Marcuse

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Herbert Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism*, published in 1958, has, I believe, a great deal to contribute to an understanding of current developments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. I admit that I am not unbiased in the matter, but I hope the argument presented here will be examined on its own merits. It is derived from *Soviet Marxism* but also uses material from Herbert Marcuse's other major treatment of the topic (the last and, to my knowledge, the only other piece he wrote directly on Eastern Europe)—namely, the text of a talk given at the Bahro Congress in Berlin in 1978, "Protosocialism and Late Capitalism: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis Based on Bahro's Analysis."

The recent events in the Soviet Union and its successor states have had a major impact on Marxism, both in theory and in practice, in the First World and in the Third World. It is easy to see in the Third World; in many countries national struggles took place in the space opened by the tensions between the great powers, and in others, such as Cuba, liberation movements had become largely dependent on the Soviet Union for their strength. In the First World, the impact has been stronger: Although the Left continues to adhere to the position that Soviet-style systems had nothing to do with Marxist goals, the collapse of the Soviet regimes has, perhaps unconsciously, been internalized as a defeat for the principles of socialism and the political parties that had espoused socialism. The collapse was certainly seen as a defeat for socialism by the Right, just as it was successfully sold as such in the popular media.

Marxist theoretical analysis has likewise had a strange aspect, strange in that it has largely shied away from analysis of what in the past produced the present. Rather, such analysis speaks only of the present and the future, predicting the disasters attendant on the forced introduction
of a market system into hitherto centrally planned states. At best, Marxist theory has been applied to the present class structure of the successor states. The occasion has not as yet been used to reflect on whether the present events require a reexamination of the past and whether that reexamination would lead to a different analysis of the long-term processes of transformation and the “transition to socialism” with which Marxism has always been concerned. And yet, it seems to me, a reexamination is indicated, for, with very few exceptions, the course of recent history was hardly predicted by even the acutest analyses of the past. Granted, predictions of ultimate collapse abounded on both Left and Right. But it can hardly be said that the development of the reform movement within the Soviet Union, symbolized by glasnost and perestroika, was widely foreseen, or that the almost spontaneous melting away both of entrenched Stalinist regimes and of the efforts at their reform would occur as they did.

I will argue that Marxist theory does indeed suggest the likelihood of the trends that have led to the present results. I will further argue that both Soviet Marxism and “Protosocialism and Late Capitalism” can contribute significantly to an understanding of those trends and of their consequences today. Both pieces deduced the presence of trends toward change, toward reform, in the Soviet system. In Soviet Marxism, the analysis suggests an internal necessity of liberalization in the Soviet Union, although it is skeptical as to whether such “liberalization” will change the essentially nonsocialist character of the system. In the text on Bahro, Marcuse calls Bahro’s book The Alternative: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Socialism “the most important contribution to Marxist theory and practice to appear in several decades,” and Bahro in turn sees in internal developments in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) the hope of a fundamental change in the character of the Soviet-style society from within.

I want to focus here on the discussions of these liberalizing trends in the Soviet Union in these two works, although in each work that discussion is really secondary to the main analysis. In “Protosocialism,” Marcuse’s attention is devoted to the implications of Bahro’s analysis of East European societies for the possibilities of change in the West, in particular the relationship of “base” and “superstructure” and the relationship of change in individuals and change in societal structures. Bahro finds
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agents of change present in Soviet-style systems while Marcuse explores the existence of analogous agents in the West. In the process, Marcuse does not explicitly critique Bahro's analysis of the situation in the GDR. Silence suggests consent, although perhaps criticism of Bahro's views of East German society was muted out of concern about solidarity, since Bahro was in jail at the time for espousing precisely those views.

