Anarcho
Review of Bakunin's Statism and Anarchy
February 3, 2011

Retrieved on 1st February 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com

**usa.anarchistlibraries.net**

# Review of Bakunin's Statism and Anarchy

Anarcho

February 3, 2011

*Statism and Anarchy* is the first complete English translation of the last work by the Russian anarchist Michael Bakunin. Given his influence, it is surprising that this 1873 work was his only book and even this is technically incomplete (referring as it does to a second part which was never written). It aimed to influence Russian populism and the "to the people" movement although most of it is an account of European history in the 19th century.

If that were all, there would be little interest in it but Bakunin also prophetically critiques Marx's "dictatorship of the proletariat" as nothing more that a dictatorship *over* the proletariat. Coming after his battles with Marx in the *International Working Men's Association*, it is surprising how little this is discussed – the core of the argument is contained in a mere five pages. (176–181) It also sketches Bakunin's vision of an anarchist society and the social forces that will achieve it, both important (and much distorted) aspects of his ideas.

Marshall Shatz has proved an excellent introduction. It is marred by a failure to summarise Bakunin's anarchism and positions on

key issues (such as defence of the revolution and strategy for social change). Shatz does repeat the usual stereotype that Bakunin's agent of social change was the lumpen proletariat while, in fact, Bakunin viewed *all* exploited and oppressed social classes as agents for revolution – artisans, peasants, proletarians. Bakunin's actual position on such key revolutionary issues *is* in *Statism and Anarchy*, but unfortunately these insights are often buried within discussions on other matters.

While, for example, Bakunin discussed the obvious need to defend a revolution in previous works, here he states "the sole means of opposing the reactionary forces of the state" was the "organising of the revolutionary force of the people." (156) Marxist myths notwithstanding, Bakunin's opposition to "the dictatorship of the proletariat" *never* reflected a naïve believe that a revolution did not need defending! Similarly, his syndicalist ideas are mentioned almost in passing when he argues that proletariat "must enter the International *en masse*, form factory, artisan, and agrarian sections, and unite them into local federations" for "the sake of its own liberation" (51) as it "indicated to [the proletariat] the ways and means of organising a popular force." (32)

So sketches of his programme for social revolution do come through but the introduction should have placed these in context. To be fair, this would have been recognised as important by an anarchist rather than an academic.

The key to understanding Bakunin's critique of Marxism is to understand his analysis of the state. The state "stands outside the people and above them" (136), "the government of society from above downward" (198) and resulted in the "actual subordination of the sovereign people to the intellectual minority that governs them." (13) While recognising that the modern state defended the capitalist class, Bakunin rejected Marx's reductionism and argued it could and did have interests of its own. He pointed to Turkish Serbia where economically dominant classes "do not even exist – there is only a bureaucratic class. Thus, the Serbian state will crush

the Serbian people for the sole purpose of enabling Serbian bureaucrats to live a fatter life." (54) The same would occur under the so-called "workers' state" of the Marxists simply because it was a state and, consequently, was a centralised, top-down social structure.

Statism, then, was the "government of society from above downward" rather than a social organisation federated "from below upward." He recognised that a democratic government did not change this as it was simply electing rulers. Thus socialism was to be created "not by the orders of any authority, even an elected one… but as the natural development of all the varied demands put forth by life itself." Revolutionary ideas rested in the people and so "no scholar can teach the people or even define for himself how they will and must live on the morrow of the social revolution. That will be determined first by the situation of each people, and secondly by the desires that manifest themselves and operate most strongly within them." (198–9)

All revolutionaries should do was participant in social movements, make these instinctive notions conscious by debate and argument. Unsurprisingly, he rejected those "managers of all popular movements" (136) who would "impose… an ideal social organisation… drawn from books" (135) and so create "Procrustean beds, too narrow to encompass the broad and powerful sweep of popular life." (198) A category which, he suggested, included Marxists – particularly as they wanted to seize state power. By doing this, Bakunin thought, they would *automatically* place themselves above the people. The Marxists were blind to this, the reality of state power and its basis in "government of the masses from above downward" (24) and that "power corrupts those invested with it just as much as those compelled to submit to it." (136)

