

## RUDOLF BAHRO—AN INTRODUCTION

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"I have always believed in the power of the idea and the word, and that it matters whether one is convinced of oneself and one's cause and doesn't shrink back deep down inside when the decision has to be made." When, after ten years of work on his book *The Alternative. A Critique of Socialism as it Actually Exists*, Rudolf Bahro made his decision to come out into the open by having his work published in West Germany, his belief in the power of the idea and the word was immediately confirmed by his arrest—on the rather ludicrous charge of "espionage"—and imprisonment in the German Democratic Republic.

That was in August 1977. At the time of writing<sup>1</sup> Bahro is still in gaol, cut off from all communication with the outside world, awaiting a secret trial. But while they could arrest the author, the East Germany authority's fears concerning the powerful impact of *The Alternative* have been more than justified. Not only has the book reached the top ten of the West German bestselling list for several months, and been translated into several major Western languages,<sup>2</sup> but in the German Democratic Republic itself, where several hundred copies are estimated to circulate clandestinely, Bahro's work has immediately become a central point of reference for the socialist opposition.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of Rudolf Bahro lies not so much in the fact that yet again an Eastern European dissident has been hit by state repression; nor even in the fact that Bahro is an avowed communist and Marxist. In the GDR, at least, the publicly articulated voices of the opposition have always been from the left, from Wolfgang Harich to Wolf Biermann. The real importance of Bahro's *Alternative* lies in its theoretical achievement: not since the 1920s, when the Left Opposition was silenced in the Soviet Union, has such a powerful and original, comprehensive critique of the bureaucratic regime that calls itself "socialist" emerged from within its own sphere. Without, of course, dissociating himself from the struggle for human rights and democratic freedoms in Eastern Europe, Bahro puts the socialist opposition back into the offensive ideologically: Socialism, he asserts, is not merely the gradual democratic reform of the existing system; Socialism as conceived by Marx, Engels and Lenin requires what he calls a "Cultural Revolution", a comprehensive re-orientation that goes beyond the political, institutional, and includes the daily life-style of the

masses, a radical change in both individual and collective habits and mentalities—in short, the consciously planned creation of a "new man." Yet Bahro cannot be dismissed as a utopian dreamer: he is not content simply to counterpose his conception of "Socialism as it Should Be" to "Socialism as it Actually Exists", his analysis of East European society is highly concrete—with the detailed knowledge of the experienced party functionary he shows that, far from suffering mere "shortcomings", the socio-economic system of existing socialism is actually moving further and further away from the aim of a classless society; and with the keen historical awareness of the trained Marxist intellect he seeks to offer a novel explanation of how it was that the high hopes of the Bolshevik revolution ended up in the creation of a totalitarian system of oppression.

Born in 1935, Rudolf Bahro is in many ways a typical representative of a whole generation of SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany; the East German Communist Party) functionaries. He joined the Party in 1952, and after graduating in philosophy at the East Berlin Humboldt University in 1959, served the SED in a variety of functions: as an editor of party journals in the campaign to collectivise East German agriculture (1959-60), and at the University of Greifswald (1960-62), as an employee of the central trade union apparatus (1962-65), again as a journalist as deputy editor of *Forum*, the SED's student paper, and since 1967 as an economist concerned with the rationalisation of production in a large Berlin rubber factory. In his "Interview with Himself" Bahro names the experience of Czechoslovakia 1968 as the decisive turning point of his political evolution; and from all we know, we can assume that August 1968 had the effect of an ideological earthquake on many of his generation. There have, of course, been manifestations of dissent in East Germany before Bahro and before 1968: several splits within the ruling Politbureau during the 1950s, the uprising of 17th June 1953, the intellectual unrest following the XXth Party Congress of the CPSU, the dissident writers of the early 1960s. The reaction to 1968 was less spectacular than most of the previous occasions, the critical consciousness engendered by it still remains largely anonymous. But it must have touched the raw nerve of the bureaucratic system: the ranks of the party functionaries at a lower and medium level, and Bahro, as such a functionary, stepping out of anonymity and articulating the latent critical consciousness in conscious criticism, must represent a more formidable threat to Honecker's ruling clique than any number of poets, artists and singers. Hence the ferocious reaction.

