

From Proudhon to Bakunin

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The late Georges Gurvitch considered it “shocking to compare Bakunin and Proudhon” and maintained that one could write a book, *Bakunin and Proudhon*, to show how far Bakunin is, in fact, from Proudhon. No doubt Gurvitch had swallowed the reputation of destructive violence which has been stuck on Bakunin. The eminent sociologist dismissed as ‘aberrant’ any comparison between the two men. I propose to make here an indispensable reassessment of this subject.

First of all, the two were contemporaries and friends. Bakunin was only five years younger than Proudhon (whilst Marx was nine years younger). Their contributions are reciprocal, with a preponderance of influence from Proudhon to Bakunin. At least that is the opinion of Y.M. Steklov, a Russian biographer of Bakunin.¹ Both were the founders of libertarian socialism. Certainly their paths as men, as theoreticians, and as activists did diverge. One was a sedentary Frenchman, the other an exiled, cosmopolitan Russian. One a son of the peasantry, the other of landed gentry. One taught himself only dead languages, the other was a consummate polyglot. Above all, as Marcel Body has reminded us, Bakunin was removed from the struggle by imprisonment and then deportation for twelve years. A precocious and fecund writer, Proudhon was able to publish an immense amount of work between 1839 and his death in 1865. It was slightly before Proudhon’s death that Bakunin, taking up the torch, entered upon his fiery career as an anarchist. He left behind a vast quantity of written work, which is still only partially accessible.

The impetus which, as he approached the age of fifty, made Bakunin branch off towards anarchism was due in large part, no doubt, to the influence of Proudhon, whom he visited in late 1863 and 1864. He had begun reading Proudhon’s works before being cast into chains, reading which incubated in the solitude of prison cells, and was completed, with the devouring haste of someone making up for lost time, after his escape and return to Europe. Perhaps he even had some books by Proudhon at his disposal during the last two years of exile, when he was under house arrest in Siberia.

Nevertheless, it was only at the end of 1863, after the fiasco of the Polish uprising, into which, needlessly, he would have liked to have been able to throw himself, that Bakunin became a libertarian. Concerning that event, we should note that the positions of Proudhon and Bakunin were quite similar: Proudhon did not wish to support the insurgents, for he saw in them members of

¹ Yuri Michailovich Steklov, *Michael Alexandrovich Bakunin: 1814–1876*. Moscow, 1926–1927.

the nobility who were oppressing their peasants; Bakunin would agree later that “the programme of the Poles” did not conform to “socialist ideas,” that “precisely for this reason” it neglected “the people’s cause,” and that the uprising which had been made “against the people,” to the exclusive benefit of the privileged classes, was a “retrograde, deadly, counter-revolutionary”² movement.

Well before 1863, as we shall see, Bakunin admired Proudhon’s writings and revolutionary action during the French revolution of 1848, but he had not yet come around to what he called, in German, with a touch of irony, his *Systemchen*, his ‘little system.’³ As early as 1842, when he arrived in Dresden, he had been fascinated by a book of a German writer, Lorenz von Stein, entitled *Socialism and Communism in Contemporary France*. Amongst other revelations Bakunin discovered there the challenges hurled at property by the young Proudhon.

In 1845, in Paris, Bakunin formed bonds of friendship with the anarchist writer, whom he considered “one of the most remarkable Frenchmen” of his time.⁴ In the intimacy of this relationship, Bakunin both learned and taught. On the one hand, he familiarized himself with anarchism, and, on the other, as a brilliant young Hegelian, he *attempted* to acquaint Proudhon with Hegel’s thought, for Proudhon, who did not know any German, had some difficulty assimilating dialectics. One evening one of their friends left the pair engrossed in an animated philosophical discussion. The next morning he found them in the same place, in front of the embers in the fireplace, still palavering.⁵

When, at the end of 1847, Bakunin was expelled from France to Belgium for having spoken at a meeting in commemoration of the Polish revolution of 1831. Proudhon expressed in his *Notebooks* the indignation which this arbitrary measure inspired in him.⁶

Yet Bakunin quickly returned to Paris to participate with passion in the revolution of February 1848,⁷ and he was to consider later that “in all that revolutionary phantasmagoria there were only two really serious men, albeit quite dissimilar to one another: they were Proudhon and Blanqui.”⁸

Some months later he departed for Germany. It was there that echoes reached him from the session of the National Assembly of 31 July 1848, when Proudhon, who had been elected as

² Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Si les traites de 1815 ont cesse d'exister?*, 1863, ed. Riviere, 1952, pp. 399–422; Michael Bakunin, *Works*, ed. Stock, Vol. IV, 1910, p. 464; “Fragments formant une suite de l’Empire Knouts-germanique,” 1872; letter from Bakunin to Herzen, 20 April 1867, and *Nota* on p. 246 in *Correspondance de Michel Bakounine, Lettres a Herzen et a Ogareff 1860–1874*, published by Michel Dragomanov, Paris, 1896, pp. 246 and 257; “Programme de la Fraternite revolutionnaire,” 1865, in Max Nettlau, *Michael Bakunin. Eine Biographie*, 3 vols., London, 1896–1900, reproduced in my anthology of anarchism, *Ni Dieu ni Maitre*, 1970, vol. 1, p. 173.