The formulations of *Soviet Marxism* were more unambiguously influenced by the circumstances in which they were written. Alone among Marcuse's works written under contract, it was the product of stays at the Columbia and Harvard Russian research centers during the period of McCarthyism and at the height of the agitation justifying the Cold War. Outright defense of the Soviet Union was not in the cards at either institution, nor would Marcuse have wished to undertake such a defense; but an explicitly Marxist approach based on the validity of Marxist conceptions would not have been widely understood either. On the other hand, a wholesale attack on all aspects of Soviet society would have been easily misconstrued as an attack on socialism and a rejection of Marxism as a whole. Thus we encounter an “immanent critique” of Soviet Marxism, with which Marcuse begins the book and which he is at pains to justify theoretically in language that, today, seems forced and unnecessary to the main task. But the circumspection served the purpose of permitting a Marxist critique of a pseudo-Marxist theory and a pseudosocialist (later “protosocialist”) reality, which was the real aim of the book. The immanent critique is productive. Its discussions of the transformation of Marxist theory as it “ceases to be the organon of revolutionary consciousness and practice and enters the superstructure of an established system of domination” are fascinating. The detailed study of the dialectic as it is transformed from a critical tool of social analysis to an all-embracing philosophical system, for instance, is a model of clarification in the history of ideas.

Marcuse's critique of Soviet Marxism as theory and ideology is not, however, my subject here. My concern is twofold: to examine the discussion of Soviet-style societies to gain a better understanding of the forces for change in that society, and to isolate important implications that analysis has for an assessment of the forces of change within our own society. A better understanding of the “base-superstructure” relationship is important for this process, since questions about the relative power of base
and superstructure to produce fundamental changes in the social system as a whole remain central for both theoretical analysis and political practice.

Social Transformation in the Soviet Union

If the Soviet Union was not capitalist, it was not socialist either, "in the sense envisaged by Marx and Engels." In classic Marxist terms, the difference lay in the ownership of the means of production: They were nationalized but not socialized, not put in the control of the "immediate producers." This was seen as an intermediate stage in the transition to socialism, in early Soviet Marxism. The beginning question then is, what forces of change might be foreseen from the early and "transitional" revolutionary period? How might one, given a Marxist analysis, expect things to develop?

Understanding the early changes poses no particular problem; Marcuse spends little time on them and presents nothing that is radically different from previous accounts. The Bolshevik Revolution took place ("it is assumed that the initial intention and objective of the Bolshevik Revolution was to build a socialist society"), not in an industrially advanced country, but in a backwards one. Without outside help (historically, it was the success of the German revolution that never came that Lenin had counted on), socialism was on weak footing. Add to the lack of positive help the presence of capitalist hostility and encirclement, and no normal development toward socialism, no smooth transition, could be expected. Marcuse places the turning point early, as far back as 1923, when it became clear that there would be no immediate revolution either in Germany or in any other advanced capitalist country. No "choice" was presented to the Soviet leadership under the circumstances; all energy had to be directed toward the building of the industrial base, leading to an ever-growing "priority of the Soviet state over Soviet Workers." Whether the development was a result of internal weakness or the international context remains unclear. On the one hand, international events "defined" Soviet Marxism; on the other hand, "there are no 'extraneous' causes . . . for all apparently outside factors and events will affect the social structure only if the ground is prepared to meet them, . . . if they 'meet' corresponding devel-
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opments within.” In the end, one may argue that the distinction between internal and external is inapplicable in this situation in any event because “the class struggle is international by its very nature.” However that may be, “if the dialectical law of the turn from quantity into quality was ever applicable, it was in the transition from Leninism (after the October Revolution) to Stalinism. The ‘retardation’ of the revolution in the West and the stabilization of capitalism made for qualitative changes in the structure of Soviet society.”

But where do we go from there? Is the result, neither capitalist nor socialist, static? Or does “Soviet nationalization, under the historical condition of its progress, . . . possess an inner dynamic which may counteract the repressive tendencies and transform the structure of Soviet society”? Marcuse, writing in the first years of the Khrushchev regime but thirty years before Gorbachev, gives a clear yes. Why?

