Years ago, in a provincial town in eastern Germany, there lived a man whose only remarkable or distinguishing feature seemed to be his enduring loyalty and devotion to the state, proved by years of unstinting and reliable service. So regular in fact were his habits, so perfectly did he seem to mesh with the machinery of daily life, that the local townspeople set their clocks according to his comings and goings. Yet, one day, quite late in life, an event occurred which, as he put it, shook him out of his "dogmatic slumbers". In the aftermath of this profound shock, he wrote a book which revolutionized the thought of his time, and catapulted its author to world fame.

That story is told of Immanuel Kant; the book: the *Critique of Pure Reason*. But it might just as well be told of Rudolf Bahro. For decades he served the East German state with unflinching and, as it seemed, unquestioning devotion. An examination of his life history reveals the *curriculum vitae* of a model functionary. In 1952, at the age of seventeen, he applied to join the Party; in 1954 he was admitted. After five years of study in East Berlin he returned to his native province to help lead the program of collectivization. In recognition of his work here he was called back to the capital, to a series of official duties; as a trade union administrator, editor of a youth journal, and, since 1967, as a management cadre in several key positions in industry. In 1972 he began a doctoral dissertation related to this field: but at the same time he secretly commenced the writing of a very different work.
For as of August 21, 1968, with the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, Rudolf Bahro had broken with the State and Party he had so faithfully served all his adult life. Yet, characteristically, he did not resign from the party in a spectacular, but fleeting gesture of defiance. Instead, he chose a more systematic way to express his opposition. In 1977, his book was ready, and was published in the West. Here, it was hailed by Marxists as diverse and authoritative as Ernest Mandel and Herbert Marcuse, as the most significant contribution to Marxist theory in a generation. The Party and State apparatus of East Germany had their own assessment of the book's significance: on August 23, 1977 they arrested Bahro as an "imperialist spy". It was not until two years later, after an international campaign on his behalf, that he was released and exiled to West Germany.

Bahro's book has since appeared in English; as its title suggests, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* is a critical examination of East European and Soviet society. The author's stated purpose is to provide a theoretical model for the laws of development of these societies, much as Marx had done for capitalism a century earlier.

This gives a clue as to the real significance of the book. For Marx's method in *Kapital* prohibited him from taking the movement of capital as an isolated phenomenon; instead he grasped it as that point where the past, present, and future of human social evolution met. Bahro, in his work, is similarly concerned with the whole. His analysis of perhaps the most original feature of world politics since Marx wrote — the existence of post-capitalist societies — does not content itself with being simply a description of the inner workings of East Germany or the Soviet Union. Its perspective is global: in the most literal sense, by breathing as much the spirit of the Vietnamese Tet offensive and the Paris May uprising, as of the Prague spring of the same eventful year; but also in the sense of grasping East European and Soviet reality as social and historical events. This in turn entails a radical shakedown of the whole edifice of Marxist theory, a loving yet ruthless testing of each concept for its validity, whether it be the view of history or class, the notions of consciousness and labour, or even — the idea of socialism itself.

'Under capitalism, we had the exploitation of man by man: under socialism, we have the reverse'. Bahro opens his study with the counterpart in theory to this classic joke from Eastern Europe. His attempt to re-construct Marxism and the socialist idea begins with a moral and intellectual salto mortale, the frank admission of Marxism's most spectacular apparent weakness — the failure to achieve, anywhere, the society which Marx envisaged. Ranging freely from Marx's early manuscripts to Lenin's writings on the state, Bahro summarizes the original
program of the communist movement: the emancipation of the personality as the goal of social production; the end of human labour as toil and its rebirth as pleasure for the body and imagination; the shedding of the fateful inequalities and antagonisms which had wracked humanity since civilization, between the exploiting and exploited classes, rulers and ruled on the one hand, and, perhaps equally venerable and pernicious, between physical and intellectual labour, and the work of men and women, on the other. On this basis, society could shed its previous characteristics of subordination and compulsion, and assume those of free association. This was socialism; and, contrary to an appellation standard in East and West, it exists nowhere in Eastern Europe.