³ *Briefe von and an Georg Herwegh*: 1848, Munich, 1896, pp. 22–23, letter from Bakunin to Herwegh, Aug. 1848.

⁴ Bakunin, *Confession*, 1851; ed. P.U.F., 1974, p. 69.

⁵ Alexander Herzen, *Sobranie*, vol. X, pp. 190–191, in Arthur Lehning, *Michel Bakounine et les metres*, Paris, 10/18, 1976, p. 116.

⁶ Proudhon, *Carnets*, vol. II, Paris, 1961, p. 336; H.-E. Kaminski, *Bakounine: La Vie d’un revolutionnaire*, 1938, pp. 80–83.

⁷ Bakunin, *Confession*, *op. cit.*, pp. 79–82.

⁸ Bakunin, *Works*, *op. cit.*, vol. II, 1907, p. 128, “Lettres a un Francais sur la crise actuelle,” 15 Sept. 1870.

a representative, took on all comers.⁹ The workers' uprising at the end of June had just been savagely repressed. The entire throng of parliamentarians, except for two representatives, one of whom was Proudhon, anathematized and insulted, as Bakunin would describe it later, "the heroic socialist who alone had had the courage to cast the challenge of socialism at that wild pack of bourgeois conservatives, liberals and radicals."¹⁰ With the exception of Proudhon and Louis Blanc, Bakunin further noted, "almost all the historians of the Revolution of 1848... have never deigned to dwell upon the crime and upon the criminals of June." Why? "The crime of June affected only the workers."¹¹

Shortly after the parliamentary harrying, Bakunin wrote to his friend, the German poet Georg Herwegh: "Proudhon is the only one in Paris — the only one in the world of political writers — who understands anything. He has displayed great and admirable courage. His speech was, at that wretched and hypocritical time, a noble act."¹² Bakunin was grateful to Proudhon for assailing the republican party of 1848, in the bosom of which "reactionary thought was conceived," and for having stigmatized "its governmental zeal."¹³ He added: "There was against Proudhon, on the part of the official representatives of republicanism, a sort of conspiracy of silence."¹⁴ Then he exclaimed: "Ah! How right Proudhon was when he said: 'In 1848, as in 1793, the revolution had as destroyers the very same people who were representing it'"¹⁵

In the wake of the unsuccessful uprising in Dresden, Bakunin was arrested on 10 May 1849. Having been handed over to Austria, the two books which Proudhon published the same year: *Revolutionary Ideas*, a miscellaneous collection of his speeches during the revolution of 1848, and *Confessions of a Revolutionary*. These two books Bakunin was to quote and recommend later,¹⁶ and his friend, the federalist Arnold Ruge, translated them into German in 1850.¹⁷

Their Parisian friendship left some indelible memories for both Proudhon and Bakunin. When Proudhon announced in his paper *The People* the arrest of Bakunin, he described him as "the friend of all of us."¹⁸ After being imprisoned himself in Sainte-Pelagie, Proudhon wrote to Alexan-

⁹ Cf this speech in vol. of *the Complete Works* of Proudhon, "Deuxieme Memoire sur la propriete," etc., ed. Riviere, 1938, pp. 359–406, and briefly summarized in my anthology, *Ni Dieu ni Maitre, op. cit., vol. I*, pp. 61–62,

¹⁰ Bakunin, *Works, op. cit., vol. V*, 1911, p. 18; newspaper *L'Egalite*, Geneva, 21 Aug. 1869.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 367–368, *L'Empire Knouts-germanique et la revolution sociale*, 1871.

¹² Herwegh, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–23.

¹³ Bakunin, *Works, op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 325, quoting Proudhon, *Idee generale de la Revolution au XIXe siecle*, 1851, ed. Riviere, 1924, p. 107.

¹⁴ Bakunin, *Works, vol. IV*, 1910, p. 318, "Avertissement pour l'Empire Knouts-germanique."

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 360, quoting Proudhon, *Idee generale, op. cit.*, pp. 233–34.

