

A COMMENTARY ON RUDOLF BAHRO'S ALTERNATIVE

Ralph Miliband

At the time this is written (July 1979), Rudolf Bahro is still in prison in the German Democratic Republic, purging an eight-year sentence for 'treason' which he received in June 1978. His real crime was that he, a functionary of the East German state and party apparatus and a party member since 1952 (he was then seventeen), wrote a book which was published in West Germany in 1977 and which is deeply critical of the 'actually existing socialism' he has served in different capacities and in different spheres for more than two decades. His imprisonment and his sentence have provoked a campaign of protest in a number of countries, notably West Germany but also France, Britain and Italy. This is all to the good, and, must go on until Bahro is released; and what is done on his behalf is also helpful to other 'dissidents' in East Germany who suffer pressure and persecution.

However, it would be no service to Bahro if the fact that he is a 'cause', and a very good cause, were to inhibit critical consideration of his book. It is an important work, which well deserved the award of the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize for 1978. Its English title, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*, (New Left Books, 1978) may suggest a more restricted compass than is warranted: It does mainly deal with Eastern Europe and Soviet-type regimes: but many of the problems with which it is concerned are of a more general character and are directly **relevant** to basic issues of socialist theory and practice, and notably to the general issue of the distribution and control of power under socialism. Whole-hearted support for Bahro is obviously compatible with a stringent appraisal of his book.

A preliminary point about it is that Bahro proceeds from the premise that there does exist a desirable *socialist* alternative to 'actually existing socialism'. Unlike so many 'dissidents' in and from Eastern Europe and the USSR, whose bitter experiences have led them to reject socialism altogether and often to turn into fierce reactionaires and apostles of the Cold War, Bahro remains in this

book the uncompromising advocate of a socialist vision of the future, and above all concerned to explore how the obstacles to its realization may be overcome. So much is he concerned with a socialist future that much which he says about it has occasionally been dismissed as 'utopian' even by Marxists and other sympathetic readers. But if by 'utopian' is meant constructs which belong to the realm of fantasy, Bahro is not guilty of the charge: he may well underestimate the difficulty of achieving many of the objectives he believes to be central to the socialist project. But that is something else. It is only if one believes that any socialist vision is utopian that Bahro **qualifies** for the label: but that is more of a comment on those who apply the label than on Bahro. In many respects, he is if anything rather 'anti-utopian' and very hard-headed, even possibly too much so.

Bahro begins with a fundamental **postulate**, namely that socialism, in so far as it entails what he calls the 'overcoming of subalternity' and the free association of equal citizens, is incompatible with economic backwardness and the requirements of industrialization. He goes very far in suggesting that the incompatibility is absolute. In the Russian case, he notes, it was inevitable that backwardness should 'levy an institutional tribute on the Bolsheviks' (p. 90). Indeed, 'the more one tries to think through the stations of Soviet history... the harder it becomes to draw a limit short of even the most fearsome excesses, and to say that what falls on the other line was absolutely avoidable' (p. 90).

This is an 'economic determinism' pushed to extremes. There is obviously no way of disproving that all that happened in Stalinist Russia, including the 'most fearsome excesses', was inevitable. But the claim is nevertheless unreasonable, in that it leaves no room whatever for any element of contingency, whereas such an element must be presumed always to exist. In this context, this makes an enormous difference. Bahro writes that 'it was not only on account of the constant threats to it, but rather because of the positive **tasks** of driving the masses into an industrialization which they could not immediately desire, that the Soviet Union had to have a single, iron, "Petrine" leadership' (p. 116); but also that 'if a more gifted man than Stalin had managed to adapt himself to this aim, then the ideological resources that the old party tradition already possessed would have stretched somewhat further, and the most extreme expressions of the terror would have been avoided. Russia would have been spared the Caesarian madness, but hardly more' (ibid.). But 'hardly more' is not an adequate description of the difference

which another outcome to the struggles of the twenties could have made.