The originality of Bahro's theses is, without any doubt, also going to establish The Alternative as an essential point of reference among Western Marxists discussing the nature of the East European societies. At least in the English-speaking area, two major traditions have dominated the debate for a long time: the orthodox Trotskyist formula of the "degenerated workers' states" and the "state capitalist" school in its

International Socialism or (in the US) Maoist varieties. Within the narrow framework of this alternative, Bahro certainly has more affinity with the Trotskyist tradition. He rejects the notion that the East European regimes are in any way capitalist, and much of his terminology—such as the reference to a ruling "bureaucracy" and the need for a "political revolution"—is clearly more reminiscent of Trotsky than of Tony Cliff. But these similarities are largely superficial. In fact Bahro explicitly polemicalises against the Trotskyist analysis: "I strongly believe that it is high time for revolutionary Marxists to abandon all theories of 'deformation', and call a halt to the old anger about the distortion and 'betrayal' of socialism, understandable as this at one time was. . . . We cannot learn the path to follow from that opposition which lost the fight against the rise of Stalinism. Every revolutionary communist since 1917 has had Trotskyist feelings at a certain stage in the move away from domination by the apparatus. But this position really does lack historical prospects. We do not want to re-establish old norms, but to create new ones."<sup>4</sup> His essential difference with the Trotskyist tradition concerns the different assessments of the historical role of Stalinism and its relation to the Bolshevik October revolution. For Bahro, the victory of Stalin over the Left Opposition was inevitable and even historically progressive: "The opening of the gap between material progress and social and political emancipation. . . . was unavoidable. The rapid technical and cultural qualification of the masses first had to create the preconditions for socialist relations of productions. But one must not forget that this is a justification of the kind given by Marx to the revolutionary practice of the bourgeoisie. It applies to an antagonistic reality in which 'the higher development of individuality is only acquired through a historical process in which the individuals are sacrificed'. "<sup>5</sup> Despite Lenin's revolutionary genius and integrity, the Russian revolution could not but lead the backward country into a prolonged phase of "despotic industrialisation", albeit on a non-capitalist road, and "Lenin's Bolshevik Party. . . . was to a large extent the extraordinary representative of the expelled capitalist exploiting class (without, however, taking the place of this class), which had not been deeply rooted enough in the economic life of a gigantic peasant country."<sup>6</sup>

But now that the historically necessary transformation from a predominantly agricultural to a predominantly industrial society had taken place even in Russia and the more backward East European countries, and given that the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia had not, after 1945, fallen into the same category anyway, the Stalinist despotism has definitely outlasted its historical role and become an obstacle towards any further progress. Bahro devotes the central part of *The Alternative* to a highly original analysis of the motor forces of the coming "Cultural Revolution." He rejects the traditional concept of "working class" as outdated, and substitutes for it a broad

alliance of all the bearers of what he terms "surplus consciousness," "the energetic and creative elements in all strata and areas of society, of all people in whose individuality the emancipatory interests predominate."<sup>7</sup> Bahro calls for the formation of a loosely-organised, new "League of Communists" to assemble all these elements, and proceeds to outline a concrete programme of action for the communist opposition thus constituted.

It is impossible within the confines of this short introduction to highlight the many novel ideas and concepts Bahro introduces into the Marxist discussion of Eastern Europe: his use of psycho-analytical concepts, his discussion of ecological and cultural restraints on quantitative economic growth, his vision of the future communist society. These are certainly many aspects of Bahro's *Alternative* that will meet with widespread criticism: quite apart from his views on the October revolution and the inevitability of Stalinism, his insistence that there should only be *one* party under socialism and certain passages with what could be described as "intellectual-elitist" overtones seem highly questionable. Such a necessary discussion of Bahro's theories, however, requires that the author be free to clarify ambiguities, to reply to critics, and defend his views against misrepresentation. As long as Rudolf Bahro continues to be imprisoned, as long as he is denied the freedom to publish and openly debate his views in the country he chooses to live and work in, the German Democratic Republic, all socialists, whether they agree with *The Alternative* or not, have the responsibility to do their utmost to support Bahro's struggle unconditionally. Believing that the power of the bureaucratic apparatus "must be undermined *ideologically* before it can fall materially", Bahro wrote *The Alternative* primarily as a weapon to be used in this ideological struggle against late Stalinism. It is as such, in its unquestionable superiority over everything else that emerged from the ranks of the socialist opposition in Eastern Europe for decades, that the importance of Rudolf Bahro's work must be judged.

#### NOTES

1. June, 1978.
2. The British edition, published by New Left Books and translated by David Fernbach, is due to appear in October, 1978.
3. Cf. the "Manifesto of the SED Opposition" published in *Der Spiegel* in January, 1978.
4. Rudolf Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*; in: *New Left Review* 106, p. 6 and 33.
5. *Die Alternative*, German original, p. 137, my own translation.
6. NLR, p. 10.
7. NLR, p. 19.

