

# **Bakunin Versus the Primitivists**

Brian Oliver Sheppard

2002

# Contents

BAKUNIN AGAINST PRIMITIVISM? . . . . .	3
“ME AGAINST THE WORLD” . . . . .	3
THE THEORY OF THE FREE CONTRACT IS FALSE . . . . .	4
A REVOLT AGAINST THE IDEA OF SOCIETY IS IMPOSSIBLE . . . . .	5
ESCAPISM IS NOT REVOLUTIONARY . . . . .	5
THE NOBLE SAVAGE AS PRIMITIVIST IDEAL . . . . .	6

## **BAKUNIN AGAINST PRIMITIVISM?**

In Bakunin's day, those who longed for pre-capitalist, feudal social relations were the aristocracy. Those who took it even further and hearkened back to the days before feudalism, before slavery and to the days of free nomadic peoples, were the romanticists. They were inspired in the main by the political writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and by much romantic poetry and literature that indicted industrial civilization. They regarded intuition at least as important as rational deliberation, but usually more so.

The values held by these romantic socialists are very similar to those held by anarcho-primitivists. Bakunin often spoke against the romanticist socialists; he felt they held individualist values that could only develop in a very privileged milieu and which reflected that privilege and its latent elitism. What Bakunin condemned in the thinking of the political followers of Rousseau are largely the same things found in modern primitivism. It is this commonality between the political romanticism of the Rousseauists and the beliefs of modern anarcho-primitivists that makes Bakunin's statements applicable to the present state of the anarchist movement, especially to the anti-worker, primitivist element within it.

"In every Congress of the International Workingmen's Association," Bakunin lamented in the late 1860's, "we have fought the individualists or false-brother socialists who say that society was founded by a free contract of originally free men and who claim, along with the moralists and bourgeois economists, that man can be free, that he can be a man, outside of society." Bakunin's refers here to the followers of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and his criticism carries weight to this day. In the anarchist movement, the romantic, anti-society sect are the primitivists.

## **"ME AGAINST THE WORLD"**

A tendency in the contemporary American radical movement is for individuals, particularly newly emerging radicals, to see themselves as enlightened, impassioned rebels struggling against a morass of public ineptitude. In the highly individualistic West, such a conception of the world and one's relation to it is hard to avoid, given how individuals are socialized to think of themselves as the height of importance — as with others on the mere periphery. This can be true even of those who bear the brunt of class, gender, and/or racial oppression in Western societies. Some radicals never move beyond this phase, and they see the chief struggle as an individual one against the rest of humanity.

Everyone is an ignoramus, the script seems to go for these enlightened rebels, and I, who can see through the haze that has so deluded others, am unfortunately caught in the midst of a society of oppressors and of complicit idiots that I am condemned to struggle against by virtue of my gifts, gifts of perception that allow me to see things as they really are but which also burden me with a life of hardship (due to "society"). This feeling of alienation is no doubt common, but when it manifests in a belief in primitivism, that coercion is part and parcel of technological advance, then primitivists are led to advocate, as has been done in the anarchist zine *Killing King Abacus*, that what is needed is a "revolutionary project that can destroy this society and its institutions." ("Against the Logic of Submission: Revolt, Not Therapy," *Willful Disobedience*, Vol. 2, No. 10)

With the “me versus the world” motif solidly in place, the young rebel proclaims society itself as the oppressor, adding that true freedom can only be possible outside society’s clutches, and never within it or though it.

Rousseau’s romanticism feeds into this egocentric conception of the world perfectly, and it is why Bakunin and other anarchists saw individualist romanticism as a dangerous trend in the anticapitalist, antistatist movement. The statement of Rousseauists that “a man can be free, that he can be a man, [only] outside of society,” is implicitly elitist. It is a misanthropic view. It sees social interaction (in the large sense) as something bad, as something to be avoided, since associating with a group — a society — must always lead to oppression. One is always served best by avoiding associations of others, as such associations can only oppress or make one conform in an undesirably herdlike manner.

