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Review: Bakunin: The Creative Passion

A review of Mark Leier's excellent new biography of Bakunin.

Anarcho

October 4, 2007

Bakunin: The Creative Passion

Mark Leier

Thomas Dunne Books

At last! A biography of Bakunin by someone who knows what they are writing about. I have long despaired at the utter ignorance and lack of commonsense when academics and others have approached anarchism, particularly Bakunin. Whether the product of ignorance or maliciousness, they seem intend on misrepresenting Bakunin's ideas and life. Leier refutes such accounts and sets the record straight. He does this with flair and knowledge, making his book highly recommended.

Informal, yet informed, Leier presents an excellent introduction to the life and ideas of Bakunin. Even the biggest Bakunin fan (and I admit to being one!) will find something new or of interest in Leier's work. His account of Bakunin's life and ideas is rich in detail and in understanding of both anarchism

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and the social and political times and circles Bakunin lived in. Leier presents a picture of Bakunin's early years based on the latest research and which shows his intellectual development within Russian radical circles, showing his important role in these as well as his early commitment to women's equality. He outlines Bakunin's activities in the 1848 revolution, plus his period of imprisonment by numerous monarchies across Europe because the Tsar got his hands on him and placed him in solitary confinement. Bakunin's escape from exile and subsequent return to revolutionary politics takes the reader to the First International and the conflict with Marx.

Along the way, Leier presents excellent overviews and discussion of Bakunin's ideas and how they developed into revolutionary anarchism. He also summarizes Bakunin's critiques of the state, capitalism, the state, religion and Marxism basing himself, in the main, on the recent French language CD-ROM of Bakunin's collected words (it really is time for us, as a movement, to get this translated and published into English – preferably starting when Bakunin became an anarchist in the 1860s!). All show a good understanding of the subject matter as well the historical and social context in which they were developed and articulated. Moreover, he draws out their relevance for today so showing that there is more to studying Bakunin than mere historical curiosity. His ideas, as Leier stresses, are as relevant today as ever.

I do have a few qualms. The use of the pop-culture references may make the book accessible to general readers but, unfortunately, will tend to date it. Bakunin's critique of the Paris Commune is not developed, nor are subsequent additions to it by other anarchists included. Given that the event was a significant influence on how anarchism developed after 1871 it is unfortunate that Leier does not discuss it more. Bakunin's obvious anarcho-syndicalism is highlighted, but for some reason he does not explicitly draw the links with his ideas and the subsequent movement. He does say that the IWW was Amer-

ica's most famous and biggest expression of anarchism, which is stretching somewhat as the IWW was more influenced by anarchism than Marxism but it was never explicitly anarchist.

Bakunin's critique of Marxism is, in general, very well presented. However, I would suggest he does not stress enough that Bakunin's critique of the proletariat as a "ruling class" is premised on the fact that the proletariat, at the time, was a minority within the working class. At the time, as Marx himself acknowledged occasionally, wage workers were outnumbered considerably by peasants and artisans everywhere bar Britain. As such, to advocate a "dictatorship of the proletariat" meant rule by a minority. Leier does discuss this social fact in his useful overview on Bakunin's views on which classes can be revolutionary agents but it would have been nice to reiterate the point when contrasting Marx and Bakunin ideas. Equally, Leier fails to give Engels' "On Authority" the theoretical drubbing it so obviously and richly deserves. The notion that stopping others ruling you is "authoritarian" or "coercive" really should be exposed for the nonsense it is. Leier does, rightly, stress that Bakunin's critique of Marxism was confirmed by both the degeneration of Social Democracy and its radical offspring, Bolshevism.

As such, I doubt, contra Leier's hope, that Marxists will be any more keen to honestly discuss anarchism than they have been in the past – it really does make sense for them to smear and rubbish us as it is the only way they can maintain the fiction that their ideology is the only revolutionary one around. Perhaps Leier will be proved right rather than my cynical position, but 20 odd years in the movement have convinced me that most Marxists (particularly Leninists) have little interests in learning anything from anarchism (beyond what they rip-off, use in their rhetoric and then label "Marxism," of course!).

Leier does not discuss the suggestion I have heard a few times that Bakunin was, in fact, gay and his involvement with Sergey Nechayev is partly explained by lust and infatuation

(passions which turn even the best minds into idiots). Leier does, however, have fun exploding the politico-psychological critiques of Bakunin's politics and activities popular with some. He also, rightly, points out how Bakunin's anti-Semitism was in contradiction with his own beliefs and were, fundamentally, a minor aspect of his ideas. He stresses that racism was a common feature of Marx and Engels which, rightly, does not stop their contributions to socialist thought being dismissed by those Marxists and Liberals who are so keen to find any excuse to put Bakunin (and by implication, anarchism) into the dust-bin of history (something explained, undoubtedly, by the awkward that Bakunin was proven right in his critiques of both!).

But these are really very minor points. Leier has produced an excellent introduction to Bakunin, his ideas and his legacy. Finally, we get an academic who understands anarchism and Bakunin, knows his subject and is more than willing to refute nonsense when he needs to. For anyone who wants find out about Bakunin and his anarchism, I can recommend no better book. As Leier stresses in his conclusion, Bakunin and anarchism has a lot to offer current radicals and his vision of a free, decentralised socialism is one which can successfully provide an alternative to capitalism, an alternative which current anarchists can build upon. We have to thank him for producing such an excellent work on one of the key anarchist thinkers.