The point is not purely historical: Bahro writes that 'the peoples of the backward countries' require not only revolution, but ~~also~~ 'a strong state, often one that is in **many** respects despotic, in order really to overcome the inherited inertia' (p. 58). But the 'inherited inertia' is in any case being overcome, not least because of the fierce pace of **super-exploitation** to which many 'backward countries' are being subjected by multi-national capitalist enterprise; and a 'strong state' can mean different things, **and** may be strong in different ways and in different degrees. It is surely dangerous not to make distinctions here and to underestimate what 'more or less' can mean in practice.

On the other hand, Bahro is right to point to the exceedingly unpleasant fact that countries whose people 'are just in the process of organizing themselves for industrialization' do need a strong state; and he is very probably and unfortunately right in also saying that 'their state can be nothing other than bureaucratic' (pp. 128-9). It was often said, until not very long ago, that the Chinese had conclusively disproved the latter point in their own process of 'organizing themselves for industrialization': recent convulsions, 'revelations' and about-turns confirm that such claims were exaggerated or spurious. Still, the point **holds** that 'bureaucracy' has many different facets and degrees, and that some forms of it are less stifling and arbitrary than others.

In any case, it is not with countries in the early stages of industrialization that, Bahro is concerned, but with societies that have made the big industrial leap under the auspices of 'actually existing socialism' or where it at any rate **prevails**—countries such as the USSR, the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia. His starting-point in regard to all of them is that they are in a state of deep and structural crisis:

It has gripped all countries of the Soviet bloc, affecting all areas of life, and it is ultimately based on the contradiction recognized by all Marxists, between the modern productive forces and relations of production that have become a hindrance to them, coming to a head. The abolition of private property in the means of production has in no way meant their immediate transformation into the property of the people. Rather, the whole society stands property-less against its state machine. [pp. 10-11.]

'Relations of production' here stands for a political order

dominated by a **state/party** apparatus which was monopolized all power and which is stifling the vitality of the social and economic order as well as the political one. As he also notes somewhere else,

the oligarchy at the top of the pyramid decides the goals for which the surplus product should be used, and subjects the *entire* reproduction process of economic, social and cultural life to its regulation. As in the case of all earlier systems of domination, the steady reproduction of its own monopoly, and when possible its expanded reproduction, goes into the overall calculation of social development and has to be paid for by the masses. [p. 241. Italics in text].

The contradiction, for Bahro, squarely resides in the political realm, which stifles the 'surplus consciousness' generated by industrial development: whatever was impossible at the beginning of the industrializing process because of the retarded state of the productive forces and **society** in general, has now become possible because of economic development, and is being repressed by a rigid, self-regarding and bureaucratic **state/party** apparatus. Bahro also clearly places the *source* of power in the political realm. It is not economic power which produces or determines political power, but the other way round: it is their location in the **state/party** apparatus which makes it possible for leaders to exercise economic and ideological as well as political control. It is also this location which ensures the economic privileges of the dominant groups ('exploitation in our system is a *political* phenomenon, a phenomenon of distribution of political power' (p. 97); and the more favourable the location, the greater the privileges.

The privileges with which Bahro is most concerned are not the obvious material ones, but those that have to do with the exercise of power, and from which the others derive. Again and again, it is to the concentration of power at one end and its trophy at the other than he returns:

Do the working masses of the 'socialist' countries '[he asks]' have even the least positive influence on the decisions that bear on their material fate, and ultimately therefore on their overall fate? On decisions as to the proportions between accumulation and consumption, between production for war and for peace, between building of homes and building of monuments, between expenditure on education and expenditure on the propagandist self-portrayal of the power structure, between the costs of liberating

women from domestic slavery and the cost of security for those 'in charge of society'? Of course not. [pp. 151-2]

