



FAREWELL TO THE WORKING CLASS

Andre Gorz
Pluto Press, 1982 pbk £3.95
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SOCIALISM AND SURVIVAL

Rudolf Bahro
Heretic Books, 1982 pbk £3.50 hbk £6.95
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These two books deal with the most fundamental question facing socialists at the present time: why, in such a crisis, is the working-class movement not presenting itself as a base for a clear alternative? What

strategies should socialists adopt in this period? They are welcome for that alone.

Both writers argue that socialists are in danger of locating their perspectives for a progression to socialism not in the reality of a modern capitalist society but in the structures of an earlier stage of capitalist development which no longer exists.

The two books are linked mainly in this overall objective: in other ways they are different. Gorz's essay is a tightly-structured *tour de force* with a universal application. Bahro's is a collection of speeches and articles on a variety of themes in a mainly West German context. Whilst Gorz develops his argument step by step, the reader can trace the refinements in Bahro's thinking as his book progresses.

Gorz is polished and assertive: Bahro shares his doubts and changes in direction with the reader. Neither, however, is comfortable to read: for we are in the presence of heresy, and the most dangerous heretics are those whose motives cannot be easily called into question. Thus Bahro:

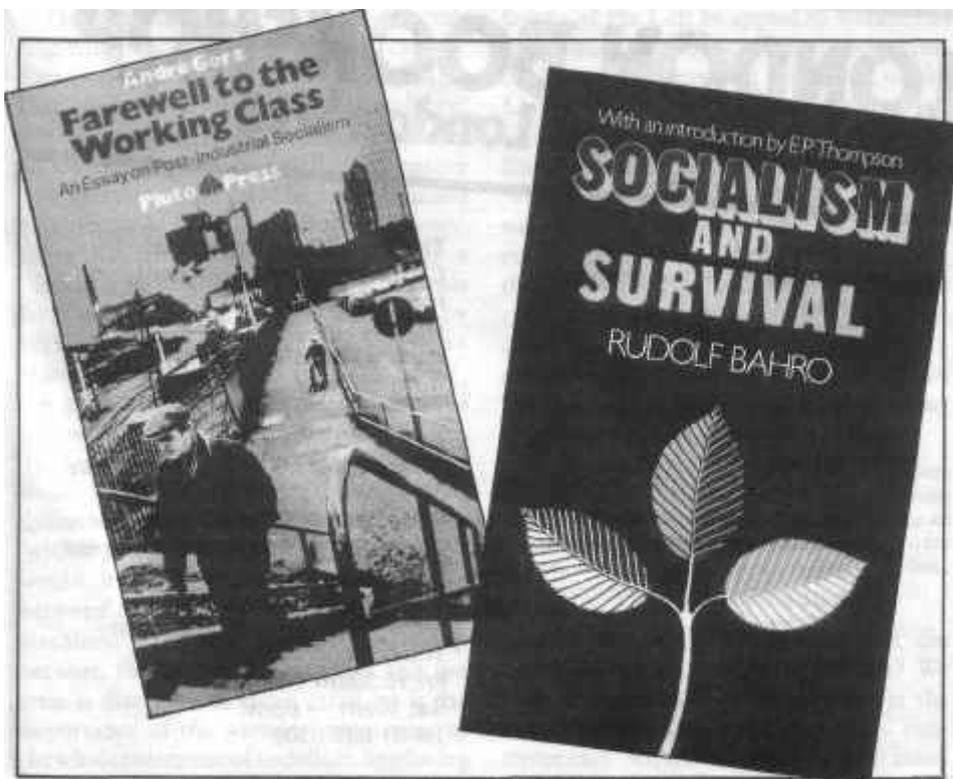
'It is no longer probable that the crisis of bourgeois society will find its solutions in the sense of the proletarian revolution traditionally expected. Dogmatic adherence to Marx is diametrically opposed to Marx's own historical materialism. It is directed against the perception of reality as it is'.

However, these are no subtle apologists for a new stage of capitalist 'post-industrial society'; rather both see themselves as urging fellow socialists to come out of what they see as a 'proletarian ghetto'. The method and the goal were correct, they say, but the subject (the industrial proletariat) is too narrow a base for socialism and, like capitalism itself, no longer corresponds to the traditional stereotype.

Gorz begins with 'Nine theses for a future left': the main point of which is to identify the context which capital has created — exclusively for its own needs — through which any transition to socialism must take place. For those still in employment, work has become instrumental — automated rather than manually skilled — but not at all intellectually stimulating. Gorz challenges the myth of the 'heroic' skilled proletariat, created by capital yet able to transcend it into socialism:

'The crisis of socialism is above all a reflection of the crisis of the proletariat. The disappearance of the polyvalent skilled worker — the possible subject of productive labour and hence of a revolutionary transformation of social relations — has also entailed the disappearance of the class able to take charge of the socialist project and translate it into reality. Fundamentally, the degeneration of socialist theory and practice has its origins here.'

