

Rudolph Bahro on Industrial Civilization

Book review

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1984

a review of

Socialism and Survival, Rudolf Bahro, Heretic Books, London, 1983

“We must pull the communications cord on the industrial system.” Who is this speaking? Some post-industrial prophet writing in the *Fifth Estate*, far from the social movement? Someone lost in theories with no immediate practical consequences or no political base? These are the words of Rudolf Bahro, former East German dissident and now one of the leading theorists and activists in the West German Green movement.

Bahro became known in the West when his critique of “actually existing socialism,” *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*, was published in 1977. Actually existing socialism wasn’t terribly amused by the critique and sentenced him to eight years in jail for “revealing state secrets.” The usual international campaign was waged for his release and two years later he was expelled from East Germany. On his arrival in the West he surprised many when, instead of joining some minuscule marxist sect, he joined the Green movement. Since then he has been trying to make himself as trouble some to the West German state as he was to the East German one, attempting to unify the sectarian left through various conferences and also attempting to forge an alliance between the left and the Greens. His recent book, *Socialism and Survival*, consists of various speeches and articles written between 1979 and 1982. It is necessarily repetitious, as Bahro makes the same points again and again in it, attempting in one speech (to a socialist congress) to explain the greens’ critique of capitalism and in another (to a green group) to show how the greens’ critique is socialist.

The publishers’ blurb claims that *Socialism and Survival* will raise many socialist hackles. This is a notoriously easy thing to do (as any anarchist will tell you) and Bahro certainly does it again and again. What may prove most infuriating of all for socialists, though, is that Bahro has in no way cast off his marxist principles and acquired a different philosophy. In his previous work he had already “reinstated the utopian dimension of communism, rejected the feasibility of proletarian revolution and looked to a mobilization of human energies for the goal of a liberation that transcended class divisions,” reads a notice in the *New Statesman* (sic), which continues:

“Bahro ... remains as committed as ever to the vision of a classless society. He sees the ecology crisis as a direct result of the capitalist industrial system [a system taken over lock, stock and barrel by the socialist states] ; he looks to material interests as the ultimate force behind social change—an interest in survival that is ‘more material’ than any economic interest.”

But nor is Bahro Gorz, draping a green veil over an old, decrepit and discredited project. (For a brilliant debunking of Gorz’s *Ecology as Politics*, see Bookchin’s *Towards an Ecological Society*. Regrettably it’s the only brilliant material in the book.) There is much in Bahro that is not new: much of what he says echoes Murray Bookchin in the sixties. Nor does his critique seem to me to be as radical as that of Camatte, Lewis Mumford, or the *Fifth Estate*.

Nevertheless, he is deeply involved in a movement that is practically as well as theoretically confronting the megamachine; more of the real project that lies before us comes through his work than through the work of any other marxist “interpreter” of the ecological critique.

Bahro’s central thesis runs along these lines: We face today an ecological crisis of threatening, global dimensions. This crisis is a direct result of capitalist industry, an industry which, according to Bahro, “is driven on by a boundless need to valorize capital, to make value into more value.” This limitless need threatens to destroy the natural base of human life and at the same time “poses the old question of ‘socialism or barbarism’ with an intensity that earlier socialists, for all their farsightedness, did not even dream of.” He states that the future of the “entire social body” is in question, speaking urgently of the imminent results of our suicidal mode of existence: “The present way of life of the most industrially advanced nations stands in a global and antagonistic contradiction to the natural conditions of human existence. We are eating up what other nations and future generations need to live on.” If these nations complete their goal of industrializing the world, life on this planet will be destroyed. This process may take a hundred years, he tells us, and will be caused not necessarily by lack of resources but by the systematic destruction of the biosphere.

Such a vision of our present situation, then, is an apocalyptic one. He comes to see the industrial system as exterminist, though he is uninterested in supplying detailed evidence to back up his thesis, replying to the skeptical, “I don’t intend to prove anything, to present the evidence for those who don’t want to read the writing on the wall, as I believe that facts and arguments are not what such people lack.”

His source for the concept of exterminism is E.P. Thompson, who coined the term to express “the tendency to self-extinction of the human race that is present in the growing independence of the arms race from even the rational interests of its most powerful protagonists.” But for Bahro, this exterminism is not confined to the danger of nuclear war: “Inseparably connected to the military and economic aggression, exterminism is expressed in the destruction of the natural basis of our existence as a species” through extensive deforestation, chemicals and contamination. For Bahro, “This is an overall crisis of our civilization, which is backfiring on human nature ... The destruction of nature by industrial accumulation, the danger of nuclear war, the impoverishment of marginalized masses in the Third World, mental impoverishment in the metropolises—these are the horsemen of the apocalypse at the end of the second Christian millennium. And apart from the fact that repression of all kinds is the response to any attempts to offer them some resistance, we have not focused our powers of understanding sufficiently to look them in the face, to make out the essence and source of their countless manifestations.”