A number of threads come together to supply the answer. The first gives primacy to the external situation. It is worth quoting at length the key passage:

The “class interest” of the bureaucracy (that is, the common denominator of the special interests of the various branches of the bureaucracy) is linked to the intensified development of the productive forces, and administrative progress into a “higher stage of socialism” would most effectively secure the cohesion of Soviet society. On the other hand, the Soviet state has consistently diverted a very large sector of the productive forces (human and material) to the business of external and internal militarization. Does this policy forestall the transition to the “second phase”? The compatibility of an armament economy with a rising standard of living is more than a technical economic problem. The maintenance of a vast military establishment (armed forces and secret police) with its educational, political and psychological controls perpetuates authoritarian institutions, attitudes, and behavior patterns which counteract a qualitative change in the repressive production relations. Inasmuch as the bureaucracy is a separate class with special privileges and powers, it has an interest in self-perpetuation and, consequently, in perpetuating repressive production (and political) relations. However, the question is whether the repressive economic and political relations on which this bureaucracy was founded are not increasingly
contradicting the more fundamental and general interests and objectives in the development of the Soviet state.

If our analysis of Soviet Marxism is correct, the answer must be affirmative. The fundamental Soviet objective in the present period is the breaking of the consolidation of the Western world which neutralizes the "interimperialist conflicts" on whose effectiveness the final victory of socialism depends. . . . In the Soviet Marxist analysis, Western consolidation is based on a "permanent war economy," which . . . sustains the rapid development of productivity in the capitalist countries and the integration of the majority of organized labor within the capitalist system. . . . The capitalist war economy is in turn sustained by the "hard" Soviet policy, which also stands in the way of Soviet progress to the second phase where it can effectively compete with capitalist capabilities. Consequently, the first step must be the relaxation of the "hard" policy. This, however, is a matter of internal as well as foreign reorientation, of shifting the emphasis from military and political to more effective economic competition, and of liberalizing the Stalinist bureaucracy.¹⁵

One might fantasize that Gorbachev had read these words, were it not that Marcuse was banned reading in the Soviet Union and, to my knowledge, no translation of Soviet Marxism was ever made there. It is certainly a quite precise description of the direction of the Soviet leadership's foreign and domestic policy after 1985.

But there are also more purely internal reasons to anticipate a liberalization in the Soviet Union. One goes back to the question of class structure. The bureaucracy dominates the decisions of the state, but its class base is uncertain. It does not "own" the means of production; it merely controls them. The distinction is important.¹⁶ At bottom it means that the appropriation of the profits of production by the bureaucracy is not legitimized; its political and legal foundations are weak. If the bureaucracy is to consolidate its position, even in the short run, it must support the increase in production that can give rise to an increase in the standard of living as well as a general sense of progress.¹⁷ Given such progress, the continuance of overt repression becomes not only unnecessary but counterproductive.

Technological progress itself requires liberalization, according to an-
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other strand in the argument supporting its likelihood. Technological rationality is inconsistent with a rigid, repressive, and command-centralized organization of economic activity; fully developed, it even "contains an element of playfulness."

While technological rationality and human freedom are hardly identical, the former is a means to the increased productivity that, today, any form of social organization must have if it is to be stable. The technological rationality that Marcuse foresaw as a necessity for the survival of the Soviet state did not of itself promise human freedom. And Marcuse is clear in his view that liberalization is not identical with socialism, that the necessity of technologically rational development does not imply the necessity of socialization of the means of production, of their control by their immediate producers. It is not socialism that Marcuse sees as the result of the internal dynamics of Soviet development, but a relaxation of overt repression.

An element of determinism creeps into the logic that links technological rationality with political liberalization. We know little of the social dynamics involved in the production of Sputnik and the Soviet Union's space program. Whatever it was, it produced highly advanced technology in a very repressive overall environment. And in just what sense can one speak, as Marcuse does at the end of the first paragraph in the long quotation above, of a "contradiction" between the interests of a bureaucracy in control of the state apparatus and the "more fundamental and general interests and objectives in the development of the Soviet state"? The movement toward increased productivity sometimes seems to take on a life of its own, a "law of history" governing the actions of men and women. But the grounds for believing in a strong pressure for improved production in Soviet society are strong even without appeal to such laws.

Marxist theory itself provides a further impetus for liberalization in a state that historically takes such theory seriously, however it may distort, codify, or subvert its content. "The continued promulgation and indoctrination in Marxism may still turn out to be a dangerous weapon for the Soviet rulers." For Marxist theory holds out the prospects of the free play of human faculties, the expression of creativity, liberation from repressive relationships in productive work and in play—concepts that can be tested against immediate experience and can raise problems if the gap is too large and too visible.