¹⁶ Bakunin, *Complete Works, vol. I*, 1961, p. 170, Fragment M, copy from Nettlau, note at the foot of the page by Bakunin.

¹⁷ Note 87 on p. 431 of vol. III of *Complete Works*, 1967.

¹⁸ Newspaper *Le People*, 2 June 1849, in Lehning, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

der Herzen in November 1851, on the occasion of a rumour that Bakunin had died, that he ‘weeps’ for him and that he ‘loves’ him. In his *Notebooks*, in the entry for 25 October 1851, again relating to the rumour, published by the newspaper *The National*, he had declared: “Bakunin was my friend; his was a true intellect, abreast of all ideas; a fine character, full of devotion. Without writing much at all he effected extraordinary propaganda. Socialism and philosophy cannot forget him. His death is one more argument for them against the State, the Church, and Capital.”¹⁹ After the premature death of the older friend, on 19 January 1865, Bakunin spoke of the “tender respect” which he felt “for the memory of Proudhon.”²⁰

Yet this fidelity in friendship, and, later, their shared libertarian option, would not proceed without serious divergences. Bakunin referred to Proudhon, without necessarily adding sufficient qualification, as an “incorrigible idealist” and as a “metaphysician to the tip of his fingers,” led astray into an “abstract notion of right,” “in logic more powerful than his revolutionary peasant instincts.”²¹ He wrote of Proudhon in 1870 to the journal *Liberty* in Brussels: “If he had lived longer, driven on by the same logic, he would have reconstructed the good Lord, for whom he had always reserved a small place in his sentimental and mystical notion of the Ideal. He would have had to do it and he was preparing to do it; he told me so himself, in his half-serious, half-ironic manner, two months before his death.”²² In fact, God was already etched into the great work of Proudhon on *justice*.²³

To be sure, Bakunin defended Proudhon against the “filthy things” which Marx wrote against him, for “this great name and this so legitimate reputation put him in the shade.”²⁴ But he agreed that “in the pitiless criticism” which Marx directed at Proudhon, “there is no doubt much that is true” and that the theoretician of historical materialism was justified in contrast to Proudhonian idealism.²⁵ He provided a lively encomium for *Capital*, which he considered a “magnificent work,” “a death sentence, scientifically grounded and pronounced irrevocably” against capitalist exploitation. Yet, in a different vein, Bakunin added, “the instinct of liberty is lacking” in Marx. “He is from head to toe an authoritarian.”²⁶ On the other hand, he reckoned that “Proudhon understood and felt liberty much better than he.”²⁷

Besides, Bakunin moderated his criticism of Proudhonian idealism when he observed that “the ideal, as Proudhon said, is only a flower, of which the material conditions of existence con-

¹⁹ Letter from Proudhon to Herzen, 27 Nov. 1851, in Lehning, *op. cit.*, pp. 185–86; Proudhon, *Carnets*, vol. IV, 1974, p. 367.

²⁰ Bakunin, *Complete Works*, vol. II, 1965, p. 199, “Ecrit contre Marx,” 1872.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 317, p. 437, note 104, manuscript of 1872.

²² *Ibid.*, vol. V, p. 3, letter to the newspaper *La Liberte* in Brussels, 12 Jan. 1870.

²³ Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Revolution et dans l’Eglise, 1859–60*, ed. Riviere, 4 vols., 1930.

²⁴ Bakunin, *Complete Works*, vol. I, 2nd part, p. 217, “Lettre aux internationaux de la Romagne,” Jan. 1872.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 317, *Etatisme et Anarchie*.

²⁶ *Works*, *op. cit.*, vol. III, pp. 208–9, “Appendice 1 l’Empire Knouts-germanique,” Nov.-Dec. 1870.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 437, note 104, manuscript of Bakunin.

stitute the roots,”²⁸ and when he congratulated Proudhon “for saying that socialism has no other mission than to realize rationally and effectively on earth the illusory and mystical promises, the realization of which has been relegated to heaven by religion.”²⁹ He approved of Proudhon when he wrote (after Feuerbach) that “men... have always only adored in their gods the other side of their own image.”³⁰ And then how he savoured that audacious broadside from Proudhon in *justice*, saluting Satan as “one who has been slandered by priests and kings” and invoking the demon in these unwonted terms: “Come, Satan, come, let me embrace you, let me clasp you to my bosom, oh most blessed of my heart!”³¹ Bakunin admired his friend for having greeted Satan “with eloquence full of love” the “creator of liberty.”³²

In sum, Proudhon, as seen by Bakunin, was “a perpetual contradiction, a vigorous genius, a revolutionary thinker always debating against the phantoms of idealism,” a “realistic revolutionary” straddling an “idealistic philosopher.” But it was of the revolutionary, and of him alone, that Bakunin considered himself to be the successor. He proposed to “enlarge, develop, liberate from all its metaphysical, idealistic, doctrinaire baggage the anarchist system of Proudhon,” at the same time that he would add to it Marxist historical materialism.³³

In one of his works, produced in 1867–1868, Bakunin paid this homage to Proudhon:

“Rule making was the common passion of all socialists before 1848, with one exception. Cabet, Louis Blanc, Fourierists, Saint-Simonians, all had a passion for indoctrinating and organizing the future, all were more or less *authoritarian*.

