

# Introduction to Complete Works of Mikhail Bakunin

## The polemic with Mazzini

Alfredo M. Bonanno

This edition of Bakunin's complete works comes to fill a considerable gap in the historical documentation available to the Italian anarchist movement in particular and to the workers' movement in general.

Various pieces have already been published in Italy, in the first place translations of a few of Bakunin's writings by P. C. Masini and the translation of *State and Anarchy* by the Corradinis. Add to this a few pamphlets and small anthologies and the panorama closes immediately.

Perhaps the reasons for this 'a priori' censure of Bakunin's works in Italy are not merely editorial or scientific, and we do not know them. However, it seems to us that it is indispensable to put an end to this situation and make an effort to push comrades to reading the great anarchist revolutionary's work directly.

Our task is enormously facilitated by the Bakunin Archives editions, in course of publication under the care of Arthur Lehning, for the International Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis in Amsterdam. This edition, which we consider definitive, has the considerable value of, among other things, not beginning the publication of Bakunin's writings in chronological order which would have meant that the most important unpublished works, those of the last years of the Russian revolutionary's life, would have remained unpublished for who knows how long yet. Various attempts have been made to edit Bakunin's complete works which for one reason or another have never been completed. We hope that this one will be an exception and that the work will be completed. Leaving out of consideration what will be published in the future, however, there remains the not inconsiderable fact that from this first volume important unpublished writings are not seeing the light. The present introductory note is intended as a simple guide for the reader, briefly illustrating the political significance and historical placing of each piece of writing included. Technical reasons, in the first place, have prevented us from reproducing Arthur Lehning's fundamental introduction at the beginning of each of the source editions, those of Amsterdam; however, being interested in soliciting in the Italian reader an immediate awakening of the political consciousness of the Bakunin contributions, we shall try to suggest here as free as possible an enjoyment from restricting discussions of historical classification, reducing this type of information to the strictly necessary. Bakunin's theoretical analyses are of fundamental

historical value, placing themselves as a luminous alternative to certain constructions of power tied to contingent reformist type structures or to authoritarian revolutionary visions; but, apart from this immediate validity whose perspective has been amply examined elsewhere, and where we should end up drowning in the immense abyss of juxtapositions and corrections to reach the definitively 'sanctified' and unusable level, apart from this validity, we were saying, it is possible to find basic revolutionary teaching: in the struggle of a man against power, even of the kind most difficult to distinguish, that which hides behind the trappings of the triumphant words of insurrection and revolt, solicited by a minority directed towards precisely the conquest of power.

Bakunin is a very rich writer, and a hardly systematic one. The fatigues he faced during his long militancy did not allow him to organically transform the whirlwinds of thoughts, problems, and analyses of revolutionary perspectives which struck his mind and which often ended up submerged by an ensuing whirlwind, none the less rich even if contradictory. All this cannot fail to be held present while reading a work which in the daily battle never loses sight of the basic points, the essential ones, i.e. that it is essential to strike the enemy. What witness the seriousness and engagement of Bakunin's work are the fragments: a large number of writings put aside elaborated to supply a definitive analysis, and this often left incomplete in view of a probable continuation which was never realised. The piling up of revolutionary duties, changing situations, the weakening or intensifying of one conflict or another, guide Bakunin's hand, continually forcing him to suspend the work. But, beyond the seeming gratuitousness there is a constant and precise line of engagement: the analysis of fundamental revolutionary problems, never personal attacks finalised in themselves, never arguments without a wider political outlet even when slander and lies, outrage and calumny are pressed against him. This great struggle does not allow him to be swept away by personal rancour and he manages to keep the right distance which enables a social evaluation of the clash which still today makes its reading useful and fruitful.

After the defeat of the Polish insurrection Bakunin decided to move to Italy where he arrived in January 1864, stopping first in Turin then passing through Genoa and on to make a flying visit to Caprera to see Garibaldi. At the end of the month of January he arrives in Florence with an introduction from the general preceded by a letter from Mazzini to his Florentine friends. Here he presents a project of reform to the Masonic lodge wherein he summarises his own federalist, atheist and socialist ideas. At the end of the year he leaves Florence for Switzerland.