Who then is going to build socialism if we cannot rely on the industrial proletariat? Gorz argues that the agent for change will be the 'non-class of non-workers' — a non-class in the sense that they are a multitude of individuals working out their own priorities and requirements rather than a class with a 'transcendent unity'.



Their mission at this stage is to build up 'autonomous power' outside of existing structures. This argument is easy to mock and to reject, but so also increasingly, is the argument that socialism will be brought about by the 'massed ranks of the industrial proletariat'.

Gorz contends that socialists have never given enough emphasis to the autonomous sphere of personal needs (except perhaps in *their* personal lives!). They have ignored, at great cost, the *plurality*, not only of organisations, but also of different ways of working and living: in short, the individual needs of people. And 'it is precisely because the socialist movement has failed to embrace and enrich this pluralist perspective that it has condemned itself to a minority position even among working people'.

The 'autonomous sphere' then, provides the basis for the new society, even though we are given no clear idea as to how capitalism will be overthrown. But what about 'socially-necessary' labour? Are the robots simply to be left to get on with it? In one of the most interesting parts of the book, Gorz tries to define the relationship between the 'autonomous' and 'heteronymous' spheres of activity under socialism. He accepts that:

'It is impossible to imagine the telephones, video machines, microprocessors, bicycles or photoelectric cells — all potentially convivial tools that can be put to autonomous purposes — could be produced at the level of a family, a group or a local community'.

He argues that such socialised production will provide an essential technical base for autonomous activity and will be vital for that reason, creating the 'abundance' necessary for socialism. In his view, the key to socialist organisation will be to ensure that *everyone* takes part in heteronymous production *as well as* autonomous activity, for a limited period weekly or over a lifetime. Heteronymous activity in this form will be beneficial psychologically by breaking down isolation and providing an element of collectivism. Upon this base, the bulk of time can be used to pursue autonomous activities based on choice. There is a key role here for politics. It would be the job of the state to organise the sphere of heteronomy, and it would not 'wither away'. The essential political task would be to regulate the relationship between heteronomy and autonomy and establish priorities. The relationship between the sphere of autonomy and the state is discussed in some detail, as is the importance of the womens' movement to the whole enterprise of socialism, beginning

with a thorough going attack by Gorz on the concept of the demand for 'waged housework'.

Bahro begins from a similar dissatisfaction with the overriding emphasis on the industrial proletariat as the focus of a move to socialism, and turns criticism of the ecology movement on its head:

'If there is anything today that really does deserve the label of a single-issue movement it is the institutionalised wage struggle which is ultimately subordinated completely to the overall process of capitalist reproduction'.

Although ostensibly about the relationship between 'Reds' and 'Greens' in West Germany, Bahro's book is in fact much more about how the socialist movement as a whole can move forward, and which strategies it should adopt in the new conditions. His basic thesis is that the external contradictions of capitalism (ecology, nuclear war and the exploitation of the underdeveloped world) have given the demand to be rid of capitalism an ultimate urgency and brought the needs for a new alliance and attitudes on the part of the Left:

'Today, socialism is and must be far more than a working-class and trade union movement of the traditional kind. Otherwise the struggle for a just distribution of the social product between wage-earners and entrepreneurs in the rich industrial countries of the West will simply be fought on the backs of the rest of humanity'.

Various themes run through Bahro's arguments, some of them not yet fully developed. There is, as with Gorz, the failure of the Left to appeal to workers as individuals. There is the stinging criticism of the sectarianism and alienation of the Left, and the appeal to understand Christian principles as a basis for socialism. But Bahro's main theme is *conversion* — 'we must live differently in order to survive' — conversion from the consumerism of capitalism and away from the impasse of the institutionalised wage conflict. Bahro does not follow Gorz into consideration of what socialist society might be, but the two writers are united in their appeal for socialists to break away from the old stereotypes. He challenges:

'Are the ecology movement against nuclear power stations, the womens' movement against patriarchy, the movement of people seeking an alternative culture, or new spirituality etc — are these all movements of the revolutionary working class in disguise?'

How can we deny the truth of the changes described by these authors? We have seen recently how necessary is the debate amongst Marxists as to the contemporary nature of the working class.

These books universalise the issues and provide fresh air where perhaps it is most needed. And yet there is something missing. Neither book confronts the question of *power*. As we know well, enlightenment is not power and societies cannot be wished away. Gorz talks about 'dismantling' power, and Bahro about 'refusal and obstruction'. Neither seems satisfactory, even, I suspect, to the authors themselves. Even those in sympathy with their views will demand much more debate on this question.

John Fisher