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- Q. By the time we broadcast today's discussion your book "Contribution to a Critique of Socialism as it actually exists" will already have been published under the title of *The Alternative*. Does the new title not express your message more accurately than the original formula? Because of course you put forward proposals for an alternative political praxis for East European Communism. You make these proposals as a Marxist, as an East German (GDR) Communist, as an insider, so to speak.
- A. What I wanted to provide was in effect not primarily a political polemic but the outline of a comprehensive political and economic analysis and alternative. My book is only polemical in as much as it destroys the Party's official self-portrait of socialism as it actually exists and discusses the situation as it really is. There is a widespread feeling here in the GDR that socialism as it exists and the socialism of Marx are two very different, substantially different things. I prove that this is so. I don't denounce it; I *explain* it as an historical fact. I analyse and criticise socialism as it actually exists as a *social formation of a specific type*, just as Marx understood capitalism as a social formation. I have gone back a long way in history, right back to the ancient Asiatic mode of production in order to show clearly the genesis of our present system, by which I mean of course in Russia and the Soviet Union. In East Germany or in Czechoslovakia socialism, as everyone knows, is a derived and not an original phenomenon. Here it is not something that can be explained in terms of itself.
- Q. That is then your starting point. And what are your aims and objectives?
- A. The main questions which my book raises and which I try to answer are these: What would the total emancipation of man—because of course that was Marx's most original aim—what would this total emancipation mean today? What barriers would it have to overcome? How could and ought a Communist praxis to look under

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the conditions of socialism as it actually exists? Who would see this praxis through, and from what forces would its agents be recruited? And how ought the new league of Communists to be organised? And on the basis of what kind of political and economic action programme?

What's more, I pose these questions in such a way that they ought to be of interest to Western Communists and Socialists. For example, it seems questionable to me whether a united left, such as the one in France, should include as one of its essential programmatic points the raising of steel production and an injection of more investment—just a further dose of the same old medicine. In the short term many a thing can be correct, even a financial boost for the steel industry. But what kind of new civilisation is the PCF really anticipating? What has it really learnt since May 1968?

- Q. Yes, of course, these are problems which are not only of interest to Communists today. Unfortunately it is idle to ask why your book has not been published in great numbers in East Germany where you live. But what will happen if you are forced to appeal to the public outside this country? Will people in the GDR be able to read your book at all?
- A. Several hundred copies will of course find their way back here, and then a few thousand people will read it. I have also condensed the substance of the book into a series of lectures which will undoubtedly reach us via the radio. Besides, I have also circulated the book in the GDR, if only in the form of a small, unprofessionally produced edition, due to the limitations imposed on me. I am confident that the essential ideas will become well-known.
- Q. How will the SED leadership react to the fact that yet another citizen, yet another Party member—because you have been one for almost 25 years—openly adopts a dissident position? Your book employs merciless logic and is quite uncompromising in its arguments. It could, in the long run, exert an influence in undermining the prevailing power structure.
- A. I hope so. I am intervening in a process which has been underway for a long time. The original idea has been eroded away. The Party can be compared to the Papal Church prior to Luther's Reformation, with agnosticism deeply penetrating even its own ranks. Perplexity right up to the Politburo. No positive idea amongst broad layers. All means of mass mobilisation, especially in the economic sphere, are worn out and threadbare. Bewilderment wherever one turns. No

discussion any more.

I wanted to provide the new layers with a theoretical basis for the struggle for the liquidation of the Stalinist social system to which they are heirs. This system must be done away with because it stifles life, because it is unproductive, because it hinders subjective motivation and paralyses and consumes it in competition with the West, a competition which we could never hope to win in this way.

Q Do you think the SED will take issue with your book?

A. Who is "the SED"? Let us deal first of all with the Party apparatus. Because this is what you had in mind. Initially the apparatus will of course respond with the usual defence mechanisms. Not only will it brand my book as revisionist but also as counter-revolutionary. It will speak of some paymaster or other. In this connection it will exploit every attention I pay to non- or anti-Communist circles (recently it has even included a certain Santiago Carillo in this category). That has long **been** routine. The servile creatures hardly need to think about the procedure any more. Of course it requires no skill to snatch a couple of isolated sentences from their context. The apparatus *has to* distort all criticism. It *must not* be true that it stems from within its own ranks, that it has a broad and emotional layer of support at home, even, and in particular, among the Party rank and file. They will endeavour at all costs to avoid any debate with my *arguments* and *conclusions*.

In any case, the book will be read, even officially, so to speak. And now we come to the matter of real importance. Almost everyone who reads it—whether instructed to do so or not—will have thoughts different from those which he can or must subsequently express in public. I believe I have written a book against which the political police will be powerless, because it still appeals to the most loyal beings—in as far as they are prepared to think at all. At least as far as my analysis and characterisation of the existing situation are concerned, even members of the Politburo will sit in front of the pages and say to themselves from time to time: Yes, that's just what it's like. This disarms you psychologically. I build directly on the gulf that exists between the official position and the inner psychological process at work in the political individuals. Whenever I speak of the apparatus then I am always referring to a reactionary power structure, and not **necessarily** to the individuals who are connected to it at various nodal points. They could of course step out of this jungle tomorrow.

Q And what about the rest of the East German public?

