

Putting the record straight on Mikhail Bakunin

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On the eve of the centenary of Bakunin, the return of all the gross stupidities which have been said about Bakunin requires a considerable work. Without hesitation whatsoever, the prize for falsification goes to Jacques Duclos, the former head of the PCF, who has devoted a huge book of several hundred pages to the relationship between Marx and Bakunin, which is a masterpiece of fiction. Now is the time to compile a catalogue of falsifications that surround Bakunin. For if Duclos holds – with Marx himself – the sad privilege of the thought of Bakunin, the anarchists are unrivalled in being his greatest unconscious falsifiers. Of the things in common that the two leaders of the First International have, the foremost is perhaps that their thought has been misrepresented in an identical way by their own disciples. We wish here to follow the development of this misrepresentation of Bakunin’s positions. Later, we will explain what we think to be his true theory of revolutionary action.

Bakunin continually moves between the mass action of the proletariat and action of organised revolutionary minorities. Neither of these two aspects of the struggle against capitalism can be separated: however, the libertarian movement after the death of Bakunin divided into two tendencies which emphasised one of the two points while neglecting the other. The same phenomenon can be found in the Marxist movement with the reformist social democrats in Germany and the radical and Jacobin social democrats in Russia.

In the anarchist movement, one current advocates the development of mass organisation, exclusively acting within the structures of the working class, and arrives at a state of a-politicism completely foreign to the ideas of Bakunin; another current refuses the very principle of organisation as this is seen as the beginnings of bureaucracy: they favour the setting up of affinity groups within which individual revolutionary initiative and the action of example will facilitate the passage without transition to an ideal communist society, where everyone will produce according to their his/her ability and will consume according to his/her need: joyful work and taking from the common store.

The first current advocated the action of the mass of workers within a structured organisation, collectivisation of the means of production and the organisation of these into a coherent whole, preparation of the workers for social transformation.

The second current completely refused authority and the discipline of organisation; tactically this is seen as temporisation with capital. This current defines itself in an essentially negative way: against authority, hierarchy, power and legal action. Its political programme is based in the concept of communal autonomy, directly inspired by Kropotkin, in particular ‘The Conquest of Bread’. This current triumphed in the Congress of the CNT at Saragossa in 1936, whose resolutions expressed misunderstanding of the economic mechanisms of society, scorn for economic and social reality. The Congress developed in its final report “The confederal concept of libertarian communism”, founded on the model of organisational plans of the future society which flourished in socialist literature of the 19th century. The foundation of the future society is the free commune. Each commune is free to do what it wishes. Those which refuse to be integrated outside the agreements of “convivencia collective” with industrial society could “choose other modes of communal life, like for example, those of naturists and nudists, or they would have the right to have an autonomous administration outside the general agreements”

In today’s parlance, one could say that the followers of Bakunin can be divided in one “right wing deviation” which is traditional anarcho-sindicalism, and one “leftist deviation” which is anarchism. The first one emphasises mass action, economic organisation and methodology. The

second one hangs on to the objectives. “the programme” quite independent of immediate reality. And each of these currents claims for itself – by the way very frequently – Bakunin.

We have distinguished four principal misrepresentations of Bakunin’s thought:

SPONTANEISM

From time to time, Bakunin seems to sing the praises of spontaneity of the masses; at other times he affirms the necessity of mass political direction. In general anarchists have clung to the first aspect of his thought, and completely abandoned the second. In reality, Bakunin said that what the masses lacked in order to emancipate themselves was organisation and science, “precisely the two things which constitute now, and have always constituted the power of governments” (Protest of the Alliance). “At the time of great political and economic crisis when the instinct of the masses, greatly inflamed, opens out to all the happy inspiration, where these herds of slave-men manipulated, crushed, but never resigned, rebel against the yoke, but feel themselves to be disoriented and powerless because they are completely disorganised, ten, twenty or thirty men, well-intentioned and well-organised amongst themselves, and who know where they’re going and what they want, can easily carry with them a hundred, two hundred, three hundred or even more” (Oeuvres 6, 90).

Later on, he says, similarly, that in order that the minority of IWMA can carry with it the majority, it is necessary that each member should be well versed in the principles of the International.

“It is only on this condition,” he says “that in times of peace and calm will he be able to effectively fulfil the mission of propagandist and missionary, and in times of struggle, that of a revolutionary leader.”

The instrument for the development of Bakunin’s ideas was the Alliance of Socialist Democracy. Its mission was to select revolutionary cadres to guide mass organisations, or to create them where they didn’t already exist. It was an ideologically coherent grouping.