“But then along came Proudhon: son of a peasant, and, in fact and by instinct, a hundred times more revolutionary than all those doctrinaire and bourgeois socialists, he armed himself with a critique as profound and penetrating as it was merciless, in order to destroy all systems.

“Contrasting liberty to authority, against these State socialists, he boldly proclaimed himself an anarchist and, in the face of their deism or their pantheism, he had the courage to call himself simply an atheist. His own socialism, founded upon liberty, both individual and collective, and upon the spontaneous action of free associations, obeying no other laws than those general laws of social economy, discovered or yet to be discovered by science, beyond all governmental regulation and all protection by the State, moreover subordinating politics to the economic, intellectual and moral interests of society, had to later necessarily end in federalism.”³⁴

²⁸ *Works, op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 18, *L'Empire...*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 270, note by Bakunin, “Appendice.”

³⁰ *Complete Works*, vol. I, 1st part, p. 9, “Reponse d’un international 1. Mazzini.”

³¹ Proudhon, *De la justice... op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 433.

³² Bakunin, *Works, op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 434, *L'Empire...*

³³ *Complete Works*, vol. III, p. 437.

³⁴ *Works, op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 38–40, “Fecleraisme, Socialisme et Antitheologisme,” 1867.

At the beginning of January 1870, Bakunin declared that he was absorbed in reading Proudhon, for he was considering writing a book on the destruction of the State, a book which was to become *Statism and Anarchy*.³⁵ In a document dating from September of the same year, he reckons that Proudhon had “demonstrated very well” that “the State... is the historical consecration of all despotism, of all privileges, the political reason for all economic and social reduction to slavery.”³⁶

Late in 1873, Bakunin contributed to the publication of a book, translated into Russian, which appeared in London in 1874. Michael Dragomanov, in the postscript to his *Correspondence of Michael Bakunin*, published in 1896, attributes the book to Bakunin. We know today that this claim is not quite correct.³⁷ In fact, this little book was put together by Bakunin’s closest disciple in the International, James Guillaume.³⁸ The book translates from the Russian as *Anarchy According to (or After) Bakunin*. We know, moreover, thanks to another disciple of Bakunin, Arman Ross (and I have been able to check this myself), that Guillaume restricted himself to summarizing, with numerous quotations, the two books by Proudhon preferred by Bakunin: *Confessions of a Revolutionary* and *General Idea of Revolution in the 19th Century*. Bakunin, having been informed of Guillaume’s project, encouraged him to proceed with it.

Arthur Lehning considers that Guillaume’s preface was probably revised by Bakunin himself. This would lend more weight to the following passage:

“We deem it... useful to convey Proudhon’s socialism with its genuine features and to expound, in simple and clear terms, the essentials of the ideas which he defended with such energy and talent.”

Putting aside any intention of dealing with Proudhon’s idealistic and metaphysical “varied oddities,” they limited themselves to “commenting only upon the part of his theories which Proudhon put forward in 1848 and which, taken up again in the programme of the International Working Men’s Association..., constitute the essence of his theoretical concepts, namely the abolition of the political state, the organization of society in economic Federalism... the Federalist doctrine concerning the organisation of work.”

In his introduction to Volume V of the *Archives*, Lehning provides both a facsimile of the title page and some extracts retranslated into French from the preface and from the book itself, a photocopy of which the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam was kind enough to let me consult. The original manuscript in French has since been burnt.³⁹

It remains to me to sketch, in broad outline, the parallelism in the libertarian views of Proudhon and Bakunin.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p.736, Preface by James Guillaume; *Etatisme et Anarchie*, 1873, *Complete Works*, vol. III.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 108, “Lettres a un Francais...” 7 Sept. 1870.

³⁷ Dragomanov, *op. cit.*, postscript, p. 371.

³⁸ James LGuillaume, *L’Internationale... 1864–1878*, vol. III, 1909, p. 187; also from Guillaume, “Notice biographique” (of Bakunin), *Works*, vol. II, p. LII, note.

