

The Revolutionary Ideas of Bakunin

**An introduction to the ideas of Bakunin, one of the founders of anarchist
thought and movement**

Anarcho

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Undoubtedly, Bakunin is one of the key anarchist thinkers and activists of the 19th century.

Building upon the federalist and libertarian socialist ideas of his friend Pierre-Joseph Proudhon as well as those in the European labour movement, Bakunin shaped anarchism into its modern form. His revolutionary, class struggle based anarchism soon became the dominant form of anarchism in the First International. He combated the state socialism of Marx and Engels and laid the foundations for both communist-anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism. His predictions about Marxism have been confirmed and his critique of capitalism, the state and religion as just as valid as when they were first expounded. Both the Russian and Spanish revolutions have confirmed the power of his ideas on revolution.

Yet Bakunin's ideas are less well known than they should be outside the anarchist movement. This is due to the fact that Marxists hate him while liberals cannot understand him. Their combined distortions of his ideas have ensured that many radicals have failed to read him and see for themselves the power of his theories. So why should we be interested in what a dead Russian had to say in the 1860s and 1870s?

I

Bakunin's revolutionary ideas were rooted in materialism. For him, "*facts are before ideas*" and the ideal was "*but a flower, whose root lies in the material conditions of existence.*" From this base he produced a coherent defence of individual freedom and its basis in a free society and co-operation between equals. Rejecting the abstract individualism of liberalism and other idealist theories, he saw that real freedom was possible only when economic and social equality existed: "*No man can achieve his own emancipation without at the same time working for the emancipation of all men around him. My freedom is the freedom of all since I am not truly free in thought and in fact, except when my freedom and my rights are confirmed and approved in the freedom and rights of all men who are my equals.*"

For Bakunin, "*man in isolation can have no awareness of his liberty ... Liberty is therefore a feature not of isolation but of interaction, not of exclusion but rather of connection.*" As capitalist ideology glorifies the abstract individual, it "*proclaims free will, and on the ruins of every liberty founds authority.*" This was unsurprising, as every development "*implies the negation of its point of departure.*" Thus "*you will always find the idealists in the very act of practical materialism, while you see the materialists pursuing and realising the most grandly ideal aspirations and thoughts.*" This is obvious today when the "libertarian" right's defence of individual liberty never gets far from opposing taxation while defending "the management's right to manage" to maximise profits. Abstract individualism cannot help but justify authority over liberty. Anarchism, however, "*denies free will and ends in the establishment of liberty.*"

This meant that anarchism "*rejects the principle of authority.*" While Engels never could understand what Bakunin meant by this, the concept is simple. For Bakunin, "*the principle of authority*" was the "*eminently theological, metaphysical and political idea that the masses, always incapable of governing themselves, must submit at all times to the benevolent yoke of a wisdom and a justice, which in one way or another, is imposed from above.*" Instead of this, Bakunin advocated what latter became known as "self-management." In such an organisation "*hierarchic order and advancement do not exist*" and there would be "*voluntary and thoughtful discipline*" for "*collective work or action.*" "*In such a system,*" Bakunin stressed, "*power, properly speaking, no longer*

exists. Power is diffused to the collectivity and becomes the true expression of the liberty of everyone, the faithful and sincere realisation of the will of all ... this is the only true discipline, the discipline necessary for the organisation of freedom.”

Freedom, as Bakunin argued, is a product of connection, not of isolation. How a group organises itself determines whether it is authoritarian or libertarian. By the term “*principle of authority*” Bakunin meant hierarchy rather than organisation and the need to make agreements. He rhetorically asked “*does it follow that I reject all authority?*” and answered quite clearly: “*No, far be it from me to entertain such a thought.*” He acknowledged the difference between being an authority — an expert — and being in authority. Similarly, he argued that anarchists “*recognise all natural authority, and all influence of fact upon us, but none of right.*” He stressed that the “*only great and omnipotent authority, at once natural and rational, the only one we respect, will be that of the collective and public spirit of a society founded on equality and solidarity and the mutual respect of all its members.*”

Given his love of freedom and hostility to hierarchy, Bakunin also rejected the state, capitalism and religion. In essay “**God and the State**” Bakunin argued the necessity of atheism, arguing that “*if God is, man is a slave; now, man can and must be free, then, God does not exist*” for the “*idea of God implies the abdication of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty, and necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind, both in theory and in practice.*” Not mincing his words, he stated that “*if God really existed it would be necessary to abolish him.*”