It is this 'division of labour' between rulers and ruled which is for Bahro the cancer of 'actually existing socialism': 'we must thank Edward Gierek', he also writes, 'for the forthright way in which he summed up the problem of our societies after the Polish December (1970) crisis, with the slogan: "You work well, and we will govern well" (p. 176). This is what Bahro rejects; and that rejection is at the core of his vision of a socialist alternative to 'actually existing socialism'. For he believes that the pain and suffering of the process of industrialization have at last produced the conditions in which it is possible for the people to take an ever-larger share in the determination of all aspects of their own lives. His first premise is that the 'overcoming of subalternity' is possible and is one of the great defining elements of the socialist project. What he wants and believes possible is at least the beginning of a 'cultural **revolution**' that would break down a functional fetishism which condemns most people to permanently fixed and subordinate tasks, and which effectively robs them of self-determination: the first condition of this 'cultural revolution' is the 'de-bureaucratization and genuine socialization of the activity of management, the participation of all individuals in disposal over the reproduction process'; its second condition 'bears on the elevation of the collective worker to the level of the given principles of science and technique of the time, which are at work in the production process' (p. 276). But the 'cultural revolution' of which Bahro speaks reaches out much further even than this and encompasses all aspects of existence.

The most difficult questions concerning Bahro's work do not lie in his reaffirmation of socialist ideals, but rather in his views of the ways in which progress is to be made in realizing them in the countries with which he is mainly concerned.

The first such question has to do with the social class or stratum which is to initiate and lead the movement for change. On this, Bahro is honestly and resolutely forthright:

New and higher cultures [he writes] are never created without the masses, without an essential change in their condition of life, nor without their initiative, at a definite stage of maturity of the ongoing crisis. But in no known historical case did the first creative impulse in ideas and organization proceed from the

masses; the trade unions do not anticipate any new civilization. [p. 149.1

This is somewhat different way of advancing a proposition similar to the Leninist view of what could be expected from the working class, and what could not; and which largely determined the kind of party which Lenin and the Bolsheviks brought into being. In so far as the working class cannot by its own efforts be the agent of its own emancipation, the vanguard party must assume a major historical role; and the less advanced and prepared the working class, the greater must be the role of the party. This being the case, frantic efforts must then be made to obscure and deny the gap that separates class and party, which leads to illusionism and myth-making. Bahro rejects this: but he also rejects, as I have noted, the notion that all that is required is to place back the emphasis on the working class and to declare it to be the subject of its own and society's emancipation. Those upon whom he relies to constitute the leading element, in social terms, of the movement for change are the people who exercise managerial and 'intellectual' functions in the societies of 'actually existing socialism' and who form the middle and higher echelons of the 'collective worker'. The initiative for fundamental change, he writes, 'can only proceed from those elements who are most bound up with the developmental functions and tendencies of the forces and relations of production'; and he believes that it is the 'intellectualized strata of the collective worker' who will 'for the time being inevitably set the tone' of a transformed socialist society (pp. 328-9).

Of course, Bahro knows perfectly well that there are many people in this stratum who are themselves 'reactionary and bureaucratized' and are part of the privileged and parasitical order that has to be changed. But he also believes that there are many others who are well aware of the need for change, and for an end to 'the permanent tutelage of society by the state' and to 'the permanent treatment of people (individuals and collectives) as infantile subjects of education' (p. 313). He derives this belief from different sources: from the Czech Spring of 1968, which showed that many of the people whom he has in mind were prepared for change, and were prepared to take great risks to see it brought about; from a 'structural' analysis, which leads him to think that, more and more, 'the Soviet scientists, technicians and economists will come up more obstinately than ever, and ever more frequently, too, against the fundamental incompatibility between the old superstructure and the new productive forces'

(p. 335); and it is difficult to believe that he does not draw from his own experience as well in thinking that there are many people in the stratum to which he himself belonged who want change in progressive directions:

Those ideologists of all kinds [he writes] who are pressed into the roles of party and state officials, from social scientist through to journalists, from artists to their censors, from the strategists of natural science to teachers of history—these are all continuously demeaned, both directly and indirectly, by **proscriptions**, by the reprimands and the praises of the arrogant politbureaucrats (the petty ones still more than the great ones). In order to follow the norms and rituals of official 'intellectual life', they must mostly learn to present the public image of pathetic cretins. [p. 324.1

