

Who Can Stop the Apocalypse?

Rudolf Bahro

1990

A Note on Rudolf Bahro

In 1977, East German dissident Rudolph Bahro was arrested and accused of publishing “state secrets” in a book entitled *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* in which he used a Marxist critique buoyed by the principles of Rosa Luxembourg to scrutinize the socialist system of his time. After more than two years in prison, he was released to West Germany where his profound preoccupation with the ecology crisis led him to become immersed in the green movement, and he eventually became a leading figure in the Green Party. Bahro’s association was, however, marred by conflicts in which his constant insistence on fundamental precepts of freedom, peace and ecological balance made him an irritating thorn in the side of the Party’s more compromising elements. He resigned from the Greens in June 1985, pointing out that through parliamentary and electoral politics, the group had sold out to the system, and that an inherent error had been made in deciding to become a political party in the first place.

Bahro is a tireless original thinker who refuses to be claimed by any political faction or party. His essays delineate the evolution of his ideas; according to Bahro, they “document an attitude, an orientation towards problems, rather than a definitive conclusion.” He sees the situation in Eastern Europe as part of a wider whole, and he clearly and openly points to the intrinsically destructive nature of the industrial capitalist system (and here he includes the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe) as the root cause of environmental devastation and social oppression. He calls for radical concrete action, along with a spiritual awakening in his search for a way out of the death maze of industrial capitalism.

The following excerpts, significantly edited, are a substantive overview of his ideas and provocations. When Bahro speaks of a growing green movement, a spirit of rejection of capitalist society motivated by “free energies” and truly alternative projects, he is speaking about many of us who, in our daily lives and through our own communities, work to stop the encroaching machine and expose its false promise.

This selection is excerpted from Bahro’s *Socialism and Survival*, 1982, Heretic Books, PO Box 247, London N15 6RW, England.

For many people, the exterminist and self-destructive tendency that seems to have taken hold of our social body presents itself in so fundamental and necessary a way that the evidence for it is as great as was the evidence for the compelling myths of archaic times. Even though the outlines of the goal are quite unclear, nothing needs to be demonstrated or proved.

For the plagues of ancient Egypt are upon us, the horsemen of the apocalypse can be heard, the seven deadly sins are visible all around us in the cities of today, where Babel is multiplied a thousandfold. In 1968 the promised

Canaan of general emancipation appeared on the horizon, and this time at last for women as well. But almost all of those who believe in this have tacitly come to realise that first of all will come the years in the wilderness. All that is lacking now is the pillar of fire to show us the route of our exodus.

This is all to say that a mood is spreading which is more to be grasped in the language of these old parables than by scientific analysis of behaviour, and which is gradually making its way across all the differentiations that political economy, sociology, political science and social psychology like to maintain. And this mood has more reason than ever before to be apocalyptic, this time not just for one particular tribe, one or other particular state or even one particular civilisation, but rather for the one civilisation that is finally decisive. This I assume is self-evident. 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...

What I want to stress though is that professional politics is not going to save anything, but can only make everything worse. Hopeful initiatives cannot come—from this direction, unless they are spurious...

Thus everything depends on convoking “non-political” or “extra-political” forces precisely on an overwhelming movement of conversion, which disrupts the normal activity of the official institutions...

The more this movement proceeds from the grass roots, the more decisively it raises the question of power. Not in the sense of preparing to storm the Winter Palace. Its main subversive potential is that of destroying the traditional consensus that supports the state and constructing a new consensus, and in this connection the front line generally runs right through the individuals concerned. But as this movement criticizes the old world order in its totality, it naturally negates for a start its whole institutional heaven. Here it polarizes against all those instances that make up this old heaven, and thus also against the traditional opposition.