The summer of the following year finds him in Sorrento, with letters of introduction also from Garibaldi this time and from his Masonic friends in Florence. Among his first important acquaintances were Fanelli, Pisacane's comrade, and Friscia. The ideas of this period could be summed up in the *la situazione italiana* published in Naples in October 1866, edited by Alberto Tucci but in substance revised and edited by Bakunin himself.

In spring of 1867 Bakunin edits a new *Situazione* in which he radically attacks the politics of Mazzini and Garibaldi. In September he leaves for Geneva to take part in the *Congress for Peace and Freedom* and tries to propagandise his ideas without any result. The following year, in the second Congress, in spite of the presence of Fanelli, Tucci, Gambuzzi and Friscia, the separation from the bourgeois promoters of the League is accentuated. In September 1869 he participates in the Congress of Basil, then goes on to Lucerne. The next year he betakes himself to Geneva, then to Lyons. After the insurrection of September 28 he leaves for Marseilles, foreseeing another revolt. In October he returns to Italy passing through Geneva. The day the Paris Commune is proclaimed he leaves for Florence.

A few weeks after the beginning of the Comune, Mazzini published his criticisms of the proletarian insurrection in Paris. Engels writes a letter to Cafiero (Romano, *Storia*, v. II, pp. 315-321), where he transcribes a report of the discussions to the general council of the International, suggesting its publication in Italy to attack Mazzini's theses. In July 1871 Bakunin reads Mazzini's critique of the *La Roma del Popolo* and also puts himself to work. *The Gazzettina Rosa* publishes in pamphlet form the *Risposta di un Internazionale a Giuseppe Mazzini*. Bakunin's text was followed by an anonymous article (which we are publishing in the appendix): *L'Internazionale e Mazzini* whose attribution is controversial. At the end of 1871 the printshop of son Guillaume publishes in Neuchatel *La Teologia politica di Mazzini e L'Internazionale*.

In the present volume we find a large number of unedited fragments which are difficult to place, except for a large fragment of 141 pages numbered 18 to 158, which are quite organic.

In the writings of this period Bakunin has a mature vision of anarchism, of the philosophical premises which render it possible and the concrete outlets he must find in order to get away from abstract formulae. The point of departure is the struggle against idealism, and the rational foundation of materialism.

The idealist is compared to the theologian – maximum condemnation of rational thought – identifying him in the cult of the absurd, authority and discipline. From idealism emerges the cult of self by the individual who adores himself in absolute or in God'. Thus he writes in his main piece against Mazzini, 'Mazzini who condemns and abhors individualism, but who on the contrary proclaims and adores idealism, is far from doubting that idealism is the spiritual father of the former'. And elsewhere, in Fragment Q: Mazzini, idealist and religious authoritarian, operates as a supreme egoist when he attempts to make triumph his political and religious ideas which are obviously attempting to impose a new order upon the world to the benefit of a new class and the greatest glory of his God; while atheist Communism and the materialist International are provoking, without imposing it upon anyone, the spontaneous organisation of the working masses, with a view to the emancipation of all, is doing work of solidarity and humanity". As we can see, the philosophical criticism at the beginning is not entrusted to an abstract elaboration which would simply have been a reversal of the Mazzinian theological thesis. Bakunin, basing his own action of idealism and its theologism or its derivations from the beginning to the need for State authority which finds its own pseudo rational justification precisely in these philosophical rarefactions. The critical opening therefore gives us the opportunity to take a distance from bourgeois individualism, that son of the ego which places itself in the voids of history considered the field of realisation of the absolute spirit, and this should not be confused with historically developed individualism, an indispensable platform for the communist and collectivist construction of society. Bakunin's collectivism only attacks the bourgeois aspect of individualism, rightly seeing in it the roots of domination and discipline.

More clearly in another passage of the *International and Mazzini* "We also curse egoism; but egoism does not consist of the revolt of the individual human against God; this revolt, we have said, is the supreme condition of every emancipation and consequence of every human virtue, because there can be no virtue where there is servitude; it consists of the revolt against the law of solidarity which is the natural and fundamental basis of every human society."

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