The Alternative in Eastern Europe

Rudolf Bahro was released from prison in the German Democratic Republic in October 1979, under an amnesty proclaimed on the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the GDR. He had been arrested in August 1977, and in July 1978 was sentenced to eight years' jail for "espionage". The act of "espionage" was the smuggling of the manuscript of this book to West Germany where it was published.

Bahro, then, was a political prisoner. His imprisonment aroused many protests among communist parties and socialists in western Europe and elsewhere. He differs from many others who have been imprisoned in that he remains very much a marxist and a communist, whose vision of socialism comes directly from Marx.

Bahro's book is immensely valuable, not only for those who are concerned about the future of socialism in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and China, but also for those concerned more generally about the transition to socialism — and communism — in advanced capitalist nations and more generally for all of humanity. Bahro's analysis intersects with this concern on such questions as the environment, consumerism, women's liberation, the division between intellectual and "manual" labor, and so on,
Bahro’s book is divided into three parts: The Non-Capitalist Road to Industrial Society; the Anatomy of Actually Existing Societies; and, finally, the Strategy of a Communist Alternative.

The first part, which need not detain us long in this review, centres around an analysis of Marx’s concept of the “Asiatic mode of production” and its characteristic form of “Oriental Despotism” as applied to pre-revolutionary Russia. Bahro engages in a lengthy analysis of oriental despotism of the past, which could be debated, but the relevance of it to the Soviet experience cannot be disputed: the Bolsheviks inherited what Engels described as the “natural basis of Oriental Despotism .... Not only the Russian State in general, but even its specific form, Tsarist despotism .... is the necessary and logical product of Russian social conditions”.

Bahro sums up his conclusions by listing those factors which were the “historical roots for the subjection of Soviet society to a bureaucratic State machine” : the “pressure of the technological superiority of the imperialist countries, enforced by their policy of military intervention and encirclement”; second, the “semi-Asiatic past of Russia, with the inherited fragmentation of its agricultural base, with the extremely heterogeneous national composition of its colonialist multi-national State, with the political traditions of Tsarist autocracy going back to the despotism of Baty Khan and with the psychology of the masses still trapped to a large extent in primary patriarchy”.

Third, “the revolutionary situation itself” referring to what Bahro sees as the role of a strong state in any revolutionary transformation, including for the economic transformation. Here he quotes Marx on the transformation from feudalism to capitalism. Fourth, “the productive forces that had to be accumulated under the pressure of the capitalist environment, in order to create the preconditions of socialism, themselves bear an antagonistic character .... Via a principle of reward according to work that is in no way taken from Marx, the Soviet State has fulfilled the most important double function of achieving labor discipline and combating the egalitarian tendencies of the masses. This was the precondition for economic advance in the conditions inherited from the Russian past .... the purpose was to accumulate more on this narrower basis that the capitalists whom it was seeking to overtake .... All in all, the Soviet state with the party as its core, was not the substitute for a working class too weak to exercise power, but rather the special substitute for an exploiting class”.

Bahro sees an inevitability, in the conditions of necessary primitive accumulation of capital as in Russia, in the dominating role of the state. At best, he concedes that the excesses of Stalin can be avoided, but that the basic form will remain. He quite specifically rejects the theory of “deformation” of the October Revolution “from Khrushchev to Garaudy” (via, of course, Trotsky), and seeks to show that “the political history of the Soviet Union is not one of abandonment of the ‘subjective factor’, but rather of its transformation, by the task it had to undertake of industrialising Russia”.

It is possible to agree with Bahro’s basic thesis that in conditions of isolation, a revolution in a backward capitalist country must inevitably and objectively proceed toward the dictatorship of a bureaucratic elite, which will also objectively tend towards “excesses”. However, the “subjective factor” can and must play a role. After all, the overthrow of capitalism is a conscious act led by a subjective force, in which the masses of peasants and the small working class rise above their condition and for no matter how short a time, become an historical force with a consciousness way beyond their objective cultural condition or possibilities.

Of course, as Bahro states, quoting Gramsci, after the revolution there is the process of “revolution-restoration” in which the legacy of history must be accounted for, and in which the objective forces are expressed, including among the working class and above all among the peasantry, but also among the vanguard — the Party.