- A. Well, of course, my book is addressed not least to the many semi-loyal Party members and indeed to those people who associate themselves critically with the GDR. Most of these only continue their involvement because to them any prospect of a change seems to be out of the question. It is not a new historical phenomenon that a particular generation experiences a collective feeling that it "just won't work." For many here in this country nothing you care to mention "works", be it from the inside or the outside. Resignation rules. It's purely psychological. Ossification has set in, a tendency which the individuals must resist. The wheels of history have of course continued to turn. Suddenly it does "work" after all, it's just that in the meantime many have opted out. What I resolutely attack is the residual loyalty to the apparatus which has for a long time worked to the detriment of the non-capitalist foundations of the GDR. The reality is such that every Party intellectual in particular must ask himself whether he is dominated by the apparatchik—because to a certain extent that is what he is—or by the Communist in him. Nobody can evade this inner subjective dilemma.

And finally my book addresses itself to the real forces of opposition. I want to encourage them to adopt an optimistic and constructive position. Don't take the road of defeatism and despair, but the road of organised opposition! Be prepared, if necessary, to give up your present existence to this end, for instance, your particular role as a salaried intellectual.

- Q. Then you believe that your work will alter the situation in the GDR?

- A. Yes, especially the ideological situation. For this I am not counting on the immediate sensational impact. On the contrary, there will be a variety of emotionally determined reactions—all the more so since ordinary people won't be able to read the book at once. But I have provided theory. And that I certainly am relying on. I am relying on the long-term effect of every thought which really goes to the very heart of these problems. I have approached it with absolute seriousness, in all sincerity and consistency. I have staked not only my intellect but also my civic livelihood on it. That is sure to have its effect.

I am only speaking about myself here as an example. Of course I am not the first to have risked something. Personal examples can now have a tremendous effect. Full use must be made of the situation that has arisen since Helsinki, and even more so since the Berlin Conference, since the emergence of Eurocommunism, in order to drive the apparatus ideologically into a corner. If possible, don't allow them a minute's peace or any breathing space in the ideological

battle. One appearance should immediately be followed by the next. I call that getting the apparatus used to having to look open opposition in the face. The aim of the exercise is finally to force it to take up the ideological battle in public in its own country and in all the so-called Socialist countries. This is the end towards which we must work. And for this the opposition needs a *comprehensive* counter-position and not merely fragmentary proposals. It must put a plan for an *alternative overall policy* on the agenda. Such aspects as the question of human rights must be found a place within a larger constructive framework. And I am absolutely certain that under socialism as it actually exists there is no alternative to the rule of the apparatus which could be implemented without or in opposition to the Communists. We need only step boldly out of the late Stalinist power structure of the apparatus and put our political experience, our Marxist method, at the disposal of *society*. That goes for each of our countries and, at the same time, for all of them put together, and first and foremost for the Soviet Union itself.

Q. What consequences do you envisage for yourself personally? What do you suppose will happen?

A. I could not afford to attach too much importance to this question. If one begins to speculate in a situation like this, one is not free to choose such a position. I am prepared for every conceivable reaction. I had time to prepare myself for the hour of truth. Of course, I won't be the victim; I'm the one who is doing the attacking. I was fortunate in being able to determine the hour myself.

Q. You will of course be expelled from the Party.

A. Yes, with the utmost speed and without any fuss. That will merely be normal procedure. It is clear from this book that I have been breaking the rules which the apparatus laid down for the Party for a long time, at least since August 21st, 1968. What is not so normal, but nevertheless typical of the system, is that I will lose my present job. Strong emphasis is being laid at present in the official propaganda of the GDR on the human right to work. Therefore I shall just have to wait and see how it applies to me.

Q. And is that all you fear?

A. Whether or not I shall be arrested depends on the international, and particularly the Communist public. That there are legal clauses in existence which I had to contravene in order to proceed at all, is

indicative of the nature of our political system. It requires laws which are, as a precaution, designed in such a way that anyone who wants to disseminate dissident views—if he does not wish to disseminate them then he is not political at all—must contravene them. Under the new penal code—depending on the interpretation—I face from the outset between 2 and 10 years, if it is decided to classify my critique of the political superstructure as subversive agitation. But it begins much earlier than that. For example, I would have had to submit my book on time to the state copyright office, along with a request for it to be released for printing abroad. I pursued this course of action for my relatively harmless, and altogether acceptably designed dissertation after it had been turned down both by the university in Leuna—Merseburg and by the Dietz publishing house. I was told that there was no way that I would get the necessary permission.

In short, every alternative political conception and position becomes a criminal offence at the very first hurdle, namely as soon as it is made public. Publicity is not legally attainable at all. For Europe this is a very anachronistic state of affairs.