It is here that the decisive break with Marx, notwithstanding Bahro’s marxism, occurs, since he sees the necessity “to conceive of socialism differently from Marx on one point above all. For him, socialism was a classless industrial society; and the industrial aspect of this was to be more or less unproblematically the legacy of capitalism ...” Referring to the fervent paeans to the “progressive” character of capitalism which “draws all, even the most barbarian nations into civilization,” in the Communist Manifesto, he declares, “We can no longer share the spirit in which this was written,” adding,

“When I wrote the conclusion to my book *The Alternative*, I already suspected that we need to criticize not only the capitalist aspect of industry and accumulation, but also accumulation itself; not only the economic form, but the material content of industrial civilization. And the reason for this is that it seems simply impossible to make in reality the division that is so easy in theory between science and technique on the one hand and their capitalist application on the other.” And elsewhere he states, “Today the provocation proceeds from the reproduction process as a whole, or rather from its ever less controllable dysfunctions. It is the all-pervasive output, harmful in the most varied ways, against which resistance is developing. The exterminist consequence that is inherent in the entire mode of production acts against human nature on the whole scale of values from the highest ideals of self-realization down to mere self-preservation.

It is now the material content of the industrial system, rather than the unequal division of the fruits of that system or the division of labor within that system, which provides the most urgent concern for a materialist critique of the capitalist system. And for those whose primary concern is with the traditionally conceived working class at the point of production, it should be pointed out that industrial production itself is a direct attack on the workers. Epidemiology, rather than economics, may now provide the critique of the capitalist mode of production both inside and outside the factory. In the words of Joseph Eyer, “Economic growth-capitalism is pathogenic.” The attack

on workers inherent in toxic production is further intensified in the recomposition of the working class on a global scale through the new international division of labor, the accompanying rise in world market factories in the Third World and the export of hazardous industries from the metropolitan countries where such products are banned. Such a brutal wastage of human beings is not only a direct attack on the health and lives of the Third World workers, but also transforms them into the fuel for the much-trumpeted post-industrial society in the West. (Which will be post-industrial in different ways for different classes. For some, it has always been a post-industrial society.) Those who claim that workers' control of technology is what is required might contemplate the only option open to workers to control toxic production—close it down before it kills them. [1]

The need for revolutionary change becomes more and more urgent. The traditional socialist view is that this change will come from the working class. Yet the failure of the workers' movement to supersede capitalism is patently obvious. As Bahro observes, the workers' movement has degenerated into "the vicious circle of a distribution struggle that simply perpetuates the relation of wage labor and capital."

Indeed, the struggles of workers for material gains in the distribution sphere have become one more energy input into the spiraling expansion of capitalist production and the continued accumulation of capital. "Within the metropolitan countries, which have as a whole an exploiting position," he writes, "the class contradiction has only a relative importance, and is always based on immediate and short-term interests; as a general rule it fuels the characteristic dynamic of material expansion." In the end, the interests of variable capital are the same as those of capital: the working class is always for concrete.

As Bahro points out, "We can look around in vain for a revolutionary working class." He turns the traditional socialist kneejerk dismissal of the ecologists as a "single issue" movement back on the socialists, arguing, "If there is anything today that really does deserve the label of a single-issue movement, it is the institutionalized wage struggle which is ultimately subordinated completely to the overall process of capitalist reproduction."

And where is that theory that confidently claimed to be the theory of the workers' movement, the theory that would point the way to communism? Trapped in the realm of political economy, departed to the academy and desperately identifying new working classes, desperately trying to shore up the ruins of its century-old ideology by tacking on to it each new sector of revolt "Even that supposedly progressive economic analysis which uses Marxist categories functions today in conformity with the system. It goes on feeling the pulse of a still continuing accumulation of capital, calculates profit rates and forecasts short-term—and recently also long-term-cyclical crisis. But it has nothing more to say on how this pulse is to be stopped, how the accumulation of capital can be not just measured but actually brought to an end. All that is left is the latest economic reformism, which already assumes the next long wave, the breakthrough into eco- and bio-industries, total cable communication, etc., as a non-avertable given which we have to surrender and adapt ourselves to." [2]

The rejection of the working class as the subject of revolutionary change leads Bahro to the search for a new subject of liberation. In this search, "We must go beyond Marx's own concept and direct ourselves to a more general subject than the western working class of today. Like the utopian socialists and communists who Marx sought to dispense with, we must once again take the species interest as our fundamental point of reference—only now in a more concrete manner."