As Bahro amply demonstrates, Marx, Engels and Lenin had no illusions about the
weight of these objective forces in countries such as Russia. But all conceived of the Russian Revolution being but the spark for Germany, and the advanced capitalist countries, where the working class there would respond. When, in Lenin's last years, it became increasingly clear that Russia would remain isolated and that the revolutions in Western Europe would not achieve victory, Lenin sought to halt the bureaucratisation. One method was the formation of the Workers and Peasants Inspectorate, which, as Bahro notes, became itself bureaucratised and under Stalin a means for his dictatorship.

The question of how far it is possible to limit bureaucratisation in backward countries remains a burning one, for it is in these countries that socialist revolutions are taking place, and where the same or similar objective conditions pertain and where the goal of primitive accumulation of capital is dictated.

In one sense, these revolutions are not as isolated, as the Soviet Union and eastern Europe form a powerful economic force which could objectively give the basis for lessening the ravages enforced by such accumulation. The problem remains, first because the aid offered is not, and for the foreseeable future could not be sufficient to overcome the basic problem, and, second, the fact that the Soviet bloc remains a bureaucratic dictatorship, and recommends, even imposes, its model on new socialist revolutions, leads to new revolutions falling for these reasons into the same pattern. All one can say is that some of the excesses of Stalin are avoided, particularly the forced collectivisation which still imposes such a heavy burden on Soviet agriculture.

Bahro mentions the Yugoslav and Chinese experiences a number of times, while deploring the fact that in east Europe he must rely on western sources to know what is happening. This, of course, points to the problems someone like Bahro faces, particularly when studying China. In regard, for example, to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, this has led him into a too-ready acceptance of the verbiage of that particular episode.

Yugoslavia does, however, show that in given conditions it is possible to substantially combat the objective forces driving to a bureaucratic dictatorship, even when the process has begun. In China, the experience prior to the Cultural Revolution showed that transformation of the countryside could be tackled without the excesses of Stalin. There is good reason to believe that, in specific circumstances, particularly with a leadership aware of the fundamental problems, it would be possible to go beyond the Yugoslav experience, even in a backward country in Africa, Asia or Latin America.

Finally, it is worth noting that the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and latter-day Maoism, were in many ways rooted in this desire to skip the inevitable stages of capital accumulation, by a "forced march" using the techniques of pre-revolutionary guerrilla warfare and mass mobilisation to "leap" forward.

In one sense, it was an attempt to replace the mass terror used by Stalin as a means of labor discipline with mass political mobilisation, which implied self-denial by the masses and an end of "material incentives", which, with the politically-inspired labor of the masses was to allow the massive accumulation of capital resources.

The "deformations" of the Cultural Revolution, denounced by Mao, were the effects of objective forces arising from the historical backwardness of China, distorting the ideal Mao had set. The end result was disastrous, with two decades lost. Now the Deng-Hua group is attempting the other road, offering the masses, and particularly the peasantry, the "material incentives" denied in the past, while exploiting the present world conjuncture to hope for massive western investment to escape from the iron grip of China's economic backwardness.

At the extreme, we have Pol Pot's Kampuchea, where the desire to go straight to communism, to physically destroy the total historical legacy, down to the most minute example, led to the massacre of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, guilty of carrying in their heads some aspect of the past, or of simply objecting to Pol Pot's "experiment". The end result was that the experimenters themselves came quickly to embody the worst barbarism of the past
which they claimed they were trying to destroy. Those who do not recognise historical necessity and try to “abolish” it, become consumed by it themselves. The continuing appeal of Maoist solutions, offering illusionary short-cuts around historical necessity, cannot be underestimated among the revolutionary intellectuals of the Third World.

They are on the other end of the scale to Bahro.

★

Bahro is not primarily concerned with such problems, but the legacy of such problems as they exist in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union today. His fundamental thesis is that the “stalinist superstructure” which continues is obsolete and that the “material preconditions of socialism are at least achieved far above that minimum that Lenin once took to be necessary”.