³⁹ Bakunin, *Complete Works*, vol. V, pp. LXIV-LXVII, commentary by Arthur Lehning.

Both use the word ‘anarchy’ (which they sometimes spell *anarchy*) in its etymological sense of absence of authority or of government. Yet they also use it in the common, and older, sense of social chaos. Perhaps they deliberately maintain this ambiguity in order to suggest that anarchy, through colossal disorder, complete disorganization of society, would install a new, stable, and rational social order founded upon liberty and solidarity.⁴⁰

Both Proudhon and Bakunin fulminate against the State and against authority. Both challenge the “swindle” of the ballot box. Neither wanted political power, but they did want to destroy both capital and the State. Both reject any socialism which would not be libertarian; that is, any form of socialism which would aggrandize the State at the expense of liberty and which would tamper with the rights, the creativity, and the necessary dealienation of the individual.

Proudhon and Bakunin were both resistant to Marxist ‘dogmatism’ and the Marxist ‘cane.’ That is what Proudhon expresses with force and alarm in his letter to Marx of 17 May 1846. It is equally evident in his personal copy of *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in which his marginal notes refer to Marx’s bad faith, lies, libel, absurdities, and plagiarism in his vicious attack upon *The Philosophy of Poverty*.⁴¹ But what was in Proudhon still only a summary retort was to be developed by Bakunin with infinitely greater richness when, long after Proudhon’s death, he experienced the antinomies – which had become crystal clear – between anarchism and Marxism.

Both saw power and social revolution as incompatible. Proudhon exclaimed: “Put a Saint Vincent de Paul in power: there will be a Guizot or a Talleyrand.” And Bakunin: “Take the most fervent revolutionary and give him the throne of all the Russias... and in the space of one year that revolutionary will be worse than (the tsar) himself”; and “Take the most sincere democrat and put him on any throne, he will without fail become a scoundrel.”⁴²

They were both at one and the same time individualistic and sociable. Both counted on the revolutionary spontaneity of the masses. They believed in the necessity, in the first case, of intervention by a few wise heads, in the second case, of a specific organization which would precede the awakening of the masses, and subsequently ensure unity of revolutionary thought and action, but without reviving any sort of authority. Both were communalists and federalists.

Proudhon and Bakunin were ‘collectivists,’ which is to say they declared themselves without equivocation in favour of the common exploitation, not by the State but by associated workers, of the large-scale means of production and of the public services. Proudhon has been quite wrongly presented as an exclusive enthusiast of private property. The confusion was to some extent created by himself, to be sure, but far more so, after his death, by his false disciples in the International, Tolain and others. At the Bale congress in 1869, Bakunin did not hesitate to risk allying himself with the statist Marxists against them in order to ensure the triumph of the principle of collective property. He had nothing but contempt for that “little workers’ coterie which

⁴⁰ Cf. my book *L’Anarchisme*, 1965, p. 14.

⁴¹ Marx, *Misere de la Philosophie*, ed. Costes, 1950.

⁴² Proudhon, *Confession d’un revolutionnaire*, 1849, ed. Riviere, 1929, p. 285; Bakunin, *Complete Works*, vol. V, p. 282, “La Science et la question vitale de la Revolution,” 1870; Programme de la Fraternite... cit. in Ni Dieu ni Maitre, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 199.

had been formed in the last years of Proudhon's life," adding that "moreover, all that so-called Proudhonian coterie was a stillbirth."⁴³

Both of them, in advance of their time, were anti-colonialist. Proudhon denounced the crimes committed by the French military in Algeria and envisioned separation. He predicted: "One day independence will come for Algeria."⁴⁴ Bakunin anticipated a vast federation, at first Euro-American, then extending to Africa and Asia.⁴⁵

In conclusion, I should like to disabuse those of my present-day libertarian socialist comrades who misjudge Proudhon only to magnify Bakunin, and, conversely, the overly zealous Proudhonians who belittle Bakunin. Certainly the work of the latter shows undeniable progress in relation to that of the former, whose strokes of genius are too often overlaid with tiresome dross. Yet I hope that I have proved that Bakunin reaped the harvest sown by Proudhon — the father of anarchism — filtering, enriching and surpassing it.

⁴³ James Guillaume, "Notice..." *op. cit.*, Works, vol. II, pp. XXXVI-XXXVII; Bakunin, *Complete Works*, vol. I, p. 241, 1st part, Fragment T.

⁴⁴ Proudhon, *La Guerre et la Paix*, 1861, ed. Riviere, 1927, p. 241.

⁴⁵ Bakunin, *Complete Works* vol. V, p. 299, "Circulaire a mes amis d'Italie," 1871.

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