As well as opposing divine authority, he rejected more concrete ones as well. The state, he argued, is an instrument of class rule. It “*is the organised authority, domination and power of the possessing classes over the masses*” and “*denotes force, authority, predominance; it presupposes inequality in fact.*” This inequality in power is required to maintain class society and so the state has evolved a hierarchical and centralised structure: “*Every state power, every government, by its nature places itself outside and over the people and inevitably subordinates them to an organisation and to aims which are foreign to and opposed to the real needs and aspirations of the people.*” For Bakunin, a popular or truly democratic state was impossible as every state meant “*the actual subjection of ... the people ... to the minority allegedly representing it but actually governing it.*”

His critique of capitalism built upon Proudhon’s. Under capitalism “*the worker sells his person and his liberty for a given time*” and “*concluded for a term only and reserving to the worker the right to quit his employer, this contract constitutes a sort of voluntary and transitory serfdom.*” Property meant for the capitalist “*the power and the right, guaranteed by the State, to live ... by exploiting the work of someone else.*” For Bakunin, the consistent libertarian must also be a socialist, as “*only associated labour, that is, labour organised upon the principles of reciprocity and co-operation, is adequate to the task of maintaining ... civilised society.*”

His opposition to oppression was not limited to just the economy. He opposed sexism and supported the equality and liberty of women. His opposition to imperialism is well known. Unlike Marx and Engels, who happily supported imperialism against “backward” peoples, for Bakunin “*every people, like every person, ... has a right to be itself.*”

II

Bakunin was no passive critic of the existing system. In his eyes there were three methods to escape the misery of capitalism: the pub, the church and social revolution. The first was

“debauchery of the body,” the second *“of the mind.”* Only the last offered genuine hope and so he took part in the First International and saw collective class struggle and organisation as the means of both fighting for improvements today and as the means of creating a free society. *“Organise the city proletariat in the name of revolutionary Socialism,”* he argued, *“and in doing this unite it into one preparatory organisation together with the peasantry.”* Prefiguring anarcho-syndicalism, he stressed that anarchists should take an active part in the labour movement for *“to create a people’s force capable of crushing the military and civil force of the State, it is necessary to organise the proletariat.”*

The strike played a key role in his ideas, as it was *“the beginnings of the social war of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie”* and *“awaken”* in the masses *“the feeling of the deep antagonism which exists between their interests and those of the bourgeoisie”* and establishes *“very fact of solidarity.”* They *“create, organise, and form a workers’ army, an army which is bound to break down the power of the bourgeoisie and the State, and lay the ground for a new world.”* Bakunin supported the general strike, for *“with the ideas of emancipation that now hold sway over the proletariat, a general strike can result only in a great cataclysm which forces society to shed its old skin.”*

His activity in the First International brought him into conflict with Marxism. He rejected Marx’s ideas for numerous reasons. He opposed the participation of radicals in bourgeois elections, correctly predicting that when *“the workers ... send common workers ... to Legislative Assemblies ... The worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment ... will in fact cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will become bourgeois.”* The descent of Marxist social-democracy into reformism and opportunism confirmed Bakunin’s worse fears.

Instead of political action, Bakunin argued for *“the social (and therefore anti-political) organisation and power of the working masses of the cities and villages.”* This meant that the *“proletariat ... must enter the International [Workers’ Association] en masse, form factory, artisan, and agrarian sections, and unite them into local federations”* for *“the sake of its own liberation.”* Anarchism, however, *“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 ... [as it] establishes the predatory domination of the bourgeoisie.”*

As for Marx’s *“dictatorship of the proletariat,”* Bakunin rejected it for two reasons. Firstly, if taken literally, the term at the time meant a dictatorship by a minority. As Marx himself admitted, the peasantry and artisans made up the majority of the working masses in every European country bar the UK. This meant Marx’s vision of *“revolution”* excluded the majority of working people. Bakunin objected that this was *“nothing more or less than a new aristocracy, that of the urban and industrial workers, to the exclusion of the millions who make up the rural proletariat and who ... will in effect become subjects of this great so-called popular State.”*

Secondly, he doubted whether the whole proletariat would actually govern in the new state. Rather *“by popular government”* the Marxists *“mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people. So-called popular representatives and rulers of the state elected by the entire nation on the basis of universal suffrage ... is a lie behind which lies the despotism of a ruling minority is concealed.”* Lenin’s regime proved him right, quickly becoming the dictatorship **over** the proletariat.