The changes which are inscribed on the agenda of the countries of 'actually existing socialism', and which nothing can remove from their agenda, will tell whether **Bahro's** expectations are realistic or not. But his hopes **must** not be misunderstood: he neither underestimates the role of the working class in the process of change; nor does he **seek** to present scientists, technicians, managers and 'intellectuals' as the new 'universal class' in place of the working class. On the contrary, he is concerned to stress both the importance of the 'intellectual' stratum and the limited nature of its demands, from the socialist perspective that **Bahro** holds. Although he attaches importance to demands for 'liberalization' and the exercise of democratic freedoms, this, he also says, does not reach deep enough and touch the heart of the matter, the heart of the matter being for him a society in which a structured, functionally sanctioned system of authority relations prevails and must be overcome.

I think that Bahro rather underestimates the significance and reach of democratic demands in the societies of 'actually existing socialism'—or for that matter anywhere else: now as always, the battle for democratic freedoms everywhere is not simply a prelude to the battle for socialism, but an intrinsic part of it; and he is unduly dismissive of what he calls a 'superficial and impatient radicalism' which erupted in Czechoslovakia in 1968 alongside the Action Programme of the Czech Communist Party 'and which ultimately served the purpose of securing the uninhibited and uncontrolled development of these privileged forces [i.e., 'intellectuals, economists and technicians'—R. M.] on the TV screen, in culture, in the state apparatus and in the leading positions of economic management' (p. 307).

Whether appropriate to the Czech Spring or not, Bahro's suspicion (or qualified suspicion) is consistent with the argument that runs like a thread throughout his book, namely that socialism does not mean the replacement of one oligarchy by another, but the dissolution of oligarchy: the 'tendency' to which he objects in the Czech Spring is that which was leading, as he sees it, to the 'appropriation of political power on the basis of "competence", i.e., of the effective socio-economic status that its representatives had acquired in the two decades since 1948' (p. 308). What Bahro has in mind is perhaps best expressed in the following quotation:

Political revolution or reformation only has meaning if it improves the conditions for the technical and at the same time cultural revolution that liberates people step by step from the chains of the traditional division of labour and the state, and ensures them the preconditions for the free development of all, right down to the primary cells of society [p. 182.1

It is an obvious exaggeration to say that political revolution or reformation only has meaning if it achieves the purposes which Bahro stipulates; but it is nevertheless salutary, not least for an 'intellectual' stratum engaged in more or less acceptably creative work, to be reminded that, in socialist terms, the notion of democracy has to go far beyond political arrangements if it is to erode effectively and ultimately dissolve the 'subalternity' in which others parts of the 'collective worker' are permanently located. In this respect, Gahro speaks in the most authentic socialist voice and cannot be faulted.

But if neither the 'working class' nor the 'intellectual' stratum can be expected to represent the 'universal' interest, how then is that interest to be expressed, and by whom?

It is here that Bahro is least convincing and that his perspectives are most clouded. He does not believe that ruling Communist parties, as they now function, can serve as agencies of socialist emancipation. On the contrary, 'the party leadership is working not to overcome this late class society of ours, but rather to consolidate and perpetuate it, and would like to confine social and economic progress to their necessary limits' (p. 242). In fact, the state and the Party in these systems are the main constitutive elements of a single apparatus of power and domination, each reinforcing the other.

On the other hand, he categorically rejects party pluralism as an 'anachronistic piece of thoughtlessness, which completely misconstrues

the concrete historical material in our countries' (p. 350). Parties, he seems to believe, must represent distinct and antagonistic social classes and elements. In so far as such classes and social elements do not exist in the countries of 'actually existing socialism', except for the 'class' conflict between the people and the party/state apparatus, there is no basis for a plurality of parties.

This is unconvincing. The notion that independent political groupings and parties can only have a meaningful existence if they are based on clearly defined classes is much too simple and reductionist, in stipulating that political activity can only be significant as a reflection of 'pure' class representation; and that the alternative 'political fragmentation of the workers' movement is only a phenomenon of groups of intellectuals, with their claims to power and their rivalries' (p. 350). The experience of capitalist societies shows the matter to be much more complex than this; and Bahro provides no good reason for thinking that it is simpler in post-capitalist societies—unless it is forced into simplicity, by a system which he rejects.