We already fall back into the system if we act as if politics could be challenged by politics (of the same type). What can we achieve by immersing ourselves in the study of how the dominant politics functions, even with a view to bringing about improvements? The time always comes when the thinkers of a new era refuse to get drawn into the distinctions of scholasticism. We still run the danger of getting absorbed by the “compulsion of things” which is administered and reproduced on an expanded scale, just like a certain Green parliamentarian in the W. German Republic. This person used to radically oppose nuclear power stations. Then he got elected to the Landtag. He soon realised that a nuclear power station could be built even against his opposition. So he transformed himself into a realist and began discussing whether an underground power station—if such could be built!—wouldn't it be better than an above-ground one. As if there weren't already enough reformists to take on that role. So the system easily gobbled him up.

The Avalanche of Accumulation

This strikes me as an example of the problem of the relationship between science and the system on the one hand, and science and the movement on the other. Should we not say goodbye to this contemplative analysis of the decisive objects? You can either be a servant and advisor of various governments and other system-maintaining institutions, or be militantly for the movement and in the movement. I am not advocating fanaticism, or even a break in communication. Yet debate will be more honest if it is conducted between intelligent people on either side, and not through so-called “intermediaries” who express themselves in non-partisan translation. The point is to see the praxis that alone can save us as running completely across the traditional business of politics and science, also across the political advisers of the left, who generally produce only few initiatives that do not contribute to the prolonging of existing conditions.

We cannot expect any escape from the vicious circle in which our civilisation is terminally trapped from the kind of science, aiming to master its object, that we have had since Euclid, Socrates, Aristotle and Archimedes, simply because this is fundamentally bound up with this civilisation's motive forces. As far as the social process is concerned, its objectivity stands for the subjugation to laws which can only wreck our evolution if we do not manage to overcome them.

Let us assume we were living at the time when one of the many Central American civilisations that produced steadily growing pyramids was in its death-throes. Would it be sensible to expect help from those very priests

who represented the law by which that culture was born and grew up, then blossomed, declined and died? The science business is largely the priestly corporation of our present civilisation. Most likely, every means it hits upon, every advice it gives, will only mean adding a further stone to our tower of Babel, for example in the shape of a new industry for environmental protection. Of course I am speaking of those scientists who play their role and uphold the rules that have to be overthrown if anything is to be left of our civilisation except—in the best of cases—pyramids of reinforced concrete, which don't even keep their shape as long as stone ones do.

Even that supposedly progressive economic analysis which uses Marx's 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 crises. But it has nothing more to say on the question of 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 an inevitable given which we have to surrender and adapt ourselves to. They don't even ask whether there is a chance of halting accumulation in its present trough.

In practice as well as in theory, the old left forms part of the institutional order that has to be overcome, and for this reason the movement of conversion is also directed against its mental structure. Though Marxist theory did not originally raise the task of stopping accumulation, it suggests that capitalist accumulation will come to a halt for intrinsic reasons, as a consequence of the internal contradictions of the bourgeois mode of production, whereas it is becoming ever more probable that the avalanche of accumulation is catastrophically reaching external limits—and without encountering fundamental resistance from the specific interests of the subordinate classes. Quite the contrary. Yet for the traditional analysis the new social movements serve only as a preliminary substitute, behind whose action the real protagonists will again re-appear.

This is failing to see the wood for the trees. 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-realisation down to mere self-preservation. It is not abstract causes, but concrete sufferings, that produce the counter-mobilisation.

I admit that I am using an extremely global construction...As far as my construction goes, it is global not only in the figurative sense but also literally—just like the challenge. Conversion in the metropolises: where are these metropolises? Firstly, of course, the European countries, as well as those from North America to Australia where the Europeans wiped out the indigenous inhabitants. And then of course Japan, which was so strikingly well disposed to assimilate the aggressive spirit of European industrialism. But where in the Third World today are there not big cities that are bridgeheads of the capital accumulation that proceeds from the centre? Industrialisation in the East also obeys the same imperatives, not only since it's got in debt to finance capital. The global metropolis has no geographical limits, it is this so far unstoppable process of industrial expansion driven and guided by capital, which is driving us over the edge of the abyss at a hundred points simultaneously.