Even more disturbing is the continuing gap between the practice of the East European countries and the process which Marx and Lenin delineated as leading to socialism, in texts as unequivocal as they were sparse, in relation to the total volume of their work. In their view, the rigid hierarchies and privileges of class society were increasingly to give way to a system of direct democracy, where every member of society assumed a variety of functions, and where all major issues of social life were discussed, decided and acted upon by the entire population. To assure this process against the establishment of some new hierarchy, safeguards were explicitly established. No political or administrative post was to receive a wage higher than that of a skilled labourer, and the mandates for such positions were to be subject to frequent rotation and immediate recall.

The reality of Eastern Europe contradicts this point for point. Executive positions bring with them spectacular material privileges in wages and conditions of life; the party leadership is a gerontocracy where even petty details must be decided from above. Far from withering away, the state apparatus is strengthened from party congress to party congress, while for the working population the hierarchy of the work-place is as petrified and frozen as in any capitalist enterprise. When, in 1970, the Polish party leader Gierek told striking dock workers ‘You will work well, and we will govern well’, he was acting much more in the spirit of the Egyptian Pharoah Pta-Hotep, who admonished his heir to preserve social peace by keeping contact with the masses, than of V.I. Lenin, who held that ‘every cook must be an administrator’.

Naivety has never been reckoned among the sins of Bolshevism. The men and women who ‘shook the world’ in 1917 were well aware (some indeed fearful) that their action represented a stupendous gamble in terms of Marx’s theory. For Marx, it was the level of material productivity and wealth which, in the final analysis, set the limit to human
possibilities. In that sense, backward, agrarian Russia was, in comparison with the industrial nations of Western Europe, an unlikely candidate for socialist transformation. Yet, if the advances of capitalism were under-represented here, so too were its guardians and agents. By displacing Russian absolutism and its feeble bourgeoisie, the Bolsheviks hoped to sound the clarion call for the working classes of Europe and the world to follow, thus assuring an established industrial and technical base for the tasks of social reconstruction.

It is not the place here to discuss how, in the epic confrontations which rocked Germany and Central Europe following World War I, the Bolshevik gamble almost was successful. Suffice it to say that, for socialists, the survival of capitalism in the West is the great negative event which dominates the century. Among other things, it threw the Russian revolution back onto its own slender resources, that awesome gravity of scarcity and want, which Marx had warned about. If extreme shifts of temperature or gravitational pressure radically alter chemical or physical processes, it is hardly different with social ones. The material conditions of the Soviet ‘socialist experiment’ re-animated the conservative tendencies of both Russian, and working-class history.

In Marx’s theory, the social and political past of the greater part of humanity had played only a small, if interesting, role as the ‘Asiatic mode of production’. In Russia, which shared this heritage, it reasserted its significance with a vengeance. In tracing out the history of the first societies with a social surplus and a complex division of labour, the high civilizations of Mesopotamia, the Incas or of China, Bahro discovers astonishing parallels with Stalin’s Russia. Whether for mandarins, bureaucrats, or priests, it was knowledge which formed the initial source of privilege. And just as Oriental despotism had arisen from the vast irrigation projects which rank among the first great human accomplishments, so too did the Stalinist state, combine its repressive function and political culture of servility, with a role as the decisive agent of historical transformation.

Stalin’s rise also tapped a conservatism latent in working-class political organization. Unlike the bourgeoisies of America and Europe, whose revolutions were launched from economic and cultural positions already privileged and secure, the proletariat was the first dispossessed class to, in its own name and on the main stage of history, conquer political power. Yet even the tremendous exertions of insurrection could not dissolve, at a stroke, the harsh legacy of material and cultural deprivation. As long as the industrial day consumes its major energy, and a fixed division of labour offers no relief, the proletariat is dependent for the tasks of leadership and administration on represen-
tatives drawn from without, or promoted from within, its ranks. The dangers of such a process are obvious: in the Soviet Union of the twenties they swept aside every corrective influence, from the sovereignty of the workers' councils to the right of political opposition. In the slogan ‘the soviets plus electrification’ Lenin signalled the course he wished the industrialization of Russia to take. It is instead summed up by Bukharin's apt epithet for Stalin: ‘Ghengis Khan with a telephone’.