Given the strength of these arguments, liberalization becomes merely a
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matter of time. Khrushchev's policies seemed to bear out the predictions of theory as Marcuse was writing; Gorbachev's policies, after Marcuse's death, seem to be incontrovertible confirmation. But then the question arises, why did liberalization fail and the entire Soviet system, not merely its most repressive elements, fall? Here we must go beyond *Soviet Marxism* for an answer and look at some of the more far-reaching implications of its analysis.

The Precipitous Decline

Marcuse clearly expected the Soviet economy to continue to grow, to increase both in productivity and output, and to produce more and more consumer goods at the same time as basic production advanced. He quotes Khrushchev's claim that the Soviet Union had, already in 1953, "the means for high-speed, simultaneous development of heavy industry, agriculture, and light industry." Marcuse concludes that, "given conditions under which the growing production . . . is not . . . utilized for wasteful and destructive purposes, production is likely to generate the material and cultural wealth that would permit . . . the second phase." Marcuse's use of the word "permit" rather than "produce" is not accidental. This is not technological determination, and Marcuse insists that radical social change must accompany technological progress for technology to be liberating. That technological progress would occur, however, Marcuse had no doubt.

Of course, events did not progress in a smooth or linear fashion in the Soviet Union or anywhere in Eastern Europe. The arms race in fact intensified, partially because of direct pressures from conservative administrations in the United States. The initial response in the Soviet Union was not liberalization but its opposite; Khrushchev's hold on power was broken by the mid-1960s. Thus when liberalization came, it may have come too late.

The arms race did not simply undercut the full use of the resources of the Soviet Union in developing its economy; because of the particular conditions of political repression, it actually undermined the advance of technical knowledge and the technical foundations for advancing productivity. Technological rationality, in Marcuse's exposition, is a necessary
ingredient of advances in productivity and is itself a function of (made increasingly possible by) such advances. In a technologically underdeveloped society, a level of production must first be reached that makes technologically rational behavior both necessary and effective. But that rationality is itself a prerequisite of reaching the productivity level. Thus a vicious circle exists. It cannot be broken all at once; the areas in which technological thinking is most advanced slowly spill over into other areas, so that advances occur in different areas at different times and places. But precisely this process was aborted in the Soviet Union in the concentration and isolation of the best technical work in the space and armaments programs. Thus to the inherent chicken-and-egg dilemma were added blockages to “normal” processes. The failure to achieve balanced and wide-ranging technological progress was in part the foreseeable result of developments Marcuse’s analysis did in fact explore.

Coupled with these externally rooted explanations for the decimated state of Soviet and most East European economies by the late 1980s were purely internal factors—economic problems inherent in any socialistically organized and Marxist-grounded society. Some economic problems, of course, had little to do with socialism but were simply decisions that could have gone either way under the control of the leadership: excessive centralization, distortions of investment policy, lack of responsiveness to technological changes and to changes in consumption desires, too rigid education policies, an inflexible command structure, failure to utilize markets at least as sources of information, and the clogging of other information flows. A repressive political system and the absence of market indicators made errors in economic decisions more difficult to correct, but signs of problems existed; a “wiser” leadership might indeed have done much better, even within structures inherently required by Marxist theory in a socialist economy.

Socialism and Surplus Consciousness

Other aspects of the retarded progress of the Soviet economy, however, have more to do with its unambiguously socialist characteristics. The first involves the role of Marxist theory. No system that relies for its legitimacy, if not its direction, on Marxism, even in the form of Soviet Marx-
ism, can afford to engage in activities absolutely counter to the fundamental principles of that theory. Thus, for instance, the exploitation of workers needs to be ameliorated, not exacerbated, over time. Except in conditions of wartime or other dire emergency, the living and working conditions of industrial workers must be improved. In the Third World, likewise, a political system basing itself on the concepts of Soviet Marxism cannot exploit workers as imperialist countries would. Unemployment cannot be tolerated on any broad basis; consequently, the simple layoff of workers whose jobs become obsolete is a difficult matter. In these and other ways, a Soviet Marxist system suffers from competitive disadvantages compared to a system without such inhibitions. It might be expected, therefore, that a Soviet-style system would lag behind in the competition with advanced capitalist economies, even under the best of circumstances.

