A debate among Marxists of Eastern Europe on an alternative democratic path of development is under way.

The contribution of Andras Hegedus to this debate is unique. He was the Prime Minister of Stalinist Hungary but has made a critical reappraisal of his own past and that of his country.

As a part of the “critical Marxist opposition”, Hegedus was subjected to official silence for many years, but has recently emerged to give lectures at the university and to publish several works, mainly abroad, but also in Hungary itself.

In this interview he discusses the work of the best-known contributor to the Eastern European Marxist debate, Rudolf Bahro of the German Democratic Republic. (See “The Challenge of Rudolf Bahro” by Denis Freney, ALR No. 72, Dec. 1979.)

The interview was conducted in Budapest by Luigi Marcolungo and published in the Italian Communist Weekly Rinascita. Translated and abridged by Dave Davies.

You have been making a study of Bahro’s views lately. What are your opinions?

Bahro’s contribution is important above all because of his denunciation, in its context, of blind apologetic faith and the philosophy of despair. In his examination of the societies of Eastern Europe he bases himself on those socialist and humanist values which are an integral part of Marxism and which I share in full.

However, I do not agree with his approach to Marxism and with conclusions that he draws from his analysis of existing social relationships in the countries of Eastern Europe.

What do you mean by this?

In my view, he bases himself on the premise that the classics of Marxism have made an unequivocal forecast of future socialist societies, while in fact Marx and Engels made contradictory forecasts at different times, including on substantial aspects.

Hence the battle of quotations, of which the most grotesque is that between the supporters of the self-management solution and the statist solution.

What is necessary is a critical attitude to Marxist orthodoxy, including Marxist-Leninist, that which performs an apologetic function such as in Eastern Europe and also critiques in the capitalist countries.
And although I wish at all costs to remain "critical" I must add (excuse what may seem a game with words) a "less critical" analysis of social relationships in eastern Europe. I do not consider them to be a "deformation" born of "despotism" but rather as a particular historical bloc (according to the gramscian concept) which has developed in particular historical conditions arising from previous social relationships specific to those countries.

This historical bloc, while offering limited possibilities of democratic development, has nevertheless in present conditions a capacity to reproduce itself.

What do you mean by "less critical" — for example in relation to the situation of the working class in these countries, judged by Bahro to be a subordinate one?

It is not possible to form an idea of the relationship between power and the working class in these countries without analysing the behaviour of the main types of workers who are socially active. To simplify to the extreme, I will say that there are two main types.

The first kind of worker is involved in the activity of the elective organs at all levels (parliament, municipal and regional councils, party committees, trade unions, etc) and lives out the official ideology and makes it his own in subjective terms. This worker, although participating in the real decision making processes in formal terms — something of which is completely conscious — does not consider himself separate from the real instances of power. And it should be kept in mind that even formal participation is, in sociological and even real terms, a type of participation whose influence is difficult to escape.

In Hungary the members of the voluntary workers' militia are a part of this group. We should also take into account the movement from generation to generation that takes place in these societies, diminishing though it may be, which still broadens the composition of this group of workers. A good part of the officer corps of the various armed forces is still today formed from the sons of workers. This is especially true for the Soviet army and the workers of Russian nationality.

Unfortunately most of those who belong to the critical opposition dismiss with contempt this type of worker, who plays a role which cannot be overlooked even in numerical terms. If this is overlooked, the capacity of the system to reproduce itself in conditions of crisis — such as Hungary after November 4, 1956 — becomes incomprehensible. Of course the motivations which come into play in the processes of integration of this group are another subject for analysis.

The lack of attention to the role and presence of this type of worker is also widespread among western observers of socialist countries. And the second type of worker?

Just as some do not take account of the first type of worker, the ideologues of official apologia do not know what to do with those who have an attitude of opposition. They are passed off as an insignificant minority or hooligans. At times of difficulty the label of counter-revolutionaries or agents of imperialism is stuck on.

But despite everything they exist and are probably not fewer than the first group, although I cannot support this with reliable sociological research. Their role becomes important at times of crisis but is present even in periods of "normality".