- Q. And you won't be expelled from the country? As you know, in recent years that has become an essential ingredient in the practice against oppositionists.
- A. It is possible that the apparatus will demonstrate its utter bankruptcy in this way. But it won't be able to exile the contents of my book in the same way. As far as I myself am concerned, my battleground is here, although I don't foresee any great difficulty in finding my place in the revolutionary ranks somewhere else. I have based my thinking on this premise. My entire development has made me, so to speak, into a product of the GDR through and through. Here at home I am co-responsible. I particularly don't want this point to be misunderstood. Since the age of 15 I have never stood on the outside; since 1950, i.e. from very early on, I have been one of the activists contributing to our present circumstances. I am thoroughly familiar with the terrain, not only theoretically but also in practice. And not only with regard to ideology and art etc.; I have done everything under the sun, in agriculture, in science and in higher education, and, during the last decade, in industry. People like myself must quite simply try to change the course of things *here at home* if they want to remain true to their origins. I never had the slightest inclination to leave the field of battle. On the contrary, when I had to quit regimented political life 10 years ago I launched myself all the more deeply into politics, into theory in the first place, but then

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entirely on my own account.

**Q.** Perhaps you can describe in a little more detail how you gained your experience and go through some of the stages in your development.

**A.** On the face of it, my biography follows the normal GDR pattern. One or two conflicts I could tell you about are typical for thousands of characters like myself, and not all of them have emerged from them as relatively unscathed psychologically as I have.

After completing my studies in philosophy, that was in 1959, the afterpains of my crisis of 1956/7 (the 20th Party Congress of the CPSU, Hungary, Poland) made me drift into the Oderburch area to an agricultural machinery and tractor station. There I was editor of a village newspaper for an area consisting of 7 or 8 communities. And I arrived just at the right time for the campaign for the full collectivisation of agriculture in 1960. I have been at home with farming all my life, thanks to my father. I come from a farming background. Collective farming is perhaps the greatest economic success in the GDR.

I subsequently spent two years at Greifswald University, not as a student, but again as an editor. There I edited the university newspaper which the Party leadership published. It was there that I became familiar with the academic atmosphere, and of course much more intimately than from a student angle. Because it was a small provincial university it was much easier to obtain an overall view.

From Greifswald the Science Department of the Central Committee of the SED brought me to Berlin, to the Central Executive of the Scientists' Trade Union. There I was, among other things, an adviser to the Chairman.

In 1965 I went to *Forum* as deputy editor. *Forum* addresses itself to students and the young intelligentsia. In 1963 a youth communique was put out by the Politburo; it was the green light for a certain amount of criticism on the bureaucratic apparatus by the younger generation. Then, in mid-1965, I was not aware that this line was about to be overturned. I had arrived too late.

During my years at the trade union and at *Forum* I lost my political naivete, if initially in a very naive way. I didn't like the postures, the bureaucratic rules of the game. I never really fitted in. Then at *Forum* I gradually and consciously pursued a definite course and eventually tried to put forward topics for discussion which were not supposed to have been discussed. "Put the contradictions on the table instead of in the drawer" was my motto. I firstly had to undergo the experience that as a small cog in an ideological power machine one cannot move in a straight line. There was a debate on poetry. I

didn't realise that I was starting a provocation against the poets when I set this debate in motion. The intended discussion was cut short. I myself had written from a rather strident, so-called "leftist" position, especially against **Günter** Kunert. At that time I thought the way that I wrote. But then the poets could not write what *they* thought, and in as far as they did still write it I was no longer allowed to print it. In the end the whole affair only proved harmful. When I realised that forces other than my personal convictions stood behind my typewriter, I abandoned my post there in spirit and decided to take a chance. The last straw was the printing of Volker Braun's "Kipper Paul Bauch", for which I was responsible. That must have been in the spring of **1966**.

A few months later I landed up in industry, and, I must emphasise, it was a soft landing. On the whole I was always very lucky to be treated so well, even after my dismissal from *Forum*. I have never been made to feel personally angry or bitter.

- Q. But what about the future? What will become of your family? You do have a family, don't you?
- A. I did have a family until 4 years ago. My children are now aged 20, 15 and 13. Our circumstances are, however, arranged in such a way that one must eventually go it alone if one wants to act as I am doing now.
- Q. And were you not afraid during all those years?
- A. Yes, I was afraid too, but not so much of the consequences that I might have to contend with one day. I was afraid of not being able to cope with my work, and above all I was afraid of not finishing it, of being found out too soon, and of not reaching the public. But, for all that, I can assure that I slept soundly most nights. That's simply a question of temperament.
- Q. But you are not trying to say that your situation was largely unproblematic, are you?
- A. I was still faced with *one* problem above all. It is not easy to keep silent to the rest of the world about the consequences one is really living towards. I would much rather have come out into the open. It is actually the very "normal", conformist existence, which one is forced to lead publicly, which is the real nuisance. You cannot begin to imagine how pleased I am that for me the game of hide and seek is now at last over, that I can at last show my true face to

society, or rather to those who know me. That has not often been the case since **1968**. But I am confident that it will be absolutely clear to most of them that I had to behave as I did, if I was really serious about writing this book. The very nature of the operation meant that I simply led the double life of a law breaker. It was not directed against my colleagues and comrades, but against the machinery, which after all forces one to adopt this form of struggle. The best prophylaxis against inner tension is the writing of an important work itself. As you can imagine, my time was fully occupied. In this respect more than any other, I lived a double life, even if at the same time it was naturally somewhat one-sided.

