



Soul and Science

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If the 20th Century was the century of physics, the 21st Century is the century of cybernetics, biology and ecology. Technological advance has both crossed new frontiers and discovered old limits.

Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine broke new ground with his understanding that nature, including its human component, seeks to establish order out of chaos by “self-organizing,” not only according to pre-determined laws, but through random creative choices as well that are responsible for the endless novelty and potentiality of being.

The technologically-armed purposive role of humans in the Anthropocentric Age thus takes on a new significance: “What we do today depends on our image of the future rather than the future depending on what we do today” as Prigogine puts it. “The equations of the future are written in our actions as well as in nature. Time becomes construction.”

Nowhere is this truer than in the new science of genomics, which touches the soul, and in the effort to preserve the ecological balance that has enabled humanity to flourish within the narrow band of earth’s livable climate.

In this section we bring together leading thinkers, scientists and technologists of our age to address these issues of mankind’s fate.

Theology not Ecology

Once a loyal supporter of the East German Communist Party, **RUDOLF BAHRO** was arrested in 1977 after the publication of his book, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*, in which he called for Gorbachev-style perestroika a decade early.

Released from prison in 1979 as a result of public-opinion pressure in the west, Bahro emigrated to West Germany where he became a founding theorist of the Green Party. His most recent book is entitled *The Logic of Salvation*.

NPQ editor Nathan Gardels spoke with Bahro in the Eifel Mountain Hamlet of Niederstadtfeldt where he made his home until he died in 1997.

NPQ | Awareness of a warming atmosphere ozone depletion, Brazilian deforestation and the dying German woods has generated a sense of environmental crisis. In Germany, the Greens have formed governing coalitions with the Social Democrats.

Yet, you have turned away from active concern with Green politics to questions of religious imagination. Why?

RUDOLF BAHRO | Because the crisis is not in the trees, it is in us. The sense of environmental crisis merely reflects the inner-world crisis of man. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger says we are alienated from the cosmos because “we have forgotten Being.”

In *Faust* Goethe wrote “you understand the spirit to which you are equal.” In our age, we understand concrete but not how the forest grows; we know the combustion engine but not the pattern which connects us to the primrose.

NPQ | But doesn't ecology aim at healing that alienation?

BAHRO | Ecology challenges the human spirit to rediscover Being, but it is not the answer to man's spiritual crisis. In fact, ecology is anthropocentric; it is man's projection of inner crisis onto the outer world; it locates the problem not in man, but in the environment.

An ecological definition of “crisis” will inevitably lead to ecological modernization—the final imperialism of man over nature. Technological amelioration of crisis may win time against depletion of the ozone layer, but will only perpetuate the “evil” inertia of the megamachine. Persisting in the normal life of industrial culture is enough to destroy the biosphere.

But, ecological modernization, the stage I believe we are now entering, is a necessary and unavoidable step in the process towards a break with destructive inertia. In ten years or so, I am convinced, we will see that the technological answer does not work.

The ozone problem alone implies the need for industrial disarmament on the order

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of ten to one. Already, the proposed solution to this and other environmental problems are no longer a matter of saving a few watts, using less plastic or getting the lead out of gasoline; they are tantamount to a call for freezing the infrastructure.

The fact that we already arrived at the stage of deep restrictions means the whole shape of our industrialized lifestyle is obsolete. Inevitably, an ecological response to the crisis of industrial culture threatens to transform the west into a gigantic Romania, where during the Communist times home heating couldn't rise above 50 degrees and electricity was only available two hours a day.

This is the Dark Age promised by an environmental awareness without a cultural revolution that breaks with the logic of the entire industrial system.

NPQ | The alternative?

BAHRO | The alternative is theology, not ecology—the birth of a new Golden Age which cultivates what Russian novelist Chingiz Aitmatov calls the “divine spark” of nobility in man. In effect, the alternative is a spiritual conversion which abandons the mentality of domination by man over nature; a submission of the city of man to St. Augustine’s “City of God” where we once again realize that, to cite Augustine, “the frail and mortal objects of earth here below, the blossoms and the leaves, could not be endowed with a beauty so immaculate and so exquisitely wrought did they not issue from Divinity which endlessly pervades with its invisible and unchanging beauty of all things.”

Such a conversion is not a matter of living in poverty, though it means answering Tolstoy’s question, “how much land does a man need?” Surely, the whole planet cannot live at the level of the American middle-class; we must turn, instead, from extensive development to quality of life.

However, I do not advocate a rejection of technology. The issue is not man’s tools, but man’s spirit. “Who is the man that uses tools?” That is the real question. The spiritual conversion I call for withdraws commitment from a system built on the fears of technologically powerful man who, because he has forgotten the Being at his center, uses science as insurance against nature instead of reconstructing God, as Einstein wanted. Einstein thought the ultimate task of science was to establish a trust in the order of the cosmos so that man would lose his destructive fear.

NPQ | This comment reminds me of something the Catholic mystic Thomas Merton once wrote: “... without a center, men become little helpless gods, imprisoned within the four walls of their weakness and fear. They are so conscious of their weakness that they think they have nothing to give to another, and that they can only subsist by snatching from others the little that they have, a little love, a little knowledge, a little power.”

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BAHRO | It is precisely the projection of that insecurity onto the natural world and other men that is so destructive. That is why regaining a spiritual center is the key question for industrial man. If the planet is going to survive, humanity has to get off its ego trip and rediscover Being. He must become “Man in Cosmos,” a Teilhard de Chardin put it.

Meister Eckhart, the Christian philosopher who lived in the now despoiled Rhine River valley during the 13th century, celebrated the Logos, or Word of God, as applying to all creatures: “all creatures are words of God. My mouth expresses God but the existence of a stone does the same. . . . God enjoys all creatures, not as creatures, but creatures as God.” Similarly, Mechtild of Magdeburg, also a Christina thinker of the 13th century, speaks of each creature—human, plant and animal—as “a flash of grace.” The eternal light of God, she wrote, is not restricted to humans alone, but is “scattered on leaves throughout the world.”

The recentering of man through the reconstruction of Logos, the remembrance of Being, is the spiritual conversion I am talking about. This should not be confused with the normal error of New Age people who say “I am God,” thereby individualizing spirituality. Trees are God too and maybe more important than I am. Rather, the center of Being is everywhere. As the anthropologist Gregory Bateson was fond of saying, God is Logos—“the pattern which connects” the cosmos.

NPQ | **Absent this spiritual conversion, ecological modernization proceeds, driven to deep restrictions if not authoritarianism by the fear of environmental destruction. Do you expect eco-dictatorship?**

BAHRO | Empty men full of fear, as we Germans know, are the raw material of authoritarianism. That’s why I put so much emphasis on conscious cultural revolution and the spiritual recentering of man.

Especially in Germany, there is a great readiness for change. Every German taxi driver will tell you the forests are dying and no one seems capable of doing anything about it. If someone comes to the German people and says, “I am the man who will make the pine needles green again,” he will be given a chance.

In the deep crisis of humanity, charisma always plays a role. The deeper the crisis, the darker the charismatic figure who will emerge. But a charismatic leader is not inevitably a criminal and a charlatan. Whether or not we will have a green Adolf depends, in my view, on how far cultural changes advance before the next Chernobyl.



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