It is this challenge—Edward Thompson has termed it exterminism, referring initially to its military side, but this can easily be generalised—which gives the diversity of movements a tendency to unite in a single movement of conversion. In the final analysis—but I don't mean this in the abstract sense, it will show itself in practice!—the marginalised masses in the countries of the Third World who plug into the electric power supply without paying will prove to be convergent with the movement against nuclear power stations, even though in functional terms they seem totally in contradiction. The question is simply that the capitalist industrial system can only be driven back and destroyed by an ungraspable and manifold movement of humanity, without formal coordination, not by an industrial working class that is defined in purely economic terms and centrally organised.

As human beings we all are marginalised, it is just that many of us are not yet aware of it. Many people still say, in pacifying terms, that the Megamachine is ultimately made up of human beings. Sure! But here the reversal of the relation of master and slave has been achieved on the grandest scale. Does anyone still seriously imagine that the old actor Ronald Reagan is only the master of the Doomsday machine which he's been transported into? But the marginalised and excluded, those with their backs against the wall, now have an unbeatable ally in this very

wall that is formed by the limits of the earth itself, against which we really shall be crushed to death if we do not manage to brake and bring to a halt the Great Machine that we have created before this finally bumps against it. Every action that somehow or other obstructs its progress forms part of the movement, a progress which is above all the progress of its investments and the acquisition of capital for these. In the rich countries in particular, we are all in the situation of the building worker who lives next to the planned new airport runway and is offered work on it. He has to make a new decision!

Spreading Refusal

How can we bring to an end the industrial era, an era that cannot endure in the long run as it is consuming its own foundations, before such time as it dies from its own activity and takes us with it? This is the question that demands an answer. This answer must lie in concrete actions, not only political ones. Its tendency—at first a symbolic one—will be to tear down the tower of Babel before this collapses upon us. And the resolution for this must be defended against any demand to say first of all what better system we want to replace it with.

At the time of the anti-fascist struggle, Bertold Brecht told “The Buddha’s Parable of the Burning House,” which is very relevant here.

When the roof was already burning, someone inside

Asked me what it was like outside, whether it wasn’t raining

Whether the wind wasn’t blowing perhaps, whether there was

Another house for them, and more of this kind.

And the Buddha answered:

...Truly, friends

Unless a man feels the ground so hot underfoot that he’d gladly

Exchange it for any other, sooner than stay, to him

I have nothing to say...

We are not yet in a position to tear down the tower. Investments now in progress are not only reinforcing the floors already built, they are massively at work building the next storey. And our efforts to halt this growth are only fragmented: we demonstrate against a particular weapons system, we prevent a nuclear power station here, an airport runway there. In most cases, we only delay things. We reduce the speed limit on the motorways a little. But we have to persist.

We need at least to consider a great moratorium, a kind of general strike against expansion, the blocking of everything embraced by the word “development,” a pull on the emergency brake. This is the task that the conversion movement has to fulfill above all else, in a whole variety of forms. It must actually achieve the stopping of investment that hostile propaganda already attributes to it, by directing itself even more against sales expectations than against the bulldozers and concrete mixers.

Liberation from deadly, injurious and superfluous labour is the other side of this anti-investment strategy. Even though emancipation is not the immediate slogan here, it is exactly at this point that the possible gain in freedom is to be The industrial system and its implications to oppress freedom, and not only at the centre.

Almost all peoples who have submitted themselves to a forced industrialisation in the hope of finding freedom at the end of the tunnel have remained stuck at its darkest point. Contrary to a once current idea, freedom is not obtainable through industrialisation, but in fact only through the rejection of industrialisation. It is pertinent here,

of course, that there is in fact no other industrial system than the capitalist one, and that we certainly deceived ourselves in seeing the ultimate cause of its alienation in the capitalist form of industrial progress. Industrialisation has since already shown that it can no longer offer any perspective of emancipation simply because it is impossible for all peoples to achieve. And it has to be halted here in Europe above all, where the industrial system had its start, and where we are particularly susceptible, as also is Japan, to its unforeseen backlash. Unilateral industrial “disarmament,” or at least the transition to a quite different kind of equipment, is the motto here.

