

Obituary

Rudolf Bahro and Cornelius Castoriadis

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In December 1997 two writers died who influenced our perspective: Rudolf Bahro and Cornelius Castoriadis, both former marxists capable of valuable insights as well as highly questionable positions. Bahro and Castoriadis were original thinkers, nevertheless, and deserve recognition as important voices in the breakup of traditional leftism and the emergence of new forms of radicalism.

Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–1997)

In the early to mid-1970s, the essays of Castoriadis (written under several pseudonyms including the most famous among radical and ultra-left readers, Paul Cardan) played a significant role in our political transformation from new/old leftism to anarcho-communism and beyond. His early works, many of them published in English by the London Solidarity group, found their way to the Fifth Estate office and, along with the work of Jacques Camatte, situationist theory, and other ultraleft and anarchist materials (often brought to our attention by Fredy Perlman), became the source of many lively discussions and debates that pushed us all the way to the left and eventually off the spectrum altogether. Such essays as “The Fate of Marxism,” “History & Revolution,” and “Redefining Revolution” contributed to our clarifying the outlines of what Castoriadis called “the ruin of classical marxism” and the “reconstruction of revolutionary theory ... [as] a permanent challenge.”

We continued to read his work from time to time in the pages of *Telos* during the late 1970s and early 1980s, but were eventually dismayed to read him argue in his essay, “Facing the War,” in the Winter 1980–81 issue, during the height of grassroots Western European and U.S. resistance to growing nuclear war preparations, that Russia had become “the primary world military power with all that presupposes industrially and technologically...” This meant that “Europe’s only protection still rests in the ICBM silos and Polaris submarines of the U.S.” (His convoluted defense of the deployment of Pershing and cruise missiles, based on the ludicrous assumption of Russian military superiority, was nevertheless mixed into a very interesting and persuasive discussion of Soviet society.)

To our relief, Castoriadis did not become merely another ex-leftist neoconservative defender of the Empire. Though we never read him systematically, we continued to run across his provocative work. Whatever differences we had with his outlook, we found stimulating and sometimes extremely valuable his dazzling mix of modern insight and classical erudition. Castoriadis’ critique of marxist pseudo-scientific rationalism and its ideology of progress, his expanded notion of the idea of classes and hierarchic societies, his image of a “pyramid” mass society generated by bureaucratic state capitalism both East and West, and his discussions of autonomous and heteronomous societies have found their way indirectly and directly into what one might loosely call a *Fifth Estate* point of view.

In the best obituary we’ve seen so far of Castoriadis, in the English anarchist magazine *Freedom*, “NW” writes that he eventually turned “increasingly to linguistics and mathematics, ancient history and pure philosophy.” In

fact, Castoriadis' discussions of ancient societies, though sometimes obscure, were striking and invigorating. As the Freedom obit puts it, Castoriadis "developed an idiosyncratic humanistic position which emphasized the part played by individual imagination and creative culture in human affairs and which included a remarkable 'ethic of mortality,' arguing that the absence of any kind of divinity above humanity and of any kind of existence after death made it all the more important to accept a tragic sense of both private and public life and to concentrate on the development of autonomous individuals in an autonomous society here and now."

More recent articles (for example, "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary," in the Fall 1993 issue of *Salmagundi*) inspired discussion just as the articles written twenty years before had discussions which may not have led to a radical new turn, but which have planted seeds for future study, reflection and conversation. As the Freedom writer comments, Castoriadis "helped to destroy some of the most harmful myths of our time"; the work he did to propose a new world to replace them now deserves more attention.

Rudolf Bahro (1935–1997)

Rudolf Bahro's book *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* (London, 1979), a young administrator's proposal for the reform of the stalinist bureaucracy, landed him in jail in East Germany when it was published in the West. Bahro's *Alternative*, which simultaneously demystified Bolshevism and defended its allegedly progressive, revolutionary role and the necessity of a one-party state, relied on a maoist-influenced idea of cultural revolution and argued for a kind of pedagogic dictatorship to work in the objective interests of the people.

Thus, as Andrew Arato surmised (in a review in the Summer 1981 *Telos* of a 1980 collection of essays edited by Ulf Wolter, *Rudolf Bahro: Critical Responses*), "it is impossible to neatly separate out the emancipatory ... and authoritarian ... features of Bahro's work."

In fact, the "antinomies" detected by Arato reflected a tension in Bahro's thinking between egalitarian and authoritarian impulses that would remain unresolved. This tension was rendered more complex by Bahro's Christian sensibility (as a socialist dissident he had already railed against the bureaucracy as a corrupted church and called for a kind of reformation), a sensibility which apparently deepened by his Bible study during his time in prison. Bahro's religious metaphors extended, at times with compelling, seminal significance, other times with highly problematic results, into his dissident green critique of industrialism.