The second socialist-grounded factor in the impeded progress of the Soviet economy has to do with the role of the bureaucracy and the intelligentsia. Technical advance comes from a technical intelligentsia. However recruited, however organized, whatever their ideology, a level of education and training and ability is necessary to produce innovation, and those possessing these levels are among the critical components of the intelligentsia. Bahro speaks of them as developing a level of “surplus consciousness” under real existing socialism: “free human capacity that is no longer absorbed by the struggle for existence.” More specifically, “The industrial, technological-scientific mode of production, in which intellectual labor becomes an essential factor, engenders in the producers . . . qualities, skills, forms of imagination . . . that are stifled or perverted in capitalist and repressive noncapitalist societies.”

Both Bahro and Marcuse saw such surplus consciousness as a factor, perhaps the factor, that would permit a break in the “chains of domination, the subjugation of human beings to labor.” Marcuse, in his discussion in 1978, was not concerned to look at the impact of the increase in such surplus consciousness on technological progress, but the exploration is potentially fruitful. For the specific forms by which “skills, forms of imagination . . . are . . . perverted” are quite different in capitalist and repressive noncapitalist societies. Capitalism provides rewards for the application of these forms of imagination to inherently unrewarding tasks, real existing socialism did not. Marcuse (and Bahro) saw surplus con-
consciousness as leading to the end of the domination of compensatory interests over emancipatory interests. Real existing socialism did not permit the full expression of emancipatory interests, and therein lay the potential for an explosive rupture of its system of domination. This was the main point of Bahro’s analysis, and Marcuse applied it, *mutatis mutandis*, to capitalism.

But within capitalism, compensatory interests are much more fully addressed than within real existing socialist societies. That was not an issue that either Bahro or Marcuse, in his essay on Bahro, explored, although clearly, from extensive discussions in *One-Dimensional Man* and later works, it was an essential part of Marcuse’s overall assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of capitalism. The consequence is that surplus consciousness can be better harnessed to the interests of technological rationality in a capitalist than in a repressive socialist society. Even at the level of observation of everyday life, the result is evident. The dynamism, the energy, the search for innovation that is found in the leading advanced industrial societies, however distorted and unproductive in a human sense it may be, seems altogether absent under real existing socialism, appearing, if at all, in artistic work but certainly not in industrial production or the commercial service sector. Put crudely, the Soviet-style systems gave up one set of incentives for technological progress and increasing productivity without substituting any equally effective alternative.

Thus, Marcuse’s analysis would suggest that, even apart from “external” pressures and even apart from the particular mistakes of particular leaders or particular organizational strategies, it is unlikely that repressive Soviet-style socialism could satisfy its promise of increased productivity and a steadily increasing quality of life for its populations. Whether under the best of circumstances (i.e., no “external” problems and a “wise” leadership) a socialist economy might be expected to perform as or more efficiently than a capitalist one, we cannot tell from the historical record, but there is certainly some theoretical reason to doubt it. At least in the short or intermediate range, heightened productivity is not able to give the goal of socialism its appeal, its promise for the future. That conclusion, which is implicit in all of critical theory, emerges concretely from Marcuse’s analysis of Soviet Marxism.

The bureaucracy itself could have attempted to overcome these inherent difficulties in advancing productivity, either through measures de-
signed to increase the allocation of resources to consumption (and thus to enhance the satisfaction of compensatory interests for the intelligentsia) or through reforms in the organizational hindrances to progress (the over-centralization, etc.). There is some evidence that, at least in the GDR, the bureaucracy tried such reforms, such as the shift of industrial capacity to the production of consumer goods in 1971. But in the Soviet Union, contrary to Marcuse's expectations that the bureaucracy would seek minimal reform in the quest for self-preservation, the bureaucracy abandoned Gorbachev and moderation, preferring to endorse a snowballing surrender of the existing bases for their power and prestige to hostile forces of change. Why did this unexpected surrender of the system by the bureaucracy it had produced take place? If the “class interest” of the bureaucracy lay in the reform of the system, as Marcuse states at the beginning of the long quotation cited previously, why did it so quickly abandon that reform?