This is not to say that a plurality of parties is a sufficient condition for the achievement of socialist democracy; and it may even be the case that it is not a necessary condition for radical changes to occur in the countries of 'actually existing socialism'. To fasten on such plurality as paramount or critical may well be unduly rigid: much would depend on the alternative. For Bahro, the alternative consists in a new form of party or political organism, a League of Communists, to which he devotes considerable attention and which is inspired by Gramsci's concept of the party as a 'collective intellectual'.

The League of Communists is intended to give expression to all the 'emancipatory interests' in society and to 'inspire the system of social forces and organizations in the name of a constructive but substantially transforming counter-force, which puts the state hierarchy in its proper place ... this means a division of social power, the installation of a progressive dialectic between state and social forces, and not just temporarily as within the party process itself, but rather for the whole duration of the transition. The result will be a situation of dual supremacy, in which the statist side gradually becomes less dominant' (p. 361).

The absolutely key question here is the relationship of the party or league to the state. Bahro wants his League of Communists to stand outside the state apparatus, so that there may be a possibility of 'bringing contradiction into the government apparatus' (p. 370).

Communists, he also says, 'must organize the social forces in such a way that these confront the apparatus on a massive scale as autonomous powers, and can force it into progressive compromises' (p. 371). Again, he makes the point that the League will have different tendencies and fractions (which is interesting in relation to the discussion of party pluralism); but he then immediately adds that the existence of tendencies and fractions in the League of Communists 'naturally presupposes that the state and administration are not directly dependent on the League and its internal debates' (p. 366).

But this separation of the party or league from the state raises more questions than it solves: for it leaves *the state* in a position of *independent power*, which is precisely what needs to be overcome. Bahro is eloquent and convincing in outlining the role of the League, namely 'the unification, coordination and direction of intellectual and moral efforts for elaborating a strategy and tactics of cultural revolution' (p. 376), on the basis of inner-party democracy and equality; and it might be argued that the very fact that it was possible for such an organization to come into being would mean that the problem of the control of the state was already much less acute: a state that would enable a League of Communists, such as Bahro has in mind, to operate freely would be a different state from any that we know in the countries of 'actually existing socialism'. There is something to this argument (which is not incidentally Bahro's argument), but not enough. For it would still be essential—and it will remain essential for any foreseeable future—to find ways and means of controlling the state in its policies and actions. The trouble with Bahro's League of Communists is that there is no obvious mechanism whereby it would be able to constrain the state apparatus and compel it to enter into the 'progressive compromises' of which he speaks, let alone impose new policy directions upon it.

The independence of the state in relation to society is the greatest of all political problems in Soviet-type regimes. This is as true for China as for the USSR and for Vietnam as for Cuba or Hungary: policy is made at a level which leaves out the people altogether, and the more important the decisions, the less say do the people have. Not only are such decisions not subject to determination by the people: they are not even subject to genuine discussion and debate in society. It is symptomatic of a general state of affairs in these regimes not only that the people of Vietnam should have had no say in that country's invasion of Cambodia, or the people of China in

that country's invasion of Vietnam, but that there should have been no debate on these acts of state policy. Genuine debate, with effects on the outcome, is not part of the political culture of the countries of 'actually existing socialism'. Capitalist democracy hardly shines in this respect either: but its political practice is much superior to that of Soviet-type regimes. So long as this remains the case, socialists everywhere will be in great trouble.

Bahro wants to remedy this state of affairs; but the means he proposes are not adequate to the purpose. However, I do not wish to conclude this commentary on a negative note. Bahro may not answer the questions he poses: but he does pose them, with great courage and honesty, in the name of a humanism without sentimentality which embodies the values and aspirations that makes socialism the hope of mankind. In an epoch like the present, so ravaged by cynicism, doubt, disillusionment and despair, his voice reaches out from his jail and speaks of better days to come, or rather of better days to be made, East and West.