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A Communist Idealist Criticizes the "Real Existing Socialism" of the GDR (1977)

Because the GDR was ending neither the exploitation of workers nor the arms race, the ethical Marxist Rudolf Bahro criticized the post-Stalinist version of "real existing socialism" in the Soviet bloc and proposed the creation of a new Communist League in order to recapture the original revolutionary spirit.

The communist movement made its appearance with the promise of solving the basic problems of modern humanity and overcoming the antagonisms of human existence. The countries that call themselves socialist still pay official allegiance to this programme. But what perspectives are people offered in the present situation, if they turn their eyes to the practice of our social life? Is there any way of telling how the new order plans to prove its superiority by a more effective organization and economy of labour? Has it attained its promised breakthrough to the humanization of collective life, or is it at least making daily progress in this field, in as much as the goal is not yet reached? What kind of better life was it that we sought to create? Was it only that mediocre well-being devoid of any further perspectives in which we try unsuccessfully to compete with late capitalism, try to overtake it on a road that, by all our traditional theory, leads straight into the abyss? We were planning to create a new and higher civilization! That new civilization is more necessary today than ever before; its image has nothing in common with the illusion of a 'perfect society' free from contradiction.

For the time being, it has turned out, we are extending the old civilization, continuing on the 'capitalist road'; compulsively, as it were, i.e. under very real compulsions, and in a most profound sense that involves our whole culture, rather than being simply a question of politics. A superstructure has emerged from our revolution which seems only good for this purpose, and for pursuing it in the most systematic and bureaucratic way possible. As all those involved are well aware, the rule of man by man has lost only its topmost layer. The alienation and subalternity of the working masses persists in a new phase. Completely stuck in the old logic of international power politics and diplomacy, the new order does not even secure peace – not to be confused with the 'balance of terror' which it plays an active part in reproducing. The relationship between the two major powers of actually existing socialism even displays some quite apocalyptic features. In the Soviet Union, the liberal intellectual opposition seems to be at least at one with the government that the major strategic task facing the country is to build up Siberia, both industrially and militarily. And China is digging in, building a new great wall against the North, which this time is underground and everywhere.

[. . .]

The centre of the crisis is the Soviet Union itself; and although it has not yet reached there the same degree of maturity as for example in the GDR and Czechoslovakia, the ground is already

shaking at the edges. Nothing that the Soviet leaders do to escape its consequences, on the basis of the existing conditions, can prevent its eruption. The invasion of Czechoslovakia in fact accelerated mental polarization in the other countries of the bloc. It is precisely the general, comprehensive and fundamental character of the crisis, precisely the fact that its focus lies in the Soviet Union, that enables the perspectives for a movement of renewal and the tasks of such a movement to appear in a quite different and more hopeful light. The discussions of Soviet economists and sociologists are bearing ever closer towards the decisive points, and it is not accidental that under the surface the arguments of the early 1920s are again being revived. The Soviet Union *must* reform itself, to keep pace internally with the demands of the masses, and to maintain its international position. The obsolete forces will then be prevented from putting their particular caste interests to the fore. The first requirement is to win the space for public discussion of the 'burning questions of our movement'.

[. . .]

We cannot undertake to deal in detail with all these problems in one single text, even if on some of them there is already an immense amount of literature, which is still deliberately withheld from the public in our countries and hence cannot even be critically examined. What is possible, however, even without making any claims to monographic completeness, is to reach a general position on this complex of questions. We can undertake to present the preliminary result attained in an outline form of the kind given in Marx's own *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. [. . .]

The hour of theory and history must begin. The hour of politics will follow sooner or later.

The first part of the book is concerned with the phenomenon of the non-capitalist road to industrial society.

Our actually existing socialism is a fundamentally different social organization from that outlined in Marx's socialist theory. This practice may be compared with the theory, but it should not be measured by it. It must be explained in terms of its own laws. All theories of deformation, however, from Khrushchev to Garaudy, lead away from this task. My own analysis leads to a general concept of the 'non-capitalist road' which includes most of the nominally socialist countries, and to the search for the origin of this non-capitalist road in the legacy of the so-called Asiatic mode of production. This is the basis for the subsequent discussion of Russia's progress from agricultural to industrial despotism, and the fate of the Bolshevik party in the process. We must try and do justice to the historical character of the Stalinist structure of domination. The political history of the Soviet Union is not one of abandonment of the 'subjective factor', but rather of its transformation, by the task that it had to undertake of industrializing Russia. It is the new tasks of today that demonstrate the anachronistic character of the old-style party, and not just certain principles of political morality.

In the second part, I deal with the systematic structure of actually existing socialism, as opposed to its historical treatment in the first part: its bureaucratic-centralist organization of labour, its character as a stratified society, the marked impotence of the immediate producers, its relatively weak impulse towards raising productivity, its political-ideological organization as a quasi-theocratic state. The essence of actually existing socialism is conceived as one of socialization in the alienated form of stratification, this being based on a traditional division of labour which has not yet been driven to the critical point at which it topples over.

The final part is devoted to the alternative that is maturing in the womb of actually existing socialism, and in the industrially developed countries as a whole. This bears the character of that comprehensive cultural revolution, that transformation of the entire former division of labour, way of life and mentality that Marx and Engels predicted. Universal human emancipation is becoming ever more pressing, but the conditions for this must be studied afresh, and its contents defined appropriately to the time. The social dialectic of its first steps is characterized by the struggle to demolish the structures of domination in labour and hence also in the state, but this can only proceed at the pace that circumstances permit, as there will still be a social stratification by intellectual competence. The cultural revolution thus presupposes a truly communist party, a new League of Communists. Communists must take their distance from the state machine, and start by putting an end to the dominance of the apparatus in their own organization. They must inscribe anew on their banner the old slogan of the *Communist Manifesto*, according to which 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all', and be more aware than ever before that this programme cannot be confined to any merely national or continental framework. The real equality of all who bear the human countenance is becoming a question of life and death in practical politics. The world is changing at a pace that is both encouraging and disturbing – disturbing because the total process is still leading spontaneously to situations that no one intended. Peace can only be secured, and the further rise of the human species and of man as an individual can only be assured, if we can put an end to all differences in development opportunities, both within each country and in the world as a whole.

Source: Rudolf Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*. Translated by David Fernbach. © NLB, 1978, pp. 7-14. Originally published in German as *Die Alternative. Zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus* (1977).