The answer is that the bureaucracy was not, indeed, a “class” whose ownership of the means of production provided a basis of power and privilege. The bureaucracy did control the productive processes, but control and ownership are not the same thing, as I have already argued. Its class base was uncertain. “Bureaucracy by itself, no matter how huge it is, does not generate self-perpetuating power unless it has an economic base of its own from which its position is derived, or unless it is allied with other social groups which possess such a power base.”

When “free market” pressures appeared and received powerful support from the outside, when internal political division gave the upper hand to market-oriented forces of change, the bureaucracy quickly realized it could as easily exercise its power in the new system as in the old. Not being dependent on relations of ownership, it had little to lose by a change in those relations and possibly even something to gain. History, with hindsight, vindicates the “nonclass” analysis.

Marcuse recognized from the outset that internal reform was only a possibility in the Soviet Union and that the likelihood that such reform would break through the bounds of real existing socialism to some form more akin to what Marx and Engels had envisaged was an even slimmer possibility. History remains inconclusive as to whether that possibility ever existed. If it did, it probably came closest to manifesting itself in the GDR during the brief period of the Wende or in Czechoslovakia at the
very beginning of the velvet revolution. In the first case, German unification quickly wiped out whatever possibilities existed; in the latter case, neither the ideological nor the practical political support for a real reform of socialism was ever substantial. In both cases, the external context sealed the fate of whatever possibility for a reform socialism might have developed.

The Ramifications of the Demise

Thus the Soviet Marxist chapter of the narrative of socialism seems closed. Does Marcuse's analysis lead us to any insights into the future? Marcuse's Bahro review, although it abjures any convergence theory, points out strong parallels between real existing socialist and real existing capitalist societies. He finds a drive toward technological rationality in each, although with different motors and different effects. He finds disparate forces for change in each, but none that comes close to an assurance of progress toward a radically different social order—no "revolutionary subject" on either side. Rather, he finds an internalization of subordination, a "transformation of freedom into security," in both social orders; but he also finds, in both, serious sources of instability, principal among them the existence of a surplus consciousness, of unsatisfied human drives, aspirations, and desires hitherto incapable of fulfillment but now visibly within the range of the possible.

What inhibits the realization of that possibility, what prevents instability from maturing into fundamental change? Here the answer is quite different in the two systems. In the one, the Soviet, it is the combination of internal repression and the external "threat" that justifies it. Liberalization, he foresaw, might be one step in the direction of stability, whether or not of further change. In the capitalist world the situation is rather the opposite. The external threat serves both to justify an internal economic policy, sometimes called the "permanent war economy," and to provide legitimacy to a liberal regime even though that regime falls far short of fulfilling the potential of the technical progress it has made possible. Externally, Soviet Marxist theory had always counted on conflicts among the capitalist powers to provide it with a respite within which to solidify its position internationally; the reality had proved otherwise, ironically, in
that the very existence of the Soviet Union and its allies had furnished a basis on which the Western powers have been able to come together and bury their own conflicts. That analysis is not one with which Marcuse significantly disagreed, although he saw many more forces for stability and potentials for progress in the West than the theorists of Soviet Marxism ever saw or acknowledged.

The disappearance of the Soviet Union changes this picture dramatically in the capitalist countries. The threat from outside, which so long justified massive military expenditures and investment in wasteful technology, is harder and harder to find. It is harder and harder to explain the reasons for the continued existence of poverty, repression, injustice, racism, and xenophobia in a world in which the possibility of plenty for all is more and more apparent and its postponement less and less able to be justified by the threat of an outside menace. If worldwide competitiveness increases to the point where economic crises follow each other in an accelerating tempo, the original “anomalous” position in which the Soviet Union found itself at its birth might not confront another protest from below: The revolt this time might come from the most developed countries. If, on the other hand, that competitiveness is brought under control and progress does indeed continue more or less smoothly, the means for capturing surplus consciousness within the confines of compensatory interests may become slimmer and slimmer. Environmental constraints and their human meaning, to which Marcuse was increasingly turning his attention at the time of his death, suggest other limits on the extent to which compensatory interests can forever be at the same time stimulated and satisfied. So the “surplus consciousness” of those doing well, coupled with the discontent of the excluded, under the constraints of a finite natural environment, may yet open the door to a form of liberation that neither Soviet-style socialism nor anti-Soviet-style capitalism has yet made possible.