In fact, the historic task which fell to the Russian Revolution pre-dated by an epoch the one its initiators had imagined: it was not the creation of a socialist society, but of its pre-requisite, a modern one. Capitalism proved as incapable of assuring the equal development of nations, as of individuals; in that sense, it is not surprising that the Russian revolution should have found its most telling resonance in the colonial world, whose peoples similarly sought a way to snap the pattern of Western tutelage and domination.

Yet, for the Soviet Union itself, this dramatic shift of historic purpose exacted a high price. Engels had written of the choice which faced a radical party which came too soon: it must either betray its program, or be swept away itself. For the rest of their careers these words were to haunt the most lucid Bolshevik theoreticians — Lenin, Preobrazensky, Trotsky. With the abundance and complexity with which reality confounds theory, the actual course of the revolution surpassed at once some of the worst fears and fondest expectations, even of these master dialecticians. The democratic and emancipatory essence of socialism was liquidated, as was the Old Guard of Bolshevism: but from the horrors of the purges and the camps emerged the world's second industrial power, based on the economic foundations of socialism, and ruled by a Communist Party which still claimed loyalty to 'socialism' and the 'toilers' it had politically expropriated.

The social fibres of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe still pulsate with this act of disenfranchisement. The most fateful division of East European society is not one of material privilege in the sense of wealth, however real such privileges may be. Instead it is to be found in the type of work people do. 'Universalizing' labour, the work of determining and directing the social process, remains in the hands of the Party bureaucracy. It is this labour from which the rest of the population, particularly the workers, are cut off. There is scarcely an aspect of East European society which does not relate back directly to this fact. The perpetual problems with the quality and productivity of labour stem from the lack of engagement in a work process which remains psychologically damaging, and whose pace and goal can only be covertly or
negatively influenced. The absence of democracy at the base undermines the rationality of the planned economy, since it becomes impossible to form an accurate picture of social needs. The constant deference to a system of ideological pretences which deny reality, becomes an active impediment to meaningful communication. Finally, the attempt to solve the problem of motivation bureaucratically, or through compulsion, only leads to an enormous squandering of resources on layers of unproductive supervisors, and the expensive toys of censorship and the secret police.4

Moreover, the negative effects of this social hierarchy reproduce themselves within the bureaucracy itself. Here too, the decisions are made by that small body of men who, as one Politbureau member put it, 'have the power and the worries'. The lower-level functionaries are left with the delicate task of fulfilling or exceeding the plan, without inciting the antagonism of their subordinates. The usual response is to retreat into a safe, if feigned, conformism and mediocrity. In describing how this process moulds and flattens each successive generation of bureaucrats, Bahro draws an impressive portrait of historical inner-vation.

Yet the conservative genius of this bureaucracy collides with the impressive dynamism of the societies it administers. This dynamism can still be traced to the material and ideological momentum of 1917. The massive engagement of the population in sophisticated forms of labour, the mobilization of society’s surplus wealth for the very real advances envisaged by the planned economy have long since overcome the scarcity which formed the backdrop to the rise of bureaucratic power. Moreover, it is with the promise of continuous material advancement leading to the distant goal of communism that, to themselves and others, the bureaucrats legitimize their rule.

The competition with the West — technological, political, economic and military — may also be seen as a dynamizing factor, adrenalin for an organism which might otherwise become lugubrious under its own weight. Indeed, in the extremes of hostility and imitation of this relationship, the West takes on all the features of a Doppelgänger, of mythic nemesis and double. But ultimately, it has a conservatizing effect. The armaments race soaks up precious resources, a ‘siege mentality’ becomes a further block to social and political experiment. But perhaps most conservatizing of all is not the antagonism, but the symbiosis of the bureaucracy with the capitalist West.

The unquestioning acceptance of capitalist techniques of mass production may at one point have had the justification of economic
exigency. Today, it serves a primarily political function — the regimentation and hierarchisization of the work force — while at the same time threatening ecological catastrophe. Meanwhile, throughout Eastern Europe a phenomenon long since familiar in the West is spreading: the use of the consumption of material and cultural goods as a substitute for the political co-determination of society.