Rousseau’s idea of the social contract posited that at one prehistoric point in time, people lived as atomized, isolated individuals who one day decided to come together for mutual protection and benefit. Living together necessitated loss of liberty; this trade-off between complete freedom and social obligation was the “social contract.” It meant that so long as humans decided to live in societies, they were necessarily not free. True freedom was possible only in isolation, away from society.

## **THE THEORY OF THE FREE CONTRACT IS FALSE**

“It was a great fallacy on the part of Jean-Jacques Rousseau to have assumed that primitive society was established by a free contract entered into by savages,” Bakunin responds in “The Immorality of the State.” In *Three Lectures to Swiss Members*, he continues, stating, “In the past there has never been a free contract. There has only been brutality, stupidity, injustice, and violence ... The theory of the free contract is just as false from the standpoint of nature. Man does not voluntarily create society, he is involuntarily born into it. He is above all a social animal. Only in society can he become a human being, that is, a thinking, speaking, loving, and willful animal.”

Modern society is bad, anarchists agree; but it is bad because its modern form is bad, not because society is absolutely bad, no matter its structure. “The State is a transitory historic form, a passing form of society,” Bakunin wrote, “like the Church, of which it is a younger brother.”

Society is not inherently oppressive, though it can assume forms that are. To the followers of Rousseau, however, society itself is the problem, and real freedom can only be maintained outside its purlieus. Humans are inherently oppressive when relating in groups, according to this belief, since association means renunciation of liberty. This belief in the inherent tendency towards coercion when humans relate in groups can be seen as a liberal version of the belief taught by organized religion that people are inherently sinful and will always do ill.

The duty of the person who seeks true freedom is to waste no time with others, but rather to seek out his own individual course, and to expect resistance by the rest of the herd, who will tend to repress when associated with, or so the Rousseauist idea leads one to deduce. The duty of the freedom-seeker, from the liberal Rousseauist point of view, is to declare war on society itself, or somehow boycott it.

## **A REVOLT AGAINST THE IDEA OF SOCIETY IS IMPOSSIBLE**

Bakunin answers this well: “A radical revolt against society would be ... just as impossible for man as a revolt against Nature, human society being nothing else but the last great manifestation or creation of Nature upon this earth. And an individual who would want to rebel against society, that is, against Nature in general and his own nature in particular, would place himself beyond the pale of real existence, would plunge into nothingness, into an absolute void, into lifeless abstraction, into God.”

By placing themselves “beyond the pale of real existence” and becoming, as Bakunin notes, modern imitators of Narcissus, egotistical individualists resemble more, in their arrogance, the powerful elites who control and dominate society than revolutionaries. Indeed, the problem with the corporate elites and politicians who control our affairs today is that they, too, place themselves beyond the pale of society, and assume God-like positions of power in which their decision making abilities have unchecked ramifications upon the lives of humans across the globe and upon the global environment as well. Such people follow the liberal Rousseauist attitude that society — collections of humans — are inherently oppressive, thus rendering their control necessary. Control of people’s supposed innate viciousness has always been given as the rationalization for the existence of the State.

To primitivists, true freedom is tantamount to finding a place where one can dwell beyond the burden of social responsibility. Corporate elites and the wealthy have found that place, and demonstrate it by continually acting in their own interests rather than society’s. But for liberal bourgeois radicals who see even this, quite despite themselves, as a part of the oppression by “society,” the only solution is to travel off somewhere away from everyone, to live alone, away from all of humanity’s evil, in an environment of what they believe to be pure and total freedom. In this setting, it is assumed that all of one’s powers may finally flower, leading to true self-actualization. Rural communes, retreats and other lifestyle forays are evidence that people do, in fact, attempt to drop out and leave society behind.