Q. Nevertheless, your book must now appear to many people who have worked with you day after day and who believed they knew you well like a bolt out of the blue.

A. Yes, of course it will. Besides, those people who knew me somewhat better will only be so utterly taken aback for a brief moment. People could always speak reasonably openly with me, as long as it remained within the limits. It might even appear as if I had less to hide than others. Because, of course, it goes without saying that all political people in the GDR hold views different from those they can express at work etc. Of course, in private you do make yourself understood, more so to some than others. If often only needs a few words, only quite a small hint, and one's position is already recognisable. Anyone who has the courage to reveal his true identity earns a good deal of confidence, if his partner does not happen to be of a generally anxious disposition. Much more communication is possible than many people imagine. People, who have not the slightest reason to be, are still afraid of one another.

Q. And how did you manage to find the *time* or the necessary *peace and quiet* to write this book in addition to a doctorate—and as a "side-line" at that—and apparently still maintain good health? You don't appear to have ever held a post in an academic institution.

A. Still, I did study philosophy for 5 years at the Humboldt University in the fifties. You know, if I had subsequently ended up in the academic field, in our official academic field—it grinds you down. I would perhaps have got round to -writing thicker manuscripts, but probably not this book. This may sound strange, but I needed better conditions in which to write it, and I found them too. Time is not the only thing one needs in a case like this.

When I hand it over to the public now, I can truthfully say that

I have not missed a single day's work in industry because of it, not one. But at least until 1975 circumstances there were relatively favourable. I was not in management, but was dealing with organisational and technical matters in an engineering office practising a sort of management consultancy for a certain branch of industry. The immediate contact with industrial and economic practice proved positively favourable for my purpose.

For my preliminary research my free time was sufficient. But then I needed a couple of consecutive months for the first draft. Here I had luck on my side. I got the chance to do an unscheduled doctor's degree. It meant that from 1972 to 1974 I was released from the firm for three months each year. 5 out of the entire 9 months were put on one side, and by the summer of 1973 the first draft was completed; even at that stage it was a thick book of over 300 typed sheets.

I then wrote the dissertation by the summer of 1975. In it I analyse quite concretely how the relations of production under socialism as it actually exists hinder the development of the subjective forces of production which are embodied in the growing number of university and technical college cadres in our industry. Of course, the actual conclusions are cut from or concealed in this text, and stylistically it keeps within the prescribed phraseology, albeit with a certain amount of difficulty. But the work aroused so much suspicion and uneasiness, particularly the appendix—an uncensored record of almost 50 interviews with industrial cadres—that the University eventually informed me that they had to reject it, ostensibly because it failed to meet the necessary academic requirements.

- Q. It astonishes me how much importance you have obviously attached to doing your job properly in the normal manner, despite and during your work on this revolutionary book, which has since been published.
- A. First of all one could say that that was simply the easiest approach. But apart from that—I have always found it difficult, in every respect, to do a botched job. One doesn't harm the apparatus so much as all those people who go about their normal business. One upsets the flow of communication. It quite simply shows a lack of solidarity. And it also impairs one's own ability to work.

It is generally a very important rule for the political struggle in our conditions *not* to spread any additional disorganisation—the level is already high enough!—but to articulate and qualify the anger at the prevailing disorganisation, in order to solidarise with

those who want to do a proper job at their place of work. Never confuse the individuals with the apparatus, not even the functionaries. They are not infrequently the first to suffer from the faults of the system.

And I was concerned about something else too. Our conditions have deprived more than a few critical and thinking people of their productivity and have driven them into unhappy isolation and made them adopt some eccentric positions or other. I have proved that I can function even within the existing system. I was, as I said, a journalist. I was a trade union functionary in the central apparatus. I have taken part as a specialist in technological and organisational rationalisation projects. At the present time I am still in charge of production and production norms. . .

Q. With production norms, too?

A. Yes, with production norms too.. Otherwise I would not know as precisely, as I describe in my book, why or to what extent they must be abolished. Even in the dissertation I was anxious to prove that it is possible to take on the dominant reactionary tendency in a constructive way. I didn't quite succeed. But when I think that firstly I gained the opportunity for concentrated theoretical work, and that secondly there were initially three favourable verdicts, and that it was only later, after an altogether scandalous episode, that two more negative opinions had to be procured in order to substantiate a rejection in the University's Academic Council. . . The rest is better forgotten.

Q. Up to now we have been discussing the external circumstances. But what was your inner motivation? If I understood correctly, you have been working in this direction since **1968**.

A. It certainly isn't a book which emerged overnight. The story begins much earlier, even if I did only start to write definitively in the early seventies.