Bahro's alternative to this 'socialism as it really exists' is as sweeping as his analysis — and as radical. In a political universe which, in its irregularities, more resembles Einsteinian physics than the uniform laws of Newton, Bahro attempts, for Marxism, what might be called 'the splitting of the atom'. For decades the economic determination of social life was held to be the basic, irreducible component of Marx's theory. Bahro, in the urgency of his return to the source, must go deeper. For, if ever it did, the automatic mechanism of economic advance and social emancipation has not functioned in this century. The end of the private ownership of the means of production has not, in itself, guaranteed an end to exploitation, nor has the prosperity in the advanced zones of East and West caused the banishment of those caste and class privileges which, historically based on scarcity, might have been expected to be abolished with it. In response to this situation, Bahro seizes on precisely the humanist and anthropological impulses of Marxism, which, in orthodox tradition, were regarded as problematic and unscientific. Instead, Bahro reveals that it was this tradition which had, not a too narrow perception of humanity's material life; he uses Marx's humanism, not as some new ideal with which to lament an imperfect world, but as a method of disclosing the hidden tendency of things themselves.

Following Marx, Bahro sets the human being, and his-hers manifold capacities, at the centre of his inquiries. What happens to these capacities in the process of work and daily life, that process through which humans cardinaly experience and transform their environment? One might contend that these are fully utilized, indeed, in our complex societies, strained and tested to the limit. Bahro is quick to puncture this apologetic myth. Nowhere, he argues, is the historical obsolescence of 'proto-socialist' (and, by implication, late capitalist) society more evident, than in its inability, with all its material and technical resources, to organize a satisfying work process. The human capacities of imagination and co-operative solidarity, both as innate to the species (a thinking and social being), and as summoned forth by training, are here so under-nourished as to produce a constant simmering mood of crisis. This, not only in the monotonous drudgery of the industrial or service sector — or in the home — remains the fate of the majority. Even in more privileged realms, tasks are specialized to the point of idiocy, and
increasingly bereft of any wider social context or beneficial purpose. Not since Hegel, who held that humanity transformed the world with its glance, has anyone had such a keen appreciation of the significance and potential which reside in the process of human labour. Accordingly, Bahro makes the transformation of work the centre-piece of the cultural revolution he sees as inaugurating a socialist society.

Here, he argues, the time has come for an historic shift in the purpose of work, from the simple production of things to the re-creation of the human personality. Bahro probes the ambivalence of the concept of work in Marx, an ambivalence inherent in the historical reality of human labour: on the one hand, its role as toil, dependency and curse; and on the other its countervening status as the veritable source of human growth and pleasure and of significance in life. The social revolutions which uprooted the capitalist in Eastern Europe left the inherited work process intact; hardly a lesser enemy of the working population than were the landowner or bourgeoisie, and equally in need of being overturned.

The starting point here must be the dismantling of the traditional division of labour, of command and obedience, and of the intellectual and manual functions. Where these cannot be fused into a single process, they can at least be distributed to all. Through this re-distribution and through the concerted application of technology, the quantum of psychologically unproductive labour in each individual’s life could be dramatically curtailed. In this way, no socially necessary task could become either a stigma, or the decisive block to a human being’s development. Nor should one underestimate the susceptibility, even of industrial labour, to metamorphosis. By re-joining the element of imagination to the manual function, and re-constituting the work process into intelligible wholes, mass production too could emulate the craftsman’s hubris and elan, and shape objects to last for centuries. Above all, the goals and forms of work would be subject to a collective process of debate and consent, both at the level of the work-place, and throughout society as a whole.

The transformation of work then becomes the Archimedean point for the transfiguration of all social relationships. If the workplace is no longer the site of submission to a foreign will and process, then politics and culture need no longer be the scenes of the manipulation and appeasement of a subaltern and repressed identity. Education can leave its ungrateful task of reducing, to two or three functions, an incommensurable human subject. Since child-rearing and domestic labour will become two of the variety of tasks performed by men and women as members of various communities, this ancient material brake to
women's emancipation can be removed. As aesthetic and qualitative criteria are introduced to the work process, and as the division between work and free time erodes, the neurotic drive to consumption will vanish, and the basis of a new relationship to nature can be laid. Individuals would now be able to see the whole of their participation in society both as their work, and as the chief reward of living.