Bahro notes that Marx and Engels saw the preconditions already achieved in England of their time, and Lenin in Germany. No doubt, these were over-optimistic projections of the potential of the economy and of the working class at those times. Whether Bahro and most Marxists of today are over-optimistic about the present level of productive forces in advanced capitalist and post-capitalist countries being sufficient for reaching socialism as defined by Marx and Lenin, will only be tested in reality. However, there can be no doubt now that the present level of productive forces is already testing the limits of finite resources. In such conditions, and given the analysis developed by, among many others, Australian communists, it is difficult to conceive of socialism which would necessitate a lunar colony! We will return to this later in this review.

The second part of Bahro’s book seeks to analyse “actually existing socialism”. Arising from the necessity of the Bolsheviks to organise post-revolutionary Russia for the primitive accumulation of capital, came the need for labor discipline, and the division of labor, which took a “traditional” form between manual and intellectual, between those who make decisions and those who carry them out. This, under Stalin, grew into a totally hierarchical and centralised structure, a structure which remains intact in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, if with some minor modifications (such as a much less reliance on terror).

Bahro sees the road to socialism as defined by Marx and Lenin as depending on the abolition of the traditional division of labor. Bahro insists that Soviet and east European socialism is stratified not into a simple dichotomy of working class and bureaucracy, as is claimed, for example, in orthodox Trotskyist analysis, but rather into a series of social strata, organised on the hierarchical structure of these societies.

Bahro agrees the bureaucracy exists, but he denies the existence of the working class as a social class as it exists in capitalist society. “Individuals”, writes Bahro, “only form a class insofar as they stand in common antithesis to another class with respect to their position vis-a-vis the conditions of production and existence.... The proletariat loses its specific socio-economic identity together with the bourgeoisie, so that in the post-revolutionary situation it is necessarily completely different criteria, in fact criteria of internal structuring, that become relevant.”

Bahro repeats many times that the bureaucracy uses the concept of an existing working class, which supposedly rules in “actually existing socialism”, to mystify. And later, Bahro develops a thesis common to all oppositionists in eastern Europe: that it is the intellectuals who will lead change.

It is not true that the working class ceases to exist because its antithesis, the capitalist class, no longer exists. Classes are historical formations. The working class continues to exist in the transition to socialism because it is historically a specific class, whose task, as conceived by Marx and Lenin, is to carry out the transition to a classless society, which implies abolition of the traditional division of labor etc. and therefore its own abolition. Of course, it is necessary to look again at such concepts in the light of historical experience. But it is insufficient to point to the “atomisation” of the working class in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, or to the fact that they have no “leaders” of their own (p. 190). The atomisation of the working class and the destruction of its autonomous political or trade union organisation can be
explained by historical evolution, as a product of stalinist terror.

If, as Bahro argues earlier, the bureaucracy is the "substitute for an exploiting class", then it can be said that in "actually existing socialism" the working class is defined not by what under capitalism is its primary feature (i.e., its relation to the means of production) but what is under capitalism a derivative function, i.e., its relation to decision-making on the organisation of the means of production and distribution of the surplus.

Bahro proceeds, however, to categorise strata in post-capitalist societies within their "level of function in overall social labor": in five categories of, at the bottom, "simple and schematic compartmentalised and ancillary work"; next, "complex specialist empirical work"; "reproductive specialist work in science"; "creative specialist work in science", and finally at the peak "analysis and synthesis of the natural and social totality".

These are part of a simplified "sketch of the social structure of proto-socialist industrial society in its differentiation according to degree of education, level of management, functions of the reproductive process and branches of the division of labor in the particular sphere of the economy". It is, of course, fruitful, including in all capitalist societies, to examine the social strata within and without the principal classes. It is necessary, even essential, if any class analysis is to be of practical use, to not only examine the major classes but also the different strata within them, and to reject the so-called marxist analysis which denies that there are no strata outside the basic classes, or in the grey fringe areas between them.

Bahro's analysis and denial of the existence of the working class is also strange insofar as it denies experience in eastern Europe in recent decades. Bahro refers several times to the Polish events in December 1970, which were eminently an example of working class action and self-organisation, but, in common with many intellectual oppositionists, stresses rather the way they were "contained" by the apparatus with "reforms". Yet the Polish events of 1970, and to a lesser extent the events in Hungary in 1956, Berlin in 1953 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, concretely
showed that the working class does exist, uniting both the "old" and "new" sectors, and is capable of overcoming its atomisation and organising in a class way.