The incubation period lies between the two notorious August days of **1961** and **1968**. I was one of the many, mainly young Communists in the GDR who associated the illusion that, in the new situation, the Party would make a radical attempt to win over the majority of the population to socialism with the, at that stage unavoidable, shutting off of the borders. It was, as one could say with hindsight, the hope for something like a Prague spring in Prussia, Saxony and Mecklenburg. The leadership yielded to this widespread sentiment with the "Youth Communique" of **1963**, which I have

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already mentioned. But it was already clear by the mid-sixties that it was merely a question of tactical manoeuvring, and that, apart from a move towards a technocratic orientation, occasioned by the development of the productive forces on an international scale, it didn't intend to introduce anything new.

Around that time it became clear to me that it would be necessary to begin a systematic struggle against the conservative elements in the Party. I thought it would be possible to dislodge them step by step from their positions of power. One needed only to equip oneself better in order to be able to beat them in an inner-Party trench war. At that time I had no idea of the nature of this opponent and its sources of strength and constant self-reproduction. Because the apparatus as such, which guarantees the continuance of reactionary policies, still didn't present any problem for me. Only on this assumption was I able to place my hopes on a process of rejuvenating the cadre—because, in the *final* analysis, that is what I was concerned about. In reality, the suitable and selected cadres are integrated and absorbed by the apparatus according to a regular pattern. Exceptions only prove the rule.

Q. How then did you apply this attitude to your work?

A. At first I undertook a kind of global preparation, without any clear direction. I began to study Marx afresh and to uncover the true history of the CPSU and the Soviet Union. Trotskyist studies. I am particularly indebted to Isaac Deutscher for a lot of indispensable insights. At the same time I was interested in the Yugoslavian experiment, the Chinese road and the nature of the conflict between Mao-tse-Tung and Khrushchev. The mere fact of the breach between Peking and Moscow was of great significance because at last it drew Marxist principles back into the discussion again. Of course I then devoured the Togliatti memorandum, and I still have that cutting from the *Neues Deutschland* today.

In December 1967 I wrote a letter to Ulbricht on the basis of my initial experiences at my new job in industry. I raised the question of socialist democracy and workers' self-management within the framework of our economic organisation, in—as people call it here—a positive way. The reply was brought to me six months later, in May 1968, when the reform movement in Czechoslovakia was about to reach its climax, by an employee of the Central Committee: just a verbal warning. Nothing followed, not even after August 21st, although I had expressed my support for the experiment publicly to the end. They didn't seek out dissidents at the time and don't do that now, just as long as one doesn't draw attention to oneself publicly.

Q. The invasion of Czechoslovakia obviously played a crucial role in making up your mind. What was it like in 1968, what kind of feelings did it arouse in people here?

A. There was genuine and profound excitement, which had already been mounting since January, and then on August 21st, you could read something on the faces of many people. Disappointment, humiliation, downcast eyes.

For me 1967/1968 were the years filled with the most intense hope. At that time, that was about 1967, I saw in China the great attempt to spare the most heavily populated country on earth the march through the depths of bureaucratic Stalinism. Then in Czechoslovakia the very same enemy, the Stalinist bureaucracy, which blocks all socialist progress in our part of the world, suffered a wound that has not healed to this day. The students and young workers of Paris for several weeks outmanoeuvred the conservative party functionaries and took the struggle against state monopoly capitalism forward to the beginnings of revolutionary dual power. The Vietnamese people inflicted a strategic defeat on US imperialism with their magnificent Tet offensive... I am not speaking here of my theoretical work, which for example, despite the use of the term "cultural revolution", is hardly inspired by Maoism, at least not in the sense of those West European groups strutting around so defiantly in their borrowed garments. I am speaking of my motivation.

Q. You spoke earlier of illusions after August 13th, 1961, and then of hopes prior to August 21st, 1968. One senses an ideal there towards which these illusions and hopes were directed. But what kind of impetus was really behind it? What was it, purely personally, that communists were so dissatisfied with?

A. I don't know whether I can make that fully clear to you. Why do people feel themselves moved to political action? In my book I mention the experience of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, of whom it is said that he never found the state that suited him. Perhaps as a reference to an experience made here in the GDR by, I would say, hundreds of thousands of people who have joined the SED in their youth during the last thirty years.

I too have undergone this experience. I was 16 when I became a candidate member in 1952. Now we in the SED have preserved an old and disreputable German custom. Every society has to have its own badge. And so it is with the party. But if you walk through our streets today you will only come across a few people wearing the party badge, and they will almost exclusively be those who *must*

wear it because of their public role. Yet there are 1.6 million party members in this small country.

At the time when I became a candidate and then a full member it was generally quite different. You'll find it difficult to imagine how proud we were then, I and countless other young comrades, to wear this party badge with the intertwined hands set against the red flag in the background. And now I ask myself and I ask all those young comrades from those thirty years: How has it come about that today we are ashamed to pin on this badge? The essence of the matter is that we have learned quite gradually to be ashamed of the party to which we belong, this party which enjoys the notorious distrust of the people, which holds people in political tutelage day in and day out, and which still feels obliged to lie about the most ridiculous trivialities, when everyone knows better, and in such a way that it brings a blush to the faces of all those who belong to it.