It is these workers who keep awake the consciousness of class as a group separate from other social groups. This consciousness manifests itself among other things by the use of "we" (workers) and "they" (the leaders)...

Does this kind of differentiation also exist among intellectuals?

When I was teaching at the university I noticed that this differentiation begins among students. Some students are oriented towards an administrative or public career and finish up identifying with the institutions. They will be the "experts", the replacements for those in power who lose their original character as intellectuals the more their career advances to assume the character of the various kinds of "bureaucrats".

On the other hand there are intellectuals who reject identification with the institutions even at the price of giving up the advantages offered by the acceptance of leadership tasks. And this is precisely the group which forms the social base of the critical intelligentsia which sets itself the objective of autonomy. It is obvious that only a limited section of these reach an "active" critical attitude. Most of them limit their activity to one simple profession, avoiding carefully all involvement in the social or political field. The result is the accentuated "privatisation" of the whole existence of the individual so typical of eastern Europe.

Choosing this compromise is relatively easy in the field of natural science, but in the social sciences it is almost inevitable that a conflict occurs sooner or later between the two tendencies, the apologetic and the critical. This is notwithstanding the growth in the number of those seeking to remain neutral or "empirically objective" at all costs.

What is your analysis of the processes of bureaucratisation of the societies of eastern Europe? And what do you think of the hypotheses advanced by Bahro?
Bahro bases his position on a communism which we can define as “consequentially anti-bureaucratic”. He sees the dominant feature of the societies of eastern Europe as the bureaucratisation of the relationships of power. He also maintains that the bureaucratic formations can be eliminated without particularly negative consequences, in a way which allows the building of an harmonious socialist or communist society.

And it is on this point that I do not agree. Firstly, because bureaucracy in the world of power structures assumes diverse and complex forms, even in opposition to each other: it is enough to consider the relationship between the directors of an enterprise and directors of the central economic organs of the state, between the bureaucracy with ideological motivation and the technocracy (which represents the day to day conflict between economic rationale and political priority), between “political” leaders and “experts”. One cannot speak vaguely.

Further, I do not agree because while it could be conceded ... that bureaucracy can be limited by social control, it is pure utopia to think that it can be eliminated entirely.

Bahro concludes that because of bureaucratisation, the revolutionary communist party has lost its function and is today nothing but a duplication of the state. Do you agree with this?

If Bahro is correct, then the only thing to be done — as he himself proposes — is to transfer the functions of the party to the state in its capacity of an institutional system and organise the communist party on a new revolutionary basis. But it would be necessary to explain why this process should be brought about, because the “just for power” of the leaders is certainly not sufficient explanation.

In reality, the communist parties in power carry out an important function of social integration among state or public organs at various levels which pursue their own particular objectives.

And the importance of this function has increased with the years in these societies, not diminished.

Bahro accepts the bureaucratisation of the institutional systems of those countries as a necessary evil as well as an historical necessity, but rejects as a useless evil the bureaucratisation of the communist party — which I maintain to be equally inevitable.

It seems that you have in mind a path of democratic development in eastern European countries different from that described by Bahro.

That is so. He thinks that in the countries of “actually existing socialism” a communist opposition will be formed sooner or later which will give rise to a truly revolutionary party. Having taken political power, it will eliminate all useless bureaucracy, realising in practice the principle outlined in the classics of marxism.

But this prospect does not convince me. This is not so much for its lack of realism (in fact there is no trace of this process in the reality of these countries), but above all because the “new party”, having attained power and independently of its original anti-bureaucratic concepts, would not be able to escape the necessity of carrying out the same function of integration of the interests within the power structure like the present party.

The “league of communists” would be transformed therefore into an institution, the members of which, exercising power and bearing all the consequences of it, would find themselves trapped in an equally intricate system of relationships of mutual subordination.

Bahro warns of this danger, but maintains that it can be avoided with a cultural revolution. An important objection here is that in fact the societies of eastern Europe, within the limits imposed by economic development, are moving towards a consumerist model of life rather than towards a cultural revolution.

