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# Rudolf Bahro: A Socialist Without a Working Class

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*Hillel Ticktin*

Rudolph Bahro's book is important for two reasons. He has re-stated the basic principles of socialism in terms of overcoming the division of labour through work becoming man's prime need rather than a compulsion over which he has no control. Many people have repeated this view in the West, but for an East European to publicly proclaim that this is on the agenda is a clarion call to the left in Eastern Europe. At the same time the contrast between what has to be and what is provides a push for those who would apologise for the societies in Eastern Europe. This is particularly true for the left in West Germany which has tended for too long to be hamstrung by the view that you have to be the friend of your enemy's enemy. In the second place, his imprisonment has made his book a bestseller, making it essential for everyone to have a view of the book. It is possible that for a time the discussion on Eastern Europe will have to be divided between pre-Bahro and post-Bahro. His tendency and self-sacrifice have given him a place in the history of socialist struggle. That said, however, his book has to be discussed objectively.

The enormous range of subjects dealt with in his book means that Bahro has given us many themes for fruitful discussion. Nonetheless, it has to be said that Bahro has failed in his objective, namely, to do for the economy of Eastern Europe what Marx did for capitalism. And there are two reasons for this: he has not, firstly, worked out a political economy that will serve for the necessary socialist critique of the USSR – the achilles heel of all left East European oppositionists with the exception of those who favour the market, such as Brus. They, however, do not unravel the relation between the class forces in the society and the nature of its economic system. (In any case, they cannot do so since they favour the introduction of the market as a permanent feature). Bahro is superior to them in that he does recognize the problem and his conception of socialism is certainly inimical to a market viewpoint. Nonetheless he has not developed a critique of Soviet political economy, except in empirical terms. Secondly, the book contains a number of contradictions. This may have been due to the limitations by which the author was circumscribed. One is always left with the impression that Bahro is holding in reserve a point of view contradictory to that which he states.

Why is there this confusion? The fundamental answer is that the society he is analysing and discussing is itself contradictory. It is at a higher level of contradiction than it was under capitalism. The processes

operating in it are combinations of forces and laws that cannot be described in ordinary or formal logic. Even those who realise this, chief among them Trotsky, are sometimes contradictory themselves in a way they were not when discussing capitalism. Thus, Trotsky in 1933 explicitly says that the society does not plan;<sup>1</sup> yet before and after that date he said it did. The reason for this is obvious: the phenomenon is new and it partakes of both elements, planning and non-planning. It is here that the problem lies.

If one is cognisant of them, problems and contradictions cease to be logical contradictions; they become material contradictions with existence in real life; they have to be described in terms of laws, tendencies, etc. This is not Bahro's approach. He does not see the USSR as a society with laws contradicting each other, derivable from modes of production — which the USSR is not. He sees the USSR (and the Eastern European countries) as being in the retraction phase of the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP). That is, he sees such countries as going through an historical epoch similar, in certain political and economic respects to the AMP. He sees the AMP as the society which introduced the division of labour, thus requiring the features of (oriental) despotism, and these therefore lie in the interstices of communism.

He goes much further, in fact, arguing that the present epoch is one of a new AMP. His explanation is insufficient. A case can be made out for this position, in certain terms, but certainly not for the basic political economy. The feature of resemblance is the strong state plus nationalisation. However, the laws of motion of the two societies are different. It might be argued that in every transition period the contradictory laws show themselves similar *in form* when the division of labour is in the melting-pot. But Bahro does not argue this, though it may be in his mind. Nor is there any reason to accept the official Soviet view of the AMP as a transition between primitive communism and class society. Some writers argue it is an alternative to either ancient society or feudalism, some that it is an assimilation to feudalism. Bahro's assumption of the official Soviet explanation may be a device on his part forced on him by the conditions in which he has had to work; but the point must be made that Marxism does not use devices and models; it uses the method of abstraction to get to the essence of a mode of production. However, once the argument in terms of AMP falls the theoretical basis of the book falls.

We might explain Bahro's failure by the circumstances of the limitations that circumscribed him and the complex situation of Eastern Europe.

Bahro also discusses the problems in terms of state-capitalism and of

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1. Trotsky, *Writings*, 1932-3, p. 224.

wage-labour. At a superficial level aspects of these persist but we have to probe to the level of the essence of the society in order to bring the contradictions into the light of day.

What is interesting is that Bahro does begin with an analysis which could have provided the key, Marx's starting point: the form of the control over the surplus product. Then he edges away and replaced it with a conception of the division of labour that is at best hazy. It is difficult to see how a Marxist can accept Bahro's account of the division of labour, as some have, since that account is functionalist, descriptive and based on subjective criteria. He sees the hierarchy (based on knowledge) and the collective worker. This gives him a hierarchy of creativity. While the argument is logical if we accept the AMP, it contradicts the idea of wage-labour-capital and a special controlling group. In using this kind of hierarchical-knowledge structure, Bahro joins Szelenyi<sup>2</sup> who points out the privileged position of those who have higher education and are able to use it. It is true that in Eastern Europe those who have the knowledge (education) comprise the hierarchy — and this explains the mobility inside these societies; it is also true that the decision-makers have the information\* which is exclusive to themselves so that in the end, control rests with those who have the key to information. But this is true for any ruling group in any society. The overcoming of the division of labour involves overcoming the exclusivity of information. It is possible to avoid clashing with Bahro on this matter only by recognizing that he is dealing with a conception of Eastern Europe that does not pass from this idea of the division of labour on to the question of who controls the surplus product. Bahro is concerned to show that one consequence of his view is that divergences between groups are of a stratification-kind, not of a class kind. Logically, he eliminates the working-class.