The longer one has been a member, the less one can tolerate, in the long run, how the party is destroying ~~and~~ exposing to ridicule the idea which was once sacred. As a rule it strikes one dumb. Most of the comrades no longer know what to say. But anyone who is equipped with the insight, with the tools and with the capacity to see through what has been happening, and what is still going on today; that here we have a new system of domination instead of socialist freedom and equality for all workers—anyone who sees through all this, and doesn't want to lose his self-respect, *must* quite simply seek an alternative, a chance to live in harmony with himself again. That was the secret behind the great hope of 1968, which attracted a wide range of support amongst the people of the GDR, too.

Whilst I had still been content with criticising the apparatus internally prior to the intervention, I now had to jump. Morally speaking I had no choice any longer. The invasion was a blow which struck me personally as deeply as any of the most heavily involved Czechoslovak participants. At that time I was drafting my letter of resignation from the party—and I was certainly not alone in this. Then I realised that this gesture, morally necessary as it was, would fall flat as soon as our rebellion had been suppressed. I could and had to find a better and more incisive course of action.

I do not know whether those responsible thought at the time that they would not have to pay for August 21st. It cannot do any harm for them to know where the intransigence which will cut across their political schemes all the more frequently in the future comes from. The struggle will not end until the source of such reactionary acts of violence as 1968, until the late Stalinist leadership of the apparatus has been removed. In the first hours and days after the

intervention something in me changed for ever. In any case I now only wanted to provide them with a reply against which they would be as **powerless** as we had been against their tanks. I am convinced that this ideological impotence is more disastrous than the material one.

Q That doesn't really sound particularly Marxist.

A. I don't mind what it sounds like. And after all Marx did say: "The idea becomes a material force. . ." I have shown that the apparatus is coagulated knowledge, consciousness, organised into a ruling power. Its dominance must be undermined *ideologically* before it can fall materially. This is precisely the lesson of the events leading up to the Prague spring. I have always believed in the power of the idea and the word, and that it matters whether one is convinced of oneself and one's cause and doesn't shrink back deep down inside when the decision has to be made. Marx himself is unthinkable without this conviction. The new truth need not even be proclaimed particularly loudly. It will still make headway, and will always provide the necessary courage.

Q Your book really comes across as much more objective than one would expect from the motivation which you reveal here.

A. I can now reveal this motivation because, through my writing and revising, through the consumption of energy, I was gradually able to tear myself free from what was merely frustrated protest. I decided to suppress the **first** draft of the summer 1973. It contained—apart from the general weakness of the entire final section—too much resentment and subjective wishful thinking.

One has to get the better of all self-destructive bitterness. I see it as a weakness when many dissidents tend to resent the course of history if it doesn't fit in with their own immediate intentions. Anyone who allows himself to be made ill is normally lost to the cause of reform.

After the intervention, as soon as I had regained my composure, I studied Marx for the third time, and Leninism for the first time critically, I mean of course in the historical-analytical sense. Because the revolutionary integrity and world-historical greatness of Lenin are for me, now as before, beyond doubt.

And, in order to understand socialism as it actually exists, I have acquired my own picture of world history, i.e. of the multitude and variety of primarily the non-European civilisations and the unity of their general structural problems. Then, in 1971, I began writing.

- Q. Whilst you were already employed in industry, that is.
- A. Yes. And since 1975 I have revised the first draft as thoroughly as was possible in the time available to me, with, by the way, the exception of the first four chapters. There I have only made very few stylistic corrections, although originally I wanted to change more even here. But then I received a copy of Rudi Dutschke's book *An Attempt to Put Lenin Back on His Feet*. He had written his work at exactly the same time as I was writing these four chapters. My third and fourth chapters in particular refer to the same sources, and in the case of Lenin, partly the same quotes. But Rudi Dutschke arrives at a rather different assessment. Now I wanted to avoid that the certainly interesting contrast of positions should be obscured by extensive polemics, and therefore I left everything as it was.

The intervening dissertation stood me in good stead for the amendments and changes in parts two and three. I am now even more concrete concerning the economic practice of existing socialism.

Section Three in particular is for the most part new; the entire theory of general emancipation and the chapter on the economics of the cultural revolution were missing completely before.

Section Three is now the most important one for me, essential as the preceding analysis is and likely as it is to find more confirmation than the concept of the alternative. Analysis is not sufficient. Theory must halt before its practical political consequences. It is a question of drawing up a programme for which people who do not want to continue in the same way can be mobilised. I would like my book to initiate broader self-clarification and more co-operation for the struggle for a new perspective within socialism as it actually exists today.

*(Translated from German by Paul Edmunson  
and Günter Minnerup)*