## **ESCAPISM IS NOT REVOLUTIONARY**

“Imagine a man endowed with the most inspired powers by nature,” Bakunin writes, “cast out from all human society into a desert since infancy. If he does not miserably perish, which is the most probable result, he will become nothing but a boor, an ape, lacking speech and thought ... Even if you are alone with yourself, perfectly isolated, you must use words to think. To be sure, you can have conceptions which represent things, but as soon as you want to consider something you must use words, for words alone determine thought, giving the character of thought to fleeting representations and instincts. Thought hardly exists before speech, nor does speech exist before thought. These two forms of the same activity of the human brain are born together. Thought is therefore impossible without speech. But what is speech? It is communication. It is the conversation of one human individual with many other human individuals. Only through this conversation and in it can animalistic man transform himself into a human being, that is, a thinking being. His individuality as a man, his freedom, is thus the product of a collectivity.”

Speech is indeed evidence of the social nature of man. That solitary confinement is such a cruel punishment shows that in some deep sense humans need contact with one another. Before

solitary confinement, it was not uncommon to expel “undesirable” individuals from the group, to cast them into exile. Isolation has often served as a punishment; that it worked shows that its consequences are undesirable for most people. It has rarely given them ample opportunity to freely develop or become self-actualized human beings. (Any “isolation” such as religious monasticism or writers’ retreats is an “isolation” doubtless predicated upon pre-existing, beneficial social relations; i.e. monks relate with one another and use facilities built by others, writers use paper and writing materials made by others, to give some possible examples).

It is hard, in this case, to see how a disdain for — or rebellion against — the idea of society itself could represent a striving for true freedom, when being deprived of social relations has historically amounted to a punishment. The possibilities for freedom that exist through social interaction are far richer than those that exist in isolation.

The social anarchist position is that only certain constellations of social relations are oppressive and undesirable, and that there is potential for a liberatory society. In effect, the primitivists condemn all human relations. Primitivists may not agree with this characterization, just as, for example, capitalists might not agree that the system they support wreaks havoc on the environment or on peoples’ lives. Despite what is outwardly claimed, a look at the underpinnings of primitivist ideas reveals that the ideology is predicated upon a set of beliefs inconsistent with any goals of increasing human freedom, happiness or equality.

Far from believing that all possible constellations of human social relations are destructive, social anarchists believe that there exist relations that can increase freedom and help humans develop to their fullest potential. The solution is not to leave all of society, part and parcel, and live away from civilization as a hermit. Nor is it to damn the abstraction of “consumer/ industrial/ modern society” and advocate that “society and its institutions be destroyed” as many passionate young primitivist rebels do. The solution is to work for revolutionary social change so that society may hold true to its promise of helping fully develop humanity’s latent potentialities.

## **THE NOBLE SAVAGE AS PRIMITIVIST IDEAL**

Rousseau’s “noble savage,” a distinctly Anglo/Eurocentric creation that has assumed the status of archetype in the imperialist West, was the model of the truly free, natural man. The noble savage is noble for living in organic unity with the environment, a conscious choice made to preserve freedom, seeing that what is called “civilization” is really an estrangement from the primal, feral self.

The “noble savage” is today reflected in much of the New Age fad, through images of indigenous peoples couched in mystic symbolism, living psychically wholesome, adventurous and unrestricted lives in a state of nature. “Southwestern art,” New Age paraphernalia, and occult shops display this tendency clearly. A colonized people is held up to privileged, imperial citizens as symbols of a simpler, less restrictive past, representing a sort of Edenic existence for the bourgeois. Many express a yearning for this through meditation, sweat lodge excursions, or classes on forgotten, ancient ways of “wiser” peoples.

Such people live in “natural liberty,” as Rousseau called it — or, at least, closer to it than inhabitants of modern civilization. Such people lead more wholesome lives, attuned to the rhythms of an ancient existence. “Once the social compact is violated,” Rousseau explains in *On the Social*

Contract, “each person then regains his first rights and resumes his natural liberty, while losing the conventional liberty for which he renounced it.”