Of course, these struggles, while reaching towards socialist democracy, were often of a "trade union" character, arising as reactions against particular injustices or bureaucratic acts, similar in many ways to such struggles in the capitalist world, in their motivation at least. And as Bahro so eloquently illustrates, it is a question of a total transformation of the "proto-socialist" societies into socialist ones, involving the abolition of the traditional division of labor, a redefinition of total goals and so on. When workers' struggles, moreover, have primarily a "trade union" aspect, then it is possible for other forces to demagogically exploit them.

It is the nature of the transformation necessary — that is, not simply introduction of socialist democracy but also a "cultural revolution" (as defined by Bahro, not Mao) — which does imply a specific role for intellectuals and, above all, for revolutionary, communist intellectuals who are able to break out of the limitations of the intellectual strata as it exists, and to develop their own, full role in such a transformation. One of those limitations is the elitism and contempt for the "working class" which is so common, including among intellectually-trained workers themselves. That does not mean, however, to fall into the other limitation of intellectuals which is to idealise the working class which, rather than overcoming elitism, is only another expression of it.

But before continuing on this question, which rather fits in to the discussions of the last part of Bahro's book, we should examine his analysis of the nature and limitations of "actually existing socialism".

The driving force of post-revolutionary Russia and of all "actually existing socialisms" is and was economic growth, first to achieve the material basis for socialism and now to overtake the capitalist world. Bureaucratic-centralist planning within those goals, goals which are dictated in fact by the capitalist world as the more "advanced" competitor, operates in specific conditions which Bahro helps elucidate in a very useful way. Communists in advanced capitalist countries, because of a vastly different experience, find it difficult to grasp these conditions. Bahro places great stress on the importance economic competition with capitalism plays in "actually existing socialism". This contributes to continuation of emphasis on economic growth, within a framework determined by the more advanced competitor.

Second, because social and material positions depend on the place occupied in the hierarchy, "competitive behaviour between individuals in our system is ... strongly focussed on the phase of education, in which access and admission to favourable positions in the system of overall social labour is determined, with those strata who have already acquired education and influence holding the centre of the stage". (p.212)

Equally important, Bahro claims that in the GDR and other east European countries, "the content and character of labor, together with the opportunities for advance and development that are bound up with the job, have already overtaken salary as a motivational factor, and the more highly skilled people are, the more pronounced this tendency is". This "competition for appropriation of activities for self-development" has become the "specific driving force of economic life characteristic of actually existing socialism".

The nature of these societies, the "assumptions of its existence", require that the contradiction between the State and "the immediate producers does not become too marked", meaning that the State is "essentially ... in no position to enforce the same intensity of labor as capitalism can". Thus, "workers have a far greater opportunity to blackmail the 'entire society' than do the trade unions under capitalism, and actually do use this, against all surface appearance, even if they can do so only in an unfruitful way, i.e. by holding back on their output".

Thus, at both the level of the intelligentsia and the "immediate producers" there is movement. But each has its specific expression. The intelligentsia are enwebbed within a bureaucratic mesh which they
either adapt to, or find themselves in contradiction with.

As for the bureaucracy, Bahro presents a bill which draws both from Marx's own analysis of capitalist state bureaucracy, and the experience of “actually existing socialism”. Bahro provides a major place for “bureaucratic rivalry” and for “bureaucratic inertia” within these societies, particularly among the “politbureaucracy”. Compared with them, the technocrat “is a progressive figure (who)... is objectively working at the liquidation of his role, inasmuch as he sets progressive productive forces in motion, whereas the bureaucrat daily sanctifies the status quo”.

“The indolence of the bureaucrat corresponds to the lack of interest of the worker and the dissatisfaction of the specialist... The modern productive forces, which are based more than ever on people being creative, are effectively braked by our bureaucracy precisely in their most sensitive zone.” And the party is trapped within this “omnipresent spider’s web by its own apparatus”.

At the peak is the “politbureau dictatorship ... a grotesque exaggeration of the bureaucratic principle, inasmuch as the party apparatus subordinate to it is at the same time both church hierarchy and super-state”.

There is no need to go into great detail here on how this leads to a lessening of potential development, which includes above all definition of the goals set and the ability to mobilise forces for such change.