His ruling group, then, is a political group; but patently it is not only a political group so the economic aspect of the problem is introduced, but only in asides or *post-factum*. He has set himself a circle to square. The primary, real question — and here lies the solution — consists in determining who has control over the surplus product.<sup>3</sup> Total control over the whole society has to be through total planning. Total planning — the conscious regulation of the economy — does not exist in the USSR (and in the Eastern European countries). As Trotsky pointed out, there is bureaucratic regulation. Planning is not merely a technical category; it is a social relation. In this sense, there is no planning. Bahro almost says this, too, when he speaks of the waste and irrationality of the regime and of the economy.

The next step follows: if the society is not planned, how do the

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2. See Szelenyi's article in this issue of *Critique*.

3. The argument is expanded in my article in *Critique* 9.

controllers control? Bahro does not pose this question directly and his answer is implicit: through the party and the political monopoly of power. Power, however, is not a category of political economy at the highest level of abstraction and must be broken down. Both Bahro and Mandel fail here: they see the monopoly of power but do not adequately relate it to the deeper question of control over the surplus. Power must be over something; ultimately, it is — to be effective — control, direct or indirect, over labour-power. This power can be exercised politically, in the sense that the rulers have a political existence and the economics are expressed politically. Bahro, like Marc Rakovsky,<sup>4</sup> starts from the politics. This is in accordance with Mandel's view that the USSR has a bureaucratic caste which has usurped power from the working-class. But Bahro also attacks Mandel and his view which roots the nature of the USSR in its deformation, or in terms of consumption and distribution. He says that what is wrong in the USSR lies in production.

Undoubtedly, bureaucracies cannot exist as autonomous entities over a long period of time without rooting themselves in production. In fact, however, Mandel, in the above article, has defended himself from this attack and has indeed crossed his Rubicon by declaring that the political revolution is also social and economic. However, in trying to walk on the water he tries to support the contradictions of Bahro who also states, in contradiction to his attack on Mandel, that the origin of the group is in the political sphere. In other words, it was not economic corruption and material privilege together with economic and absolute political control which produced the elite, but political monopoly which produced economic privilege. If political monopoly was responsible, the fault must lie with Lenin, and Bahro does not shrink from saying so. Here he speaks the language of some Soviet left emigrés and of the German school which takes that position. This makes sense and fits their AMP viewpoint, but it does not suit Mandel. He, in fact, is in an insoluble contradiction, caught between arguing the political nature of the ruling group and the socio-economic circumstances of their evolution. Against this, it is necessary to note that the Left Opposition of the twenties argued that the growing power of the bureaucracy came from the corruption of NEP and international capitalism. They showed that the layers of the bureaucracy came from the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, from specialists and from bureaucrats from pre-1917; added to which was the influence of the petty-bourgeoisie and the direct corruption of communist functionaries.<sup>5</sup> In short, they did not argue that the movement was from politics to economics, but from economics to politics. This has, further, to be interpreted in the sense of political

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4. Marc Rakovsky, *Towards an East European Marxism*, Allison and Busby, 1977.

5. Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin*, 'What Now?' Pathfinder, 1970. pp. 340-5.

economy, i.e. in the circumstances surrounding the social groups involved in socialism in one country.

Here Bahro straddles the fence: on one side, he treats Russia as a unique phenomenon which had carried through an anti-imperialist, non-socialist revolution whose essential task was to industrialise the country. The only way this could be done was by imposing a strong state on a subaltern people. Not many people — least of all the working class of the world at the time — would accept this interpretation of history. On the other side, he brings out a number of important points: judgement on the USSR must always be based on the terms of its comparative productivity. This leads us, but not Bahro, to the following analysis. It is clear that a USSR, cut off from the world division of labour, suffers immense handicaps; the ordinary economic advantages of world specialisation even for this biggest of countries are denied it. Secondly, in order that this separation from higher productivity be maintained, the population of the USSR has to be kept in ignorance of advances in the non-Soviet world thus effectively reducing knowledge that would improve the native productivity. Thirdly, industrialisation behind such closed walls necessarily becomes competitive and non-complementary. Fourthly, the initial low productivity is maintained or even worsened, thereby reinforcing the need to maintain the separation. Fifthly, the social effect is that the higher productivity of the non-Soviet world forces its way through to the Soviet Union by way of imports and selective information. The result is that the intelligentsia looks to capitalism as the system with the higher productivity. Sections of the working class become disaffected and the repressive apparatus has to be toughened. This in turn increases the disaffection, and lowers productivity further still.