The basis, as already mentioned, is the progressive disintegration of the social body, as expressed in a decay of the system of values and thus of all institutional authorities. More and more people are either excluded, marginalised, dismissed or directly motivated to drop out, with either all or part of their energies. This gives rise by necessity to a strategy (by which I don't mean anything like a secretly elaborated and planned plot that combines two elements: a gradually spreading refusal and a deliberate obstruction. This is not meant as a kind of new discovery, I simply want to draw attention to what is necessary and deliberate in it.

Refusal, above all, means protecting one's own energies from being absorbed, and on top of this it means active withdrawal of energies from the ruling structures, very often backed by an accusation. Refusal of military service through to total non-cooperation is the most striking example of it. I believe that non-political withdrawal is only a temporary moment in this context. One may say that the productive apparatus itself rejects people's energies—unemployment—and that the hippies, alternative people, job-sharers, etc. only help to relieve its burden. But a far more comprehensive trend is involved, also with those who for the time being still remain “inside.” It is already affecting work motivation as such.

Obstruction means restricting the operation of the system by active resistance, starting with the most dangerous of its normal directions of development. The motto for this is selective ungovernability. Specific measures such as the installation of new weapons systems, the construction of nuclear power stations, more and more airports, motorways, new industrial plant, etc. should be made impossible.

Actions can stretch from blockades and demonstrations via refusal of taxes to legal obstructions, making each new investment a wearying obstacle course. The most important thing, however, is the relativising of the norms of an achievement society, the undermining of the consensus for expansion...

What the movement offers that is positive and alternative is not something to be attained within the system, but in opposition to it. Even though the eventual outcome will certainly not be a purist one, the movement must strive to completely cast off the ruling structure. In its actual practice, therefore, its own ideal can be present only as the measure by which actions of obstruction are assessed. It must take shape in forms of behaviour, in methods and means, both inwardly and outwardly.

Militancy is not the same as violence. Here in the metropolitan countries, at any rate, everything indicates a strategy of non-violence in the sense of not injuring life on the other side. If we force them to use tanks, then we ourselves make the ideological breakthrough impossible.

For those involved, the conversion movement itself becomes an adventure, a field for enjoyment of life and self-realisation and identification. The different society, the new state of the world as a goal, is not the ultimate motive of commitment, even though the utopia is very important for the direction as well as for the choice of means...

The goal we have to achieve is like seeking to bring an avalanche to a halt from within. If someone could see it from outside, it would look as if this avalanche was braked and halted shortly before impact by a spiritual hand. This is against the law of the inert mass of concrete and steel that encases us. So it has to be an effort that comes from consciousness, from the soul, so concentrated and by so many people that there has been no historical parallel...

I believe this conversion is possible, because now humanity feels threatened in its drive for self-preservation. The tendency is growing, and it is a tendency inherent in every human being, to entrust ourselves to an extreme alternative, however uncertain—because there is nothing else left to do. This decision can suddenly take hold of millions—tomorrow or the day after—and expand the horizon of political possibility overnight. Relatively small or medium catastrophes will not fail to remind us how near the hour is.

I propose that in expectation of this moment each of us should encourage disquiet and the readiness for a general change of heart, both in ourselves and in our own milieu. Let us withdraw more than just our vote from the Great Machine and its servants. We must completely cease playing along with it wherever this is possible. We must

gradually paralyse everything that goes in the old direction: military installations and motorways, nuclear power stations and airports, chemical factories and big hospitals, supermarkets and education works.

Let us consider how we can feed ourselves, keep warm, clothe ourselves, educate ourselves and keep ourselves healthy independent of the Great Machine. Let us begin to work at this before the Great Machine has completely regulated us, concreted us over, poisoned us, asphyxiated us and sooner or later subjected us to total nuclear annihilation.

We must live differently in order to survive! Then we can perhaps still arrive where we have always wanted to, if only with one string of our heart: at a peace that is something higher than all the reason contained in our previous history.



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