The final section of Bahro’s book is both its most important and most controversial. Bahro directly confronts the question of “utopianism” to which “marxists have a defensive attitude. It was so laborious to escape from them in the past. But today utopian thought has a new necessity ... Today it is general emancipation that is the absolute necessity.”

Bahro returns to a central theme — that economic conditions, the level of productive forces in advanced industrial societies, are or will soon be sufficient to consider the abolition of the traditional division of labor and “general emancipation” — and that the social forces are already present in “actually existing socialism” to achieve this goal.

Bahro advances the concept of “surplus consciousness” as one key concept for his “strategy”: “today we have for the first time in history a really massive ‘surplus consciousness’, i.e., an energetic mental capacity that is no longer absorbed by the immediate necessities and danger of human existence and can thus orient itself to more distant problems... The problem is to drive forward the ‘overproduction’ of consciousness, so as to put the whole historical past ‘on its head’ and make the idea into the decisive material force, to guide things to a radical transformation that goes still deeper than the customary transition from one formation to another within one and the same civilisation”.

This leads Bahro to his central strategic concept — a “cultural revolution” defined as “a transformation of the entire subjective form of life of the masses, something that can only be compared with that other transition which introduced humanity into class society by way of patriarchy, the vertical division of labor and the state. In this second cultural revolution, man will found his existence on his consciousness, on the ‘highest mode of existence of matter’ and concentrate on the social organisation of the noosphere so as to regulate his natural relationship anew from this point of departure”.

It is unfortunate that Bahro uses the term “surplus consciousness” which certainly has idealist and even metaphysical implications.

Essentially, however, Bahro is advancing a thoroughly materialist concept: the high level of productive forces and the high cultural level of all sectors arising from it and necessitated by it, provide the basis for “general emancipation”, or in the words of Marx and Engels in the German Ideology: “the task of replacing the domination of circumstances and of chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances”.

The task is concretised by Bahro: expanded production, “this very avalanche of expansion in all material and technical dimensions, is beginning to exhibit a runaway character. The success that we have with our means of dominating nature is threatening to destroy both ourselves and all
other peoples, whom it relentlessly draws into its wake”. It stands “in global antagonistic contradiction to the natural conditions of human existence... The so-called scientific and technical revolution... must be reprogrammed by a new social revolution. The idea of progress in general must be interpreted in a radically different way from that which we are accustomed”.

Thus Bahro in the following pages takes up the concerns of many in the capitalist world: the environment and consumerism, which in the GDR is leading to the same waste as in the capitalist West. Bahro analyses how “consumerism” arises from alienation. He therefore concludes that “the overcoming of subalternity on a mass scale is the only possible alternative to the limitless expansion of material needs”. This is a very important conclusion, not only for eastern Europe, but also for the West.

It is already clear in countries such as Australia that material needs are manufactured and are pushed beyond bounds that are rational, healthy or ecologically sound. Under capitalism, these false needs also arise from alienation, while being sponsored in the drive for maximum profits. In “actually existing socialism”, it is alienation plus the continuous pressure of the need to measure up to the advanced capitalist world, that sponsors artificial needs.

There remain, of course, real material needs that exist and will continue to exist and which any society claiming to be socialist must fulfil. In Australia today real needs, such as housing, education, health and other needs which have to be largely fulfilled by public functions, are denied because the drive is to maximising profits which requires new, artificial needs to take precedence. It is not only, of course, a question of maximising profits, but of the capitalist state finding forms of social control and containment or diversion, allowing alienation to be channelled.

Bahro is right: only when there is a revolution in cultural options, a revolution against alienation, waste and artificial needs, can progress take place in advanced industrial societies.

In advanced capitalist countries, it is inconceivable that a revolution can occur which will be aimed at more of the same —
that is, fulfilling even greater material needs. Rather, it will be aimed at fulfilling real needs that are denied, while undertaking the same type of “cultural revolution” that Bahro defines as necessary in the “actually existing socialisms”.

As Bahro sums it up: “The question is to create the objective conditions so that everyone can prefer to know and to be, instead of to possess”.