Socialism in one country has to have a siege economy. This diverts more resources from production than would have been the case had the USSR relied on the world proletariat. The military sector becomes gigantic. Scarcity competes with the requirements of the military and repressive apparatus for resources, and this goes on as long as the drive of capitalism to create demand for unnecessary services and goods goes on. Productivity thus becomes an external phenomenon which the national socialist economy can never control. There is, therefore, no hope for this society unless and until it breaks out of its isolation. But it cannot do so: embarked on the course of socialism in one country, there is a social group in control which has an inherent interest in maintaining national socialism.

Bahro does not make this analysis, though he does make the point about productivity and the unnecessary growth and material demands of capitalism. Logically, he should have gone on to contradict the basic premise of the necessity of socialism in one country or the undemocratic type of party in control as being responsible for what happened. The

direction remains — from the economic to the political, not the other way round.

His whole sweep, the division of labour being overcome in one epoch, implies one world. But this is the problem: the USSR is not just capitalism with its head — the capitalist class — cut off. It has another social group in control, rooted in production — in control (or in partial control) of the surplus product. Bahro both agrees and disagrees with this. He comes from a Germany permeated with Kant and Weber, where it is possible to talk of a disembodied rationality which can be counterposed to the irrational and wasteful USSR. He speaks of the irresponsibility of the economy. Like him, Renate Damus speaks of an inherent category irrespective of social class or group.<sup>6</sup> But Bahro recoils from her, saying she is on the side of the bureaucrats. Inevitably, if an abstract criterion is used, the analysis will conclude in apologetics. There is no God-given criterion, there is no categorical imperative; one must go back to the existing classes and consider their interests and their struggles if one is to find the causes of the irrationalities and waste of the system.

The empirical data of the book is well enough known in the West and the description of the system is no advance on what has been given by others.

Bahro explicitly points to the special interests of the intelligentsia. He points out that they have to be contained and that technocracy is a danger. This puts his analysis well to the left on the far-left. On the other hand, he makes no distinction between intelligentsia and bureaucracy at the beginning of his book, (though he does so later), and this enables him to quote Bakunin and Makhaisky against Marx. But this is a boring revival of a viewpoint that existed before Marx, the anarchist view that all power is to be abolished. The Russian Marxists widely discussed and rejected Makhaisky before 1917, and Trotsky attacks this precursor of the theorists of the 'new class' in the twenties and thirties. This is an elementary anarchist view which is recognised as being correct in principle — so long as it is unnecessary to have to go through a transition period.

Socialism does not arise from man's ideals being impressed on reality (and here Bahro is wrong). Rather the reverse: reality demands that these ideals be introduced. Because Bahro can only see something called emancipatory consciousness being the cause of change, he relegates the workers to a passive role. They only have compensatory consciousness or trade union consciousness. For Bahro they have ceased to exist as a class. The contradictions within capitalism require for their solution the final victory of the proletarian class in the achievement of socialism. Modern society, increasingly integrated within plants and between plants, increases the socialisation of the workers

6. Renate Damus, 'Thesis presented to the Bahro Congress', November 1978.

and raises their power within production to act socially. This calls for democracy and consultation. Discrimination against minority sections and lack of communication disrupt production. The matter was profoundly formulated by Marx when he identified the socialisation of labour as the basic contradiction in the law of value. It is this heightened power and increasing necessity which demand that the workers as the socialised group take power and introduce universal democracy.

From this point of view, there is no alternative to the working class as the dynamic. It is not a question of choice for the proletariat. For history, that is another matter since the proletariat can be expropriated by another group, as the anarchists imply; but this would be at the cost of disrupting production; the proletariat is increasingly compelled to exert its forces against repression. The rule of repression must in time be contained; it is not eternal in nature. Bahro is right to raise the question, but by ignoring the real dynamic of capitalism and hence of the epoch, he has failed to provide what he intended: the laws of motion of Eastern European economy.

Finally: Bahro's apologetics for the line taken by the USSR is unsupported by argument. In his book he gives the alternative of Bukharin which, interestingly, Trotsky thought feasible but a capitalist road:<sup>7</sup> namely, that there could have been industrialisation without Stalinism. There could also have been the possibility that Trotsky could have won against Stalin either by coming to power or because the German revolution of 1923 had succeeded. One has only to read the story of Bela Kun and the sorry mess he made of the Hungarian revolution to realise the importance of the subjective factor. The dialectics of subjective and objective may not be easy to understand but they exist nevertheless. Here Mandel is completely correct against Bahro.

Bahro is important because the range of issues he raises has revived discussion of fundamental questions. He is important because he counterposes socialist society in approximately Marx's form to what exists. He has helped to cleanse the concept of socialism from the stain of Stalinism. In essence, therefore, although not subjectively, he is compelled to be against Eurocommunism. Bahro is therefore part of the left. His antinomies have the curious though welcome function of making him acceptable to everyone of the left. If his contradictions perversely help to unite the left his book will have served its purpose.

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8. Trotsky, *Writings*, 1929, p. 83.