The “natural liberty” regained is the anti-social liberty of renouncing social ties. It is the liberty of the primitivist rebel who looks backward, to the past of human history, for liberation, rather than forward.

“This theory revealed by J-J. Rousseau,” Bakunin writes, “the most malevolent writer of the past century, the sophist who inspired all the bourgeois revolutionaries, betokens a complete ignorance of both nature and history. It is not in the past, nor even in the present, that we should seek the freedom of the masses. It is in the future.”

Bakunin could do just as well to say this to our primitivists today — for they, as the modern adherents of the bourgeois, romanticist tradition of Rousseau, whether conscious or not, look to the past for freedom. Social anarchists, however, look to a future that is as of yet unformed and there for the taking for whoever wants it. Such a claim to the future must be realized through collective effort, however; no individual can rebel against “society” and have the future. Dumping technology and civilization is no realistic option. In a letter that Voltaire sent to Rousseau after reading his essay on the noble savage, Voltaire claimed, “One longs, in reading your book, to walk on all fours.”

How might Voltaire respond to an essay by John Zerzan, or Feral Faun, or any other of our primitivist writers, who extol ancient people and their ways as holding the key to our liberation? How might he respond to such primitivist heroes as Ted Kaczynski, who shunned society to live a remote, primitive lifestyle where he could supposedly be truly free?

“The freedom of individuals is by no means an individual matter,” Bakunin claimed in defiance of this bourgeois individualist tradition. “It is a collective matter, a collective product. No individual can be free outside of human society or without its cooperation ... Everything human in man is the product of a collective, social labor. To be free in absolute isolation is an absurdity invented by theologians and metaphysicians who have replaced the society of humans by that of God, their phantom. They say that each person feels free in the presence of God, that is, in the presence of absolute emptiness, Nothingness. Freedom in isolation, then, is the Freedom of Nothingness, or indeed the Nothingness of freedom: slavery.”

These ideas on society and its desirability were not Bakunin’s alone, but form the bulk of much traditional anarchist thinking. Accepting or rejecting ideas based on their own soundness and not on the stature of the person uttering them is of course key if we are to avoid clothing some individuals in the raiments of sainthood, regarding all they speak as Holy Writ. However, Kropotkin, Rocker, Malatesta, Berkman, etc., all claimed that what was in order for revolutionaries was not the destruction of “society” as such, but rather the destruction of the modern form of society, to be replaced with a newer form — one that built upon the technological advances of capitalist society but jettisoned its oppressive social forms otherwise. If one disregards the basic social insights of these thinkers — as one would have to were one to believe primitivist ideas — then in what sense is one working within the milieu of Bakunin, Kropotkin, et. al. — namely, the milieu of anarchism? If a group doesn’t work within the anarchist milieu, then why should they receive such massive coverage and publication in anarchist journals? Why not give equal time to Trotskyists or others who likewise aren’t working within an anarchist milieu?

Bakunin isn’t God, and just because he says something, it isn’t necessarily true (and there are other things about which Bakunin was quite wrong). But that much of Bakunin’s analysis forms the basis of subsequent antiauthoritarian thought up until our own time is a virtual truism. If

the anarchist movement is ready to reject the insights that Bakunin gave us about society, then primitivism can perhaps be accepted as an adequate successor. But if Bakunin's insights are going to be regarded as still relevant, as insights anarchists still consider true and worthy, then they are in bitter conflict with the ideas of primitivism. If we are going to be consistent, we can hold one set of beliefs — but not both of them.



The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Brian Oliver Sheppard  
Bakunin Versus the Primitivists  
2002

Retrieved on March 7, 2005 from [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org)  
Brian Oliver Sheppard is an anarchist writer and organizer who writes for *The Industrial Worker* and has written for *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, *Kontrapunkt*, *Barricada*, and other anarchist papers. His *Exploitation and How it Affects You* was published by Barricade Books in Melbourne, Australia, in 2000. He can be reached at [bsheppard@bari.iww.org](mailto:bsheppard@bari.iww.org)

**[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)**