The task of this new revolutionary subject is enormous: to stop the accumulation of capital. Bahro recognizes this subject in the recent movements against exterminism, the peace and ecology movement, "which by virtue of its inherent dynamic is a movement for conversion in the metropolises, for a transformation that goes right through to the material and mental foundations of our culture."

Bahro's use of the term "conversion" is almost religious in some places and I'm very suspicious when he speaks of the possibility of an alliance with Christian elements (I'm also alarmed that he read the Bible while in captivity in East Germany and considers that this benefited him). Also, the outlines of this project of conversion are hazy in the extreme. Nevertheless, since these movements arise spontaneously in reaction to capital's plans, they immediately raise the question of political power since they challenge capital's command of physical space. These movements are also social rather than class ones. They represent another manifestation of the Great Subculture which Gary Snyder talks of in *Earth Household*.

The character of these movements means that they will develop in opposition to the fossilized trade union bureaucracy so beloved by Trotskysts. The revolution they suggest is different from the old idea of hijacking the

capitalist mode of production and continuing on. This revolution is a critique of the production process itself, and echoes the critique of production articulated by what Marxists would term the “vanguard of the working class” workers in the sixties who were as radical in their critique of trade unionism as in their critique of production.

Bahro also cautions Marxists against fetishization of old concepts of the working class which do not recognize that resistance to capital has shifted its axis. The search for an effective negation of capital should not be fettered by adherence to a fossilized notion of the composition of the working class. Communism, as Bahro reminds us, is the real movement against capital. The Green movement, with its project of halting the accumulation of capital, has the possibility of becoming such a movement. It is certainly the first movement that has consciously set itself that objective.

All this would be so much theoretical ballyhoo—interesting but meaningless—if it was not the articulation of a definite movement. While the peace movement has yet to show its mettle in real opposition to the plans of state and capital (though that time is rapidly coming with the introduction of cruise missiles into Europe this winter) [3] the ecology movement has again and again demonstrated its opposition in real ways, especially in opposition to the genocidal nuclear power program but also in other areas (against the airport expansion in Frankfurt, against the dumping of toxic and nuclear wastes, for squatting, against the recent attempted census and the introduction of identity cards, etc.) And all this in the model state of Western Europe, under threat of *berufsverbote* (professional job ban), where a demonstration against the Kalkar fast breeder results in a national police alert, and looking at the publicly available plans for the nuclear reactors at Heppenheimer results in one’s name being entered in the national police computer.

When such a movement grows in the very heartland of capital one must sit up and take notice. Certainly capital has. Certain fractions of capital were shit-scared that the Greens would hold the balance of power in West Germany after the last election. And the West German chemical industry is shelling out Deutsch-marks at a tremendous rate for an advertisement campaign aiming at showing how chemicals are indispensable.

The growth of these movements is a cause of joy and optimism too, that quality definitely not too prolific in the pages of the *Fifth Estate*. Having watched the destruction of the communist movement in Italy, the bright hope of the last few years, we now find the green movement destabilizing capital within the most controlled, the most, until now, stable state of capital in Western Europe. And some strands of that movement are now articulating a project of liberation which shares much with that of the Fifth Estate; As toxic capital becomes genotoxic capital, we must welcome all resistance to the beasts that threaten to exterminate us. As well as dancing, there must be resistance.

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NOTES

1. One example of the desperate realization by workerist Marxists that technology is moving totally beyond the ability of the working class (and anyone else, for that matter) to control can be found in Martin Spence’s totally reformist “Nuclear Capital” (in *Capital & Class*, Spring 1982), which includes an impassioned appeal for intervention now while industry is supposedly still at a level which can be controlled by workers. As a further example of the poverty of the workerist left, the 36 page article on nuclear capital does not once mention its toxic and exterminist functions. (When it says nuclear capital fragments labor it isn’t thinking about radioactivity.)

2. Two examples of this may be cited in relation to biotechnology which illustrate the essentially reformist nature of the radical science movement. Jeremy Rifkin, in his article on biotechnology and recombinant DNA (in *Mother Jones*, February-March 1977), says, “With the dawn of the Organic Age upon us, there is no longer any question of going back.” And Edward Yoxen (associated with the *Radical Science Journal* in England), in his book on biotechnology, *The Gene Business*, never once questions whether these techniques should be developed at all. Being the Marxist that he is, all his attention is directed to the productive rather than reproductive aspects of biotechnology, thereby overlooking the major threats. He also fails to mention hazards: Hazard isn’t even mentioned in the index. All that is involved is control over the direction of the research and its productive application. (Yoxen

knows the way it should be applied.) This despite the fact that elsewhere Yoxen has shown that biotechnology was created by capital for capital. (See "Life As a Productive Force," in *Science, Technology and the Labor Process*.)

3. This review was written in the fall of 1983.

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See "A Third World View of the West German Ecological Movement" by Saral Sarkar, FE #342, Summer 1993

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