Bakunin’s opposition to the *“workers’ state”* had nothing to do with organising or defending a revolution, as Marxists claim. Bakunin was well aware of the need for both after destroying the state and abolishing capitalism. For him, the anarchist abolition of the state did not mean the workers (to quote Marx) *“lay down their arms.”* Bakunin was clear that *“in order to defend*

the revolution ... volunteers will ... form a communal militia.” These would “*federate... for common defence.*” The communes would “*organise a revolutionary force capable of defeating reaction*” and “*it is the very fact of the expansion and organisation of the revolution for the purpose of self-defence among the insurgent areas that will bring about the triumph of the revolution.*”

No, Bakunin’s opposition to Marxism rested on the question of power. If working class emancipation was to be genuine, the state had to be destroyed. For if “*the whole proletariat ... [are] members of the government ... there will be no government, no state, but, if there is to be a state there will be those who are ruled and those who are slaves.*” Thus anarchists do “*not accept, even in the process of revolutionary transition, either constituent assemblies, provisional governments or so-called revolutionary dictatorships; because we are 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.*”

Instead of a “revolutionary” government ruling the masses from above in a centralised state, an anarchist revolution would be based on a federation of communes and workers’ councils. The very process of collective class struggle would, for Bakunin create the basis of a free society. The “*federative Alliance of all working men’s [sic!] associations ... [would] constitute the Commune*” and so the “*future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom upwards, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal.*” The councils from bottom to top would be composed of “*delegates ... vested with plenary but accountable and removable mandates.*”

The basic structure created by the revolution would be based on the working classes own combat organisations, as created in their struggles within, but against, oppression and exploitation. And these, not a ruling party, would make the decisions: “*Since revolution everywhere must be created by the people and supreme control must always belong to the people organised in a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations ... organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation.*” The revolutionary group “*influences the people exclusively through the natural, personal influence of its members, who have not the slightest power*” within popular organisations.

Yet Bakunin’s vision of revolution was not purely directed at the state, it was directed also against capitalism. A free society was based on “*the land, the instruments of work and all other capital*” becoming “*the collective property of the whole of society and be utilised only by the workers, in other words by the agricultural and industrial associations.*” Thus one of the firsts act of the revolution was the workers making “*a clean sweep of all the instruments of labour, every kind of capital and building.*” For “*no revolution could succeed ... unless it was simultaneously a political and a social revolution.*” The social revolution to be, at the same time, the abolition of the state and of capitalism.

The new, free, society would be organised “*from the bottom-up,*” as a “*truly popular organisation begins from below, from the association, from the commune. Thus starting out with the organisation of the lowest nucleus and proceeding upward, federalism becomes a political institution of socialism, the free and spontaneous organisation of popular life.*” Economically, wage slavery would be replaced by co-operative production, which would “*flourish and reach its full potential only in a society where the land, the instruments of production, and hereditary property will be owned and operated by the workers themselves: by their freely organised federations of industrial and agricultural workers.*”

In this way, *“every human being should have the material and moral means to develop his humanity.”* Bakunin’s anarchism was about changing society and abolishing all forms of authoritarian social relationship, putting life before the spirit-destroying nature of the state and capitalism. For the anarchist *“takes his stand on his positive right to life and all its pleasures, both intellectual, moral and physical. He loves life, and intends to enjoy it to the full.”*

III

Bakunin’s ideas of what to replace capitalism with are still valid, as are his suggestions on how to achieve socialism. The Paris Commune was a striking confirmation of many of his ideas, as were the soviets of the Russian Revolution and the collectives of the Spanish. His critique of Marxism has been proven right: Social democracy became as reformist as he predicted while Bolshevism was as authoritarian. These suggest that Bakunin’s ideas are worth considering today. Not, though, to mindlessly repeat but to build on and development.

Of course there are many aspects of Bakunin’s ideas which are not discussed here, both positive and negative. His bigotry against Jews and Germans are examples of the latter, as is his fondness for secret societies. For all that, Bakunin is rightfully considered a key anarchist thinker. This is because anarchists are not “Bakuninists” and can reject the personal flaws and failings of any important anarchist thinker. Anarchists agree that in many aspects of his ideas and life Bakunin was wrong. This does not detract from the positive ideas he contributed to the development of anarchist theory and practice.

The Anarchist Federation’s pamphlet **“Basic Bakunin”** is a good, cheap and short introduction to the ideas of Bakunin. Those looking for a more substantial account of his life and ideas then **“Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom”** by Brian Morris is highly recommended. The best (and most expensive) account of Bakunin’s ideas is Richard B. Saltman’s **“The Social and Political Thought of Michael Bakunin.”**

However, reading Bakunin’s writings first hand is always the best. Freedom Press’ **“Marxism, Freedom and the State”** is a good, short, collection of texts. **“Bakunin on Anarchism”** is a comprehensive collection of his works while **“The Basic Bakunin”** contains some important essays from the late 1860s and early 1870s. Bakunin’s classic essay **“God and the State”** is still available and is highly recommended while his only book **“Statism and Anarchy”** is worth reading (but the critique of Marxism within it is only a very small part of the whole). Volume one of the anarchist anthology **“No Gods, No Masters”** contains a representative collection of his key anarchist works.

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