“It is a secret society, formed in the heart of the International, to give it a revolutionary organisation, and to transform it and all the popular masses outside it, into a force sufficiently organised to annihilate political, clerical, bourgeois reaction, to destroy all religious, political, judicial institutions of states.”

It is difficult to see spontaneism here. Bakunin only said that if the revolutionary minority must act within the masses it must not substitute itself for the masses.

In the last analysis, it is always the masses themselves that must act on their own account. Revolutionary militants must push workers towards organisation, and when circumstances demand it, they must not hesitate to take the lead. This idea contrasts singularly with what anarchism subsequently became

Thus, in 1905, when the Russian anarchist Voline was pressed by the insurgent Russian workers to take on the presidency of the soviet. of St Petersburg, he refused because “he wasn’t a worker” and in order not to embrace authority. Finally, the presidency fell to Trotsky, after Nossar, the first President, was arrested.

Mass action and minority revolutionary action are inseparable, according to Bakunin. But the action of revolutionary minorities only has sense when it is linked to mass working class organisation. If they are isolated from the organised working class, revolutionaries are condemned to failure.

“Socialism .. only has a real existence in enlightened revolutionary impulse, in the collective will and in the working class’s own mass organisations — and when this impulse, this will, this organisation, falls short, the best books in the world are nothing but theories in a vacuum, impotent dreams.”

APOLITICISM

Anarchism has been presented as an apolitical, abstentionist movement by playing with words and giving them a different meaning to that which the Bakuninists gave them.

Political action, at the time, meant parliamentary action. So to be anti-parliamentarian meant to be anti-political. As the marxists at this moment in time could not conceive of any other political action for the proletariat than parliamentary action, the denial of the electoral mystification was understood as opposition to every form of political action.

The Bakuninists replied to the accusation of abstentionism by pointing out that the term was ambiguous and that it never meant political indifference, but a rejection of bourgeois politics in favour of a “politics of work”.

Abstention is a radical questioning of the political rules of the bourgeoisie’s game.

“The International does not reject politics generally. It will certainly be forced to involve itself insofar as it will be forced to struggle against the bourgeois class. It only rejects bourgeois politics.”

Bakunin condemned suffrage as an instrument of proletarian emancipation. He denies the use of putting up candidates. But he didn’t elevate abstentionism to the level of an absolute principle. He recognised a degree of interest in local elections.

He even advised Gambuzzi’s parliamentary intervention.

Nowhere in Bakunin will you find hysterical, vicious condemnations that became dear to anarchists after his death. Elections are not condemned for moral reasons, but because they risk prolonging the bourgeoisie’s game. On this point, Bakunin proved to be right over and above the Marxists, right up to Lenin.

Anti-parliamentarianism was so unfamiliar to Marxists that from the start of the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks — at least at the beginning — passed as Bakuninists in the European workers’ movement.

THE REFUSAL OF AUTHORITY

The Bakuninists called themselves “anti-authoritarians”. The confusion that arose as a result of the use of this word has been bitterly taken up since Bakunin’s death. Authoritarian in the language of the time meant bureaucratic. The anti-authoritarians were simply anti-bureaucratic in opposition to the Marxist tendency.

The question then was not one of morals or character, and attitude to authority influenced by temperament. It was a political standpoint. Anti-authoritarian means “democratic”. This last word existed at the time but with a different meaning.

Less than a century after the French Revolution, it described the political practices of the bourgeoisie. It was the Bourgeoisie who were “democrats”.

When it was applied to the working class movement, the word ‘democrat’ was accompanied by ‘social’ or ‘socialist’, as in ‘social democrat. The worker who was a ‘democrat’ was either a ‘social-democrat’ or anti authoritarian.

Later democracy and proletariat were associated in the expression ‘workers democracy’.

The anti-authoritarian tendency of the International was in favour of workers democracy, the tendency qualified a authoritarian was accused of bureaucratic centralisation.

But Bakunin was far from being opposed to all authority. His tendency allowed power if it came directly from the proletariat, and was controlled by it. He opposed the revolutionary government of the Jacobin type with insurrectionary proletarian power through the organisation of the working class.

Strictly speaking, this is not a form of political power but of social power.

After Bakunin’s death, anarchists rejected the very idea of power. They only referred to the writings that were critical of power, and to a sort of metaphysical anti-authoritarianism. They abandoned the method of analysis which came from real facts. They abandoned this as far as the foundation of Bakuninist theory based on materialism and historical analysis. And with it they abandoned the field of struggle of the working class in favour of a particular form of radicalised liberalism.