But Bahro's insistence of the humanism of Marx does not simply constitute the resurrection of a program; it also entails a strategy. Least of all in Eastern Europe, with its strict taboos as regards political and ideological utterance, is the real scope of discontent manifest: its whole weight is thrown back on the lives of individuals, where it becomes the private frustration and despair of everyone. Bahro, alone in his capacity to grasp this despair as a potential liberating force, alone makes a complete inventory of it: in the refusal to perform; in the murderous tensions of personal and family life; in the outbursts of asocial behaviour; and in the prevailing mood of cynicism and withdrawal, as well as the open expressions of discontent. For him, this is simply the actuality of a revolution which political repression has turned into a negative power. Or, as he puts it, the 'surplus consciousness', all the needs generated by the new possibilities of society, which are thwarted by out-moded structures.

For Bahro, surplus consciousness then becomes the scene of the decisive contest between the socialist opposition and the bureaucracy, and of the forces of renewal and conservatism generally. For the bureaucracy, the key weapon, in addition to repression, is what Bahro calls 'compensation'. Through a wider distribution of privilege, a greater show of liberalism, and above all, by fostering a cult of material consumption, the bureaucracy hopes to absorb the grievances of the population, while leaving their cause untouched. The task of the opposition, of the 'league of communists' which Bahro envisages, is precisely to break this vicious circle by means of a two-pronged strategy. First, to undercut the logic of repression by openly raising a series of political demands, such as the right to free public discussion of dissenting viewpoints, or the re-constitution of independent trade unions. Second, by proposing measures which touch on the felt grievances of the population, yet prefigure the cultural revolution: the suspension of all bureaucratic privileges (including the dispensation from manual labour); a shift in the priorities of production which would end the demoralizing shortages of necessary goods and services, and enable an immediate shortening of the work week.

Bahro's confidence that once, by persistent and exemplary action, the wall of repression has been breached, an irresistible movement can be
assembled, is based on historical precedent. In Czechoslovakia, an opposition which began with students and intellectuals came to embrace the entire population, including the industrial working-class and wide sectors of the party apparatus. It soon isolated that small minority whose identities had become entirely bound up with the machinery of domination. Moreover, as the movement assumed greater scope and momentum they soon shed their simply sectoral interests and began to discuss and organize the re-formation of society. Such, argues Bahro, is the weight of surplus consciousness in Eastern Europe. It reaches even into that human material which forms the staff of prisons and armies; and if Bahro’s prison warden assured him ‘we’re all Bahro enthusiasts here’, there can be no doubt that it also extends into the Soviet Union.6

But Bahro’s work is not only an ‘alternative’ for Eastern Europe; it has a very direct significance for socialists in the West. For even more than in Eastern Europe, socialists here confront a ruling block whose power to manipulate and destroy has been vastly enhanced by that very development of society’s productive forces, which makes their rule obsolete. Nor is the potential base for a program of social transformation any longer exclusively concentrated in the confrontation of large working-class parties with the capitalist order, or even in the enduring, and still, at times, explosive conflict of wage labour and capital. It has instead become much more diffused throughout society as a whole. In this sense, Bahro’s concepts of surplus consciousness, and of the dual of emancipatory and compensatory interest, are categories with a more than local application. They will play their role in the formation of a new political consciousness, and a new consensus of opposition, in the West.

However, this does not yet touch the central achievement of Bahro’s work. It can be best summed up in the words: the restitution of utopia.7 The socialist movement began with the promise to radically alter the terms of human existence, to ‘change life’. Little is left now of this initial promise. The leadership of the great working-class parties and trade union organizations of the West have long since accepted the logic of the capitalist economy as their own political terrain. This has been made all the easier for them by the fact that the most prominent example of a socialist effort to change life, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, has ended in an industrial society whose daily routine, for the working population, is little different from that in the West, and whose political system remains a form of despotism.