But the real objection is rather that there is a contradiction between the character of the individual hypothesised in Bahro’s cultural revolution and that of the member of the revolutionary communist party who is struggling for power.

In addition there is another important consideration. It is the danger that the replacement of the “bureaucratised party” by the new “revolutionary party”, this “exchange of roles between anvil and hammer” finishes up causing incalculable suffering to the population.

What prospects do you regard as possible for an alternative democratic development in eastern Europe? I know that you have been reticent about giving a precise answer, although you have maintained that it is not a matter of a return to a multi-party system.

I have reached the conclusion that the true alternative, both “possible and desirable”, can only be the attainment of a dichotomy within society which can guarantee the pluralism indispensable for a democratic social life.

This dichotomy could be guaranteed on one hand by the existence of an institutional system of power. Although largely bureaucratised, it could carry out at the same time an historically necessary function above all in economics and more generally in ensuring the more complex framework of social life.

On the other hand, there would be various movements, more or less institutionalised, which could provide social control* of the bureaucratic
Conflict, Girvan is at pains to emphasise, changes the form of the relationship, but not necessarily its essence. Its essence lies in the power which the parent company exercises over its subsidiaries, the metropolitan centre over the periphery:

The subsidiary’s integration with the parent company comprehensive: its economic dependence is therefore total, and its subjugation to external authority absolute. It is the imperialism of the parent over the subsidiary, as embodied in the power relationships and economic characteristic of the transnational firm, which, when reproduced on a world scale and transposed onto the centre-periphery pattern of the international capitalist economy, gives rise to the phenomenon that we have called corporate imperialism. (24-5).

Girvan shows how all the raw material industries in the Third World came to be foreign-owned as American and European monopoly capital expanded at the end of the last century. In copper, for example, it was the same story in Montana and in Chile — the elimination of an embryonic capitalist class and the integration of resources into the operations of a monopoly company. Mineral-exporting economies in the Third World experience periods of rapid growth of exports, but eventually a state of relative stagnation is reached as the TNC moves on to more economic suppliers, or to new end-products. Girvan asks how can mineral industry initiate a process of self-sustaining growth in the wider economy that can outlast the boom period in mineral exports. Under corporate imperialism the answer is that it cannot:

...mineral industries in the peripheral countries have conspicuously failed to act as a catalyst for the generation of self-sustaining growth... (Moreover)... this failure has occurred in spite of decades of active government intervention in these economies, using mineral-industry revenues to promote diversified development aimed at relieving economic dependence on mineral exports. Today, that goal is as far away as ever for most if not all of the mineral export economies. (30-31)

This failure results from the subsidiary which owns the mining industry being integrated with the parent company, not with the local economy. Profits are remitted overseas, linkages are few, purchases are made from the parent firm rather than locally, capital is raised by the parent firm abroad and so forth. The host government and the subsidiary’s labor force attempt to bargain with the transnational for a larger share of the revenue flow. At some point in the history of the firm’s investment in the country, a larger share may be obtained. After the period of formal colonialism ended in the 1960s, generally the first generation of nationalist leaders were able to “renegotiate” a better deal with the TNCs. One problem here is knowing exactly what are the profits of the subsidiaries, but if this and similar problems can be overcome, the host government may find itself with increased revenues from the mining sector. The consequence of this is that taxes from mining became the main source of government revenue, the state apparatus expands rapidly, and the power of the bureaucratic-politician class is greatly strengthened. Income from mining now finances expensive development schemes which involve imports of capital and consumption goods. At this point, attempts to diversify run contrary to the interests of the TNC and the host government leaders and public servants, who then see any threat — including militant labor demands for higher wages and/or control — to the TNC as a threat to their own position. “Growth without development” sums it up: national income increases, as do levels of investment, imports, exports — but poverty and structural unemployment remain. Having obtained a “better deal” from the TNCs and become more dependent upon mineral exports, countries producing the same raw material sometimes come together to present a united front to the multinationals and to demand an even higher share. Some of these attempts have been very successful, e.g. OPEC and the International Bauxite Association. But