Expelled from East Germany to the West in 1980, Bahro fulfilled no one's expectations—neither Cold Warriors nor Western marxists—of the exile-dissident, choosing instead to explore new terrain and to add dramatically original and provocative insights to the emerging green movement. E.P. Thompson remarked in his preface to the English edition of Bahro's *Socialism and Survival* (1982) that upon arriving in the West Bahro "hit the ground running, but running in his own direction." Lacking any bitterness toward the East, and noticing in any case the same malaise in the West, Bahro rejected both sides, and began to critique the whole structure and content of industrial civilization with a "prophetic sense of urgency" and an openness toward the utopian mode. Thompson also noted the echoes of William Morris in *The Alternative*. (Morris was a forerunner of green-socialist utopianism and what one might in retrospect describe as nascent social ecological, critical-luddite thought.)

Bahro wrote (in *Socialism and Survival*) that he was forced to reexamine his views, particularly in light of the ecological crisis, "in which all the contradictions of the prevailing mode of production and way of life, all the dangers of the world situation, intersect and coalesce..." Bahro began to challenge the ideology of progress itself, "The very idea of progress must be interpreted in a completely new way," he wrote. "The per capita consumption of raw materials and energy, the per capita production of steel and cement that are adduced in all the statistics as criteria of progress, are typical criteria of a progress that is totally alienated." The only "progress" worth talking about was a progress in human emancipation," and that required the abolition of industrial capitalism, in both small and large steps. "We must gradually paralyse everything that goes in the old direction," he wrote in 1981: "military installations and motorways, nuclear power stations and airports, chemical factories and big hospitals, supermarkets and education works."

Bahro argued the need for a radical conversion reminiscent of the global reorientation of values and lifeways Lewis Mumford had called for in the 1970s. "Let us consider how we can feed ourselves, keep warm, clothe ourselves,

educate ourselves and keep ourselves healthy independent of the Great Machine,” Bahro declared. “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.”

Eventually Bahro broke with the Green Party, arguing (in work done between 1982 and 1985 translated and gathered into an English edition, *Building the Green Movement*) that the German ecology peace party, by involving itself in the political administration of the nation-state, could “help bring about the final imperial restoration of the country.” He publicly resigned in 1985, declaring that “the party is a counter-productive tool,” and that “the given political space is a trap into which life energy disappears, indeed, where it is rededicated to the spiral of death.”

Bahro started out as a loyal oppositionist of the East German Communist Party, calling for its reform, believing in the necessity of the leading, conscious minority, but ended by turning his back on all parties and party politics, though not on the process of radical inquiry, association and action. But he did not resolve the problem of authority, and toward the end of his life was proposing increasingly absurd and disturbing ideas—for example, ecological theocracy and the need to “redeem Hitler” and “liberate [the] brown parts” in the German character. (See Staudenmaier and Biehl, *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience*, as well as my Fall 1997 FE review, “Swamp Fever, Primitivism & the ‘Ideological Vortex’” for discussion of Bahro’s fascistic utterances.) This madness apparently had its roots in the original, unresolved authoritarianism of his early work, combined perhaps with his failure to make balanced use of insights from archaic religious traditions (evidenced by at least one bizarre episode along the way—his fascination with the Bhagwan Rajneesh cult in the mid-1980s).

Bahro’s decline was unfortunate because his contribution, however erratic, was remarkable. He suffered cancer the last few years of his life (making him possibly one of millions of victims of industrial contamination), and one wonders if his illness did not exacerbate his theoretical breakdown. But such speculation is not reasonable analysis, and whatever the circumstances one must take responsibility for what one writes; Bahro’s last writings were shameful and disappointing.

Bahro’s important insights into the exterminist system are worth remembering nevertheless; they were compelling in part because they came from an ex-marxist who had learned many of the valuable lessons offered by marxist anti-capitalism, but who superseded that perspective toward a deeper notion of radical transformation, even if ultimately his project was marred by failure and folly. At his best, he was a strikingly original voice of—conscience in opposition to the global “Great Machine.”

“We must live differently in order to survive!” he warned the peace movement in the early 1980s. That task still lies before us, more imperative than ever.

FE Note: The Castoriadis obituary appeared in the Feb. 7, 1998 *Freedom* (Angel Alley, 84b Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX UK). The Freedom Bookshop (same address) carries his pamphlets.

“Who Can Stop the Apocalypse?” (an excerpt from Bahro’s *Socialism and Survival*) appeared in a 12-page, FE 1990 Earth Day Special, available through our book service free with book orders, or for postage (send \$1.24 for a pound’s worth), or \$1 postage and handling for a single copy.

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