To the extent that it is possible for a mere book to do so, Bahro’s work counteracts this legacy. If radical socialists were always taunted by the question of what their future society would look like, they can now
point to this book. It possesses an uncanny authority and power to convince. This derives not simply from the moral and intellectual authority of one who, at some existential cost, kept the faith and deduced the necessity of socialism from the rubble of its failed realization. Nor is it merely the result of Bahro naming grievances and frustrations which thousands feel, but which go unspoken. More than this, Bahro’s proposals are precise. If, in the popular imagination, heaven was always a place just like the earth, only much better, the outlines of Bahro’s new society have a similar closeness to real-life experience. As little as Marx and Engels — who had only the single historical example of the Paris Commune — does Bahro base his image of socialism on speculation: he has a lifetime guiding Eastern European reality to which he can refer. He draws on all his intimate knowledge of the planned economy to demonstrate at what points, and with what ease, the pattern of work and living could be altered. In unique fashion he combines the breadth of Marx’s original conceptions with the concern for detail and practicality of a proven technocrat and expert, who thought that there must be another way of doing things.

Amidst the sober, painstaking terminology which he introduced to philosophic discourse, there occurs in Kant’s Metaphysics of Morals a sentence which illuminates that work, as it does that great movement of secular emancipation which provided the intellectual armament for the French and Russian revolutions: the statement, that each human life must be an end in itself. And just as it previously breached the feudal and capitalist orders, one can feel, in the pages of Bahro’s work, this same movement of emancipation gathering for another qualitative leap. Similarly, in Bahro’s recent tireless activity in exile, for the unity of the ecology, feminist, and radical left movements, Kant’s famed postulate is fused with the celebrated formula of another thinker: ‘The philosophers have interpreted the world enough; the point, however, is to change it’.

NOTES

1. Mandel’s review is reprinted in From Stalinism to Eurocommunism, London 1978. Marcuse’s appreciation — his last major article — appeared in German in Kritik, No. 19.


3. The great historian and scholar of the Russian Revolution, Isaac Deutscher — to whom Bahro has acknowledged a particular indebtedness — relates this in the first volume of his monumental life of Trotsky (The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879-1921, London 1970, 396). Lenin’s role as one of the main architects of 20th century history has obscured his rank as one of its outstanding interpreters, particularly in the post-1920 writings on Asia or on the young Soviet state which fill the last volumes of the Collected Works.
Preobrazensky's *The New Economics*, London, 1973 remains a seminal exposition of the problems of industrialization and modernization under the aegis of a planned economy, while Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed*, New York, 1973, the outcome of the Left Opposition's lost battle with Stalin, is a text, written by one of the most gifted of Marxist theoreticians, whose central observations and conclusions retain a surprising actuality.

4. Thus, Jiri Pelikan, director of Czech television during the Prague Spring, has told of his astonishment upon discovering, shortly after his appointment, that the money being spent in the largely vain effort to block Western broadcasts from reaching Czechoslovakia would have been sufficient to finance a colour television network for the whole country.

5. In this sense, Miklos Haratzi's *A Worker in a Worker's State*, London 1977 makes fascinating reading alongside Bahro. Written from a very different national and sociological perspective — that of a wage-worker in Hungary — Haratzi's analysis and conclusions are strikingly similar to Bahro's.

6. Interview in *Der Spiegel*, October 22, 1979. Recent events in Poland have in part read like a textbook confirmation of Bahro's analysis. The Polish opposition, particularly the KOR (Committee for Social Self-Defence) around figures like Jacek Kuron, has functioned very much along the lines of Bahro's proposed 'League of Communists'. Having first, through a series of courageous public initiatives in favour of democratic rights, carved out a semi-legal place for itself in Polish politics, the KOR's political conceptions became perhaps the major single influence on the strategy of the emergent independent Polish workers' movement, even if this movement itself otherwise bears all the classic features of a spontaneous proletarian mass eruption, on the part of a working class already experienced in struggle (1970, 76) and possessed of a particularly fortunate combination of daring and political maturity. The meteoric rise of *Solidarnosc*, while dramatically illustrating Bahro's thesis of how quickly an opposition movement in Eastern Europe could become an alternative pole of political power in society, also serves to disprove his curious pessimism about the capacity of the working class for political initiative and self-activity.

7. In this, as in his concept of surplus consciousness, Bahro touches directly on central themes of the life work of Ernst Bloch, the philosopher of Utopia and 'the Principle of Hope' who, two decades earlier, had also, as a non-conformist Marxist thinker, been driven away from East Germany. Bloch's work is only now becoming available in English.