THE CLASS MOVEMENT

Bakunin’s political strategy did not depart from his theory of the relations between the classes. This should be established once and for all.

When the proletariat was weak, he advised against indiscriminate struggle against all the fractions of the bourgeoisie.

From the point of view of working class struggle, not all political regimes are equivalent. It is not a matter of indifference whether the struggle is against the dictatorial regime of Bismarck or the Tsar, or against that of a parliamentary democracy.

“The most imperfect of republics is a thousand times better than the most enlightened monarchy.”

In 1870, Bakunin recommended using the patriotic reaction of the French proletariat and turning it into revolutionary war. In his ‘Letters to a Frenchman’ he makes a remarkable analysis of the relationships between different fractions of the bourgeoisie and the working class, and develops some months in advance and prophetically, what were to be the Paris and provincial Communes.

A thorough reading of Bakunin shows that his entire work consisted of constant enquiry, the relationships which could exist between the fractions which make up the dominant class and their opposition with the proletariat. His strategy for the workers movement is intimately linked with his analysis of these relationships.

In no case can it be separated from the historical moment in which these relationships take place. In other words, not every time is ripe for revolution, and a detailed understanding of the relationship of forces between the bourgeoisie and the working class permits one at the same time not to miss suitable occasions and to avoid making tragic mistakes.

Bakunin's successors thought, on one hand, that there existed between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat a sort of immutable and constant relationship; on the other hand, that the relationship between the classes could not in any way enter into the scheme of things to determine revolutionary action. In the first case, they adopted a certain number of basic principles that were considered essential, and they gave themselves the objective of putting them into practice at some time or another in the future, whatever the circumstances of the moment.

Thus, the report of the Saragossa Conference already mentioned could have been written at any period. It stands absolutely outside time.

On the eve of the Spanish Civil War, the military problems for example, and agitation in the heart of the army, are dealt with one phrase: "Thousands of workers have been through the barracks, and are familiar with modern revolutionary warfare."

In the second case, they thought that the relationships of power between the classes were unimportant as the proletariat must act spontaneously. It is not related to any social determinism, but on the contrary to the hazards of exemplary action. The whole problem lies then in creating the right detonator.

The history of the anarchist movement is full of these sensational actions, which were useless and bloody. In the hope of encouraging the revolution, they attacked the town hall by the dozen: they made speeches, they proclaimed — very often in an atmosphere of complete indifference — about libertarian communism. They burnt local archives whilst waiting for the police to arrive.

Attentism or voluntarism, in either case the reference made to Bakunin is insulting. Very often, the libertarian movement has replaced the scientific method of analysis of relations between classes with magical incantations. The scientific and sociological nature of Bakuninist analysis of social relations and political action was completely rejected by the libertarian movement.

The intellectual failure of the libertarian movement can be seen in the accusations of 'marxism' made about every attempt to introduce the slightest notion of scientific method in political analysis.

For example Malatesta said: "Today, I find that Bakunin was in political economy and in the interpretation of history, too Marxist. I find that his philosophy debated without any possibility of resolution, the contradiction between his mechanical conception of the universe and his faith in the effectiveness of free will over the destinies of man and the universe."

The "mechanical conception of the universe", that is in Malatesta's mind, is the dialectical method which makes of the social world a moving whole, about which one can determine general laws of evolution. "The effectiveness of free will" is voluntarist revolutionary action. The problem can therefore be reduced to the relationship of mass action on society and the action of revolutionary minorities.

Malatesta is incapable of understanding the relationship of interdependence which exists between the human race and environment, between the social determinism of the human race and its capacity to transform the environment.

The individual cannot be separated from the environment in which he/she lives. Even though the individual is largely determined by environment, he/she can act upon it and modify it, provided the trouble is taken to understand the laws or evolution.

CONCLUSION

The action of the working class must be the synthesis of the understanding of the “mechanics of the universe” – the mechanics of society – and “the effectiveness of free will” – conscious revolutionary action. There lies the foundation of Bakunin’s theory of revolutionary action.

Two Bakunins do not exist – one which is libertarian, anti-authoritarian and who glorifies the spontaneous action of the masses; the other one ‘marxist’, authoritarian, who advocates the organisation of the vanguard.

There is only one Bakunin, who applies to different times in diverse circumstances principles of action which flow from a lucid understanding of the dialectic between the masses and the advanced revolutionary minorities

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