Bakunin sketches the two alternatives suggested by Marxists, peaceful reform by electoral struggle and violent revolution. The former, he correctly predicted, would mean "the election to the German parliament of one or two workers" and was "not dangerous." In fact, it was "highly useful to the German state as a lightning-rod,

or a safety-valve." Unlike the "political and social theory" of the anarchists, which "leads them directly and inexorably to a complete break with all governments and all forms of bourgeois politics, leaving no alternative but social revolution," Marxism "inexorably enmeshes and entangles its adherents, under the pretext of political tactics, in endless accommodation with governments and the various bourgeois political parties – that is, it thrusts them directly into reaction." (193, 179–80)

While Marxists like to assert anarchists argue that working people should ignore politics, *Statism and Anarchy* explicitly rejects this. Bakunin pointed to a group in Germany that argued workers "were supposed to disengage themselves systematically from all political and social concerns and questions about the state, property, and so forth." This "completely subordinated the proletariat to the bourgeoisie which exploits it and for which it was to remain an obedient and mindless tool." (174)

As well as predicting Social-Democracy's descent into reformism, his warnings about the realities of a Marxist regime came to be in Bolshevism. The party hierarchy *did* "concentrat[e] in their own hands all … production … under the direct command of state engineers, who will form a new privileged scientific and political class." (181) It *was* "the highly despotic government of the masses by a new and very small aristocracy of real or pretended scholars. The people are not learned, so they will be liberated from the cares of government and included in entirety in the governed herd." (178–9)

In this *Statism and Anarchy* was truly prophetic. Yet while it is fair to proclaim Marx "a Jacobin" Bakunin's suggestion that Marx's "favourite dream is of a political dictatorship" (182) was unwarranted. Far better to argue as he does at times that, in spite of their best intentions, Marxists would create a new class system simply because of their impoverished analysis of the state and the hierarchical social relations it creates between governed and government.



inequality between the minority elected to power and the majority who no longer manage their own fates.

That Draper failed to comprehend Bakunin's critique of democracy is clear. He equates democratically electing a government with actual mass *participation* in decision making, an equation Bakunin rightly rejected. That Draper cannot comprehend this basic point shows that Bakunin was correct – Marxists, like liberals, confuse representative democracy with popular self-management.

What is bizarre about Draper's argument is that he turns Bakunin's obvious call for truly democratic social structures into "socialism from above." Perhaps this is unsurprising, for if Bakunin was recognised as advocating "socialism from below" then Draper would have to re-evaluate Marx, his own ideology and Bakunin's critique of both state and Marxism. To do so would raise the awkward conclusion that Bakunin was right…

Marx understood the basics of Bakunin's critique. (*Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution: The 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat'* (Monthly Review Press, 1986), Volume III, p. 116) If he had, then he would have been aware that Bakunin's, like Proudhon's, attacks on democracy were framed as a critique of thinking electing rulers equalled self-government and freedom.

Suffice to say, anyone who actually comprehended the anarchist critique of the state and, consequently, our critique of Marxism would recognise the ignorance and fallacy at the heart of Draper's claim that there "are always two possibilities" in attacks on democracy, the first is based on it "not being democratic enough, for not really effecting control by the people" while the second aims to discredit "democracy itself." (299) For anarchists, the question is not whether we "control" those with power over us but whether we organise to manage our own affairs *directly* and so end hierarchy in society – even elected hierarchies. As such, Bakunin stressed the need for mandated and recallable delegates to ensure that those we elect remain our delegates rather than our rulers, that we do not delegate *power* into their hands. Sadly, though, the need for the imperative mandate and recall which he mentions in previous works does not get mentioned in *Statism and Anarchy*. It is this sort of thing which would need to be covered in a comprehensive *political* introduction.

Without evidence Draper asserts (299) that "anarchism takes the second road. Bakunin continually denounces the 'Marxists' *because* they favour universal suffrage." He does, wisely, add an "In general" to avoid awkward questions when critics, aware of what Bakunin actually argued, point to the substantial evidence against his claims. After all, a glance at Bakunin's critique of Marx shows that he criticised Marxists because they, like the bourgeois liberals, saw universal suffrage as the means of electing governments. In short, that (representative) democracy was undemocratic and that Marxists did not go beyond bourgeois forms of social organisation and so keep a key form of inequality within their socialism – the



While many Marxists view their new state as a radical democracy, Bakunin disagreed. If it truly were the case that the "entire nation will rule" then "no one will be ruled. Then there will be no government, no state." However, this was not what was meant: "By popular government [Marxists] mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people." This was "a lie behind which the despotism of a ruling minority is concealed" made up "of *former* workers, who, as soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people will cease to be workers and will begin to look upon the whole workers' world from the heights of the state. They will no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people." (178) Marxism in power proved the correctness of this prediction.

