Bakunin: Ignorance or Lies?

Anarcho

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I had the distinct displeasure of looking at Mike Gonzalez's new book, **"A Rebel's Guide to Marx,"** recently. Gonzalez, for those who do not know, is a long time leading member of the SWP hierarchy. Given how the SWP seem incapable of writing anything truth or accurate about anarchism, I was prepared for the worse when it came to his account of Marx's conflict with Bakunin. I was not disappointed.

According to Gonzalez Bakunin was no friend of the working class because he was opposed to working class people organising! This was because it would result in "authoritarianism." He was addicted to conspiracy, arguing for secret cells which would attack the state on behalf of the working class and was opposed to Marx's dictum that the emancipation of the workers was the task of the workers themselves.

What a travesty of the truth! Anyone even faintly familiar with Bakunin's ideas would know that he was utterly in favour of working class organisation. He continually stressed the need for *"the social (and therefore anti-political) organisation and power of the working masses of the cities and villages."* [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 300] Hell, you do not need to read Bakunin to know this, you can read Marx and Engels. According to Marx, Bakunin's theory consisted of urging the working class to *"only organise themselves by trades-unions"* and *"not occupy itself with **politics**."* Engels asserted that in the *"Bakuninist programme a general strike is the lever employed by which the social revolution is started"* and that they admitted *"this required a well-formed organisation of the working class"* (i.e. a trade union federation). [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 48, p. 132 and p. 133]

Ignoring the misrepresentations of Marx and Engels about the theories of their enemies, they did get the basic point of Bakunin's ideas – the centrality of trade union organisation and struggle as well as the use of strikes and the general strike – right.

As for the claim that Bakunin was opposed to the idea of working class self-emancipation, that is equally false (ironically, Gonzalez follows Lenin who explicitly held the position he falsely ascribes to Bakunin). Bakunin continually quoted Marx's (originally Flora Tristan's) words from the Preamble to the General Rules of the First International — *"That the emancipation of the workers must be accomplished by the workers themselves."* Far more than Marx, Bakunin argued that workers' can only free themselves by a *"single path, that of emancipation through practical action"* namely *"workers' solidarity in their struggle against the bosses"* by trades unions and solidarity. The *"collective experience"* workers gain in the International combined with the *"collective strug-*

gle of the workers against the bosses" will ensure workers *"will necessarily come to realise that there is an irreconcilable antagonism between the henchmen of reaction and [their] own dearest human concerns. Having reached this point, [they] will recognise [themselves] to be ... revolutionary socialist[s]."* [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 92 and p. 103]

In contrast Marx placed his hopes for working class self-emancipation on a political party which would conquer "political power." As history soon proved, Marx was mistaken — "political power" can only be seized by a minority (i.e. the party, not the class it claims to represent) and if the few have the power, the rest are no longer free (i.e. they no longer govern themselves). That the many elect the few who issue them orders does not signify emancipation! It is because of this that anarchists stress self-management of working class struggle and organisation from below. Anarchists are (to use Bakunin's words) *"convinced that revolution is only sincere, honest and real in the hands of the masses, and that when it is concentrated in those of a few ruling individuals it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction."* [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 237]

This did not mean Bakunin rejected the need for revolutionaries to organise within the class struggle. Like Marx, he saw the need for a political grouping, to help convince others of the validity of anarchist ideas. However, for Bakunin the political group did not aim to seize political power (unlike Marxists) and so it *"rule[d] out any idea of dictatorship and custodial control."* Rather the *"revolution would be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations ... organised from below upwards by means of revolutionary delegation."* All the political group could do was to *"help the people towards self-determination on the lines of the most complete equality and the fullest freedom in every direction, without the least interference from any sort of domination."* [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 172 and p. 191]

Needless to say, Gonzalez fails to discuss these key aspects of the Marx-Bakunin conflict – and whom history subsequently proved right! Nor, while praising the Paris Commune, does he note that many of its key aspects (such as federalism, revocable mandates, co-operatives, etc.) were prefigured in the works of Proudhon in 1840s and Bakunin in 1860s. Like the Russian Soviets of 1917, this popular revolt a marked similarity with Bakunin's discussions of revolutionary change. As he put it, the *"future organisation must be made solely from the bottom upwards, by free association or free federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal."* [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 206]

Similarly, Gonzalez's notion that Bakunin saw revolution in terms of conspiracies launching insurrections on behalf of the people is equally a distortion of the anarchist's ideas. As becomes clear from reading Bakunin, he saw revolution as coming from below and rooted in social struggle and popular organisation.

I welcome people criticising or critiquing anarchism or individual anarchists as it allows us to strengthen our ideas. I do have a problem with people attacking anarchism/anarchists for positions we/they do not actually hold. To assert, for example, that Bakunin opposed working class organisation is either a lie or shows the utter ignorance of the author. It suggests either that the SWP does not care about the facts or it means that you can become a leading member of its hierarchy and know absolutely nothing about a subject but feel able to expose that ignorance in print.

Neither option puts Gonzalez in a good light — but at least he can console himself that his failing is shared by most, if not all, of his comrades.

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A short critique of a sadly typical Leninist account of Bakunin by a leading member of the British SWP.

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