Notes

1. This essay was first commissioned by Marx Wartofsky and will appear in his edited Festschrift to Robert Cohen, to be published by Kluwer Academic Publishers.
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5. “This study attempts to evaluate some main trends of Soviet Marxism in terms of an ‘immanent critique,’ that is to say, it starts from the theoretical premises of Soviet Marxism. . . . The critique employs the conceptual instruments of its object, namely, Marxism, in order to clarify the actual function of Marxism in Soviet society. . . . [It assumes] that Soviet Marxism (i.e., Leninism, Stalinism, and post-Stalin trends) is not merely an ideology promulgated by the Kremlin in order to rationalize and justify its policies but expresses in various forms the realities of Soviet developments.” Marcuse, Soviet Marxism, 1. If one accepts that “the theoretical premises of Soviet Marxism” are indeed the theory developed by Marx and Engels and that theory, in Marxist understanding, plays a historical role going beyond ideology, one might as easily have said, “this study is a Marxist critique of Soviet Marxism.”


7. Ibid., 8, n. 1.

8. Marcuse, agreeing, says that “the abolition of private property in the means of production does not, by itself, constitute an essential distinction as long as production is centralized and controlled over and above the population.” Marcuse, Soviet Marxism, 81. In “Protosocialism and Late Capitalism,” he speaks of “the abolition of private ownership of the means of production” as the “indispensable precondition of socialism . . . [the real difference lies] in the way in which the material and intellectual forces of production are used.” Herbert Marcuse, “Protosocialism and Late Capitalism: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis Based on Bahro’s Analysis,” in Wolter, ed., Rudolph Bahro, 24-48.


10. Ibid., 74.

11. Ibid., 6.

12. Ibid., 3.

13. Ibid., 96.

14. Ibid., 74.

15. Ibid., 171-72.


17. Marcuse, Soviet Marxism, 118.

18. Ibid., 257. See, in general, chapter 12, “Ethics and Productivity.”
In a brief discussion of the concept of historical laws in Marxism, Marcuse refers to the “irreversibility” of historical processes determined by the “basic form of societal reproduction,” but the example he gives is of the emergence of the feudal system out of the agricultural economy of the late Roman empire! Ibid., 3–4.

Ibid., 265.

Ibid., 267.


Marcuse, Soviet Marxism, 170.

Innumerable Western texts expand on these and other issues. One of the less ideological is Janos Kornai, Economics of Shortage, 2 vols. (Amsterdam and New York: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1980).

Marcuse, “Protosocialism and Late Capitalism,” 27.

Ibid., 28.

“... not through a policy of reducing consumption but through a genuine equalization in the distribution of those consumer goods which determine the standard of living.” Marcuse (quoting Bahro), ibid., 35.

Based on it, Bahro believed an overthrow of the existing regime in the GDR from the inside was possible. Marcuse did not take a position on Bahro’s belief. Marcuse, “Protosocialism and Late Capitalism,” 36.

Marcuse, Soviet Marxism, 109.

For more detailed discussion, see my Missing Marx.

In Soviet Marxism, he already spoke of the “fundamental difference... paralleled by a strong trend toward assimilation.” Marcuse, Soviet Marxism, 81. Elsewhere, he speaks of “an essential link between the two conflicting systems... in the technical-economic basis common to both systems, i.e., mechanized... industry as the mainspring of societal organization in all spheres of life.” Marcuse, “Protosocialism and Late Capitalism,” 6.

Marcuse, Soviet Marxism, 191.

Marcuse emphasized that the “turn to subjectivity,” in Bahro’s formulation, was ambivalent. Marcuse “Protosocialism and Late Capitalism,” 46. Although Marcuse was also much concerned with what Bahro called the “essentially aesthetic motivation” of socialism, I would suspect he would not have followed Bahro on the road Bahro subsequently took on the relationship of the subjective to the political.

See, for instance, Marcuse, Soviet Marxism, 99.