Another aspect of his critique which is often misunderstood is Bakunin's suggestion (177–8) that "the peasant rabble" would be the class whom the proletariat, as "ruling class," would "rule." At the time "the urban and factory proletariat" were very much a *minority* class, with the bulk of the working classes being artisans and peasants rather the wage-slaves. Simply put, a revolution which placed the proletarian into a position of power would disenfranchise the bulk of the population and never produce a free society. That Bakunin's warnings were correct here as well can be seen when the Bolsheviks skewed the soviets in favour of the proletariat and quickly alienated 90% of the population – before alienating the proletariat in whose name they ruled.

Attempts by Leninists to blame "objective circumstances" (civil war, economic collapse, etc.) for this confirmation of Bakunin's arguments are unconvincing. Space precludes any real discussion but suffice to say Bolshevik authoritarianism *predated* the start of the Civil War while its vision of socialism *increased the revolution's economic problems*. Equally, given that Leninists mock anarchists by inaccurately suggesting we think the capitalist class will disappear without a fight after a revolution, it seems self-contradictory

to blame Bolshevik tyranny on something (civil war and its resulting economic disruption) they think is inevitable!

Given this analysis of the state, Bakunin argued that revolution *must* be "an end to all masters and to domination of every kind, and the free construction of popular life in accordance with popular needs, not from above downward, as in the state, but from below upward, by the people themselves, dispensing with all governments and parliaments – a voluntary alliance of agricultural and factory worker associations, communes, provinces, and nations." (33) In short, a system of workers' councils.

Bakunin stressed that not all social structures were states. Thus a "federal organisation, from below upward, of workers' associations, groups, communes, districts, and ultimately, regions and nations" could not be considered as the same as "centralised states" and were "contrary to their essence." The end of "sham popular sovereignty" would create "real as opposed to fictitious freedom." (13) This would be based on a self-managed economy, with cooperation being the "just mode of future production" and "all forms of land and capital" becoming "collective property." (201) In short, "a popular federation with it based on emancipated labour and collective property." (22)

This vision of a bottom-up federal self-managed *libertarian* socialism, a socialism from below, is one that continues to be of value and can inspire current generations of radicals.

The book is marred by Bakunin's personal bigotries. He repeats anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews (and calls them "Yids") and pronounces that Germans were "statists and bureaucrats by nature." (34) The history of German/Slav relations is reflected in the latter; Bakunin recounts that they consisted "of exterminating, enslaving, and forcibly Germanising, the Slavs." (104) Interestingly, even Engels proclaimed (in the 1840s) that the "Slav barbarians" were "*forced* to attain the first stage of civilisation only by means of a foreign yoke" and they should be grateful for the Germans for "having given themselves the trouble of civilising" them! Bakunin,



though, does express the hope that "social revolution reconciles" Slav and German workers. (104) Given this, Bakunin was a firm defender of national self-determination: "Every nation, like very individual, is of necessity what it is, and has an unquestionable right to be itself" (46)

The book ends with two appendices addressed to the then Russian revolutionary movement. In the first Bakunin discusses the *mir*, the Russian peasant community, and unlike many Slavic radicals he was extremely critical of the arguing that it had "three dark features" which had to be combated and any revolt against "the hated state power and bureaucratic arbitrariness … simultaneously becomes a revolt against the despotism of the commune." The "war against patriarchalism is now being waged in virtually every village and every family."(206, 210, 214). This is obviously of historic interest while the second, his programme for the Slavic Section of the International, is of wider interest as a summation, albeit incomplete, of his revolutionary ideas.

To conclude, this is an important, if flawed, work. It is fair to say that this is a book best suited for extracts within an anthology – but what extracts they are!

**Statism and Anarchy**
Michael Bakunin
Marshall Shatz (Editor)
Cambridge University Press
Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought

---

Marxist Hal Draper, whose ability to misunderstand and twist anarchist ideas seemed unlimited, unsurprisingly completely failed to comprehend Bakunin's critique of Marx. For Draper, like most Marxists, electing rulers was the be-all and end-all of freedom. He smugly noted that Marx, "against Bakunin," had "to argue the basic idea of *representative* democracy" so showing that neither he nor