be wrong. If the way I'm presenting it is falling into that then that's a mistake on my part, it is not that kind of crude over-simple thing. But it's more the way I was trying to describe it, in terms of how people are influenced, and then how that influence causes them to act within the choices that they're given, the very limited choices by the way the system works and the position it's put them in. □

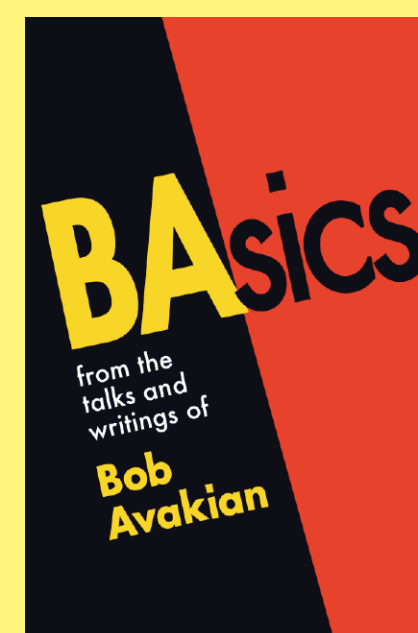
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At the beginning of 2012, an in-depth interview with Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, was conducted over a period of several days by A. Brooks, a younger-generation revolutionary who has been inspired by the leadership and body of work of Bob Avakian and the new synthesis of communism this has brought forward.

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