Bahro outlines a program for such a cultural revolution, including such things as “the redivision of labor” in which all share not only in decision-making but in different types of labor; “a unitary course of education for fully socialised people” and “securing the capacity for education and the motivation to learn”, with “humanisation of childhood”, end to “sexual oppression”, patriarchalism and “personal communication” etc.

Some of these are, of course, also widely debated in the West, and no doubt many (including this reviewer) will find much to debate, to query or to reject. The point is not the validity or not of Bahro’s specific solutions, but his stress on these factors within a “cultural revolution”, as integrated within the total revolution he sees as not only desirable but necessary and possible.

After outlining such questions (which he returns to in the last two chapters), Bahro considers the “potential for a new transformation”, examining for example the Prague Spring, the hallmark of which was its aspect of “glorious revolution”, “of the appropriation of political power on the basis of competence” .... it needed no special program apart from that of ‘pressing forward’”.

Bahro sees dangers in a movement which is simply a political opposition “not a political-economic, socio-economic and cultural opposition”. Such a “superficially political opposition” which, behind democratic demands seeks mainly to destroy the apparatus, “unfortunately” means for Bahro that probably “the minimal program of a democratic revolution against the politbureaucracy becomes autonomous, and demands a stage of its own”.

It is this fear which nags at Bahro and which he returns to throughout the last part of the book: that the rising nationalism in eastern Europe (and inside the Soviet Union) arising from Soviet heavy-handed domination, plus the lag in the west European socialist revolution, plus the dangers of an Europe-wide explosion ending in nuclear war, mean that “a planned evolution in eastern Europe would be the surest means to averting a later European conflict over this zone. Otherwise it cannot be ruled out.” Bahro expresses his thanks for west European communist support and advocates dialogue between those in east and west Europe. Unfortunately, in my view (and as things have turned out), Bahro seems much too optimistic in the evolution of “Eurocommunism” to power and socialist transformation in west Europe.

Bahro proposes the formation of a league of communists which would represent the “emancipatory interests”, that is those forces and interests in all strata which identify with “general emancipation”, the cultural revolution etc., which “puts the state hierarchy in its proper place”. Bahro rejects the concept of this “league of communists”, being a “working class party”, for reasons outlined earlier, and the league becomes “...the collective intellectual”.

Of course, Bahro shows some awareness of the inherent limits of intellectuals, but in fact sees the league as the party of the intellectuals which will unite around it all “emancipatory interests” from all strata.

In many ways, Bahro ignores (when it comes to the intellectuals) his own strictures concerning the effects of the traditional division of labor. While we are told much about the effects it has on the bureaucrat and the worker, little is mentioned about its effects on the intelligentsia as such (except when they are absorbed into the apparatus). The “pure intellectual” is, by omission, almost idealised and, in fact, this intellectual is the model for the future society.

* * * *

It is not, however, necessary to dwell on this important gap in Bahro’s theses.

After all, he has written a trail-blazing book, not only for communists in the
advanced industrial societies of "actually existing socialism", but also for those in advanced capitalist countries and, more generally, for the whole international communist movement.

Bahro is somewhat unique in that he is optimistic concerning perspectives for change in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. One gets the opinion that he did not believe that he would face prison after writing this book, and that there were forces, even in the top ideological apparatus of the ruling parties, that were of basically the same mind as himself. Let us hope that this is correct, although two years in prison shows that he perhaps underestimated the official reaction.

It is true, as we saw in Czechoslovakia, that the forces for change are potentially very strong, and that the resistance of the top apparatus, the "politbureaucracy", crumbled easily, and many at the top became leaders of change. No doubt, too, there are "Soviet Dubceks" waiting in the wings at the top leadership, as he claims.

Certainly, once objective and subjective factors ripen and combine, the task of changing the bureaucratic system and opening the road to socialism is much easier in eastern Europe than in capitalist countries, where the ruling class maintains immensely powerful ideological autonomous and active forces of repression.

Any such change in "actually existing socialism" would, of course, be an immense aid to the revolutionary movement in advanced capitalist countries as well as in the ex-colonial nations suffering from the horrific legacy of capitalist and imperialist super-exploitation.

* * * *

One thing is certain: Rudolf Bahro is a comrade, a communist of courage and perspicacity. His release from prison is to be welcomed and let's hope that change begins within the framework he outlines.