

Social Classes and Bureaucracy in Bakunin

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“The state has always been the patrimony of some privileged class:
a priestly class, an aristocratic class, a bourgeois class,
a bureaucratic class in the end.”

— Mikhail Bakunin¹

This article – almost fully extracted from my book *Teoria Bakuniniana do Estado* [Bakuninian Theory of the State]² – aims to realize a brief discussion on the theory of social classes and bureaucracy elaborated by Mikhail Bakunin in his anarchist period.

What are the criteria that define the social classes? Which are the social classes? Are there dominant and oppressed classes? How can class struggle be defined? What is bureaucracy? How does it relate to other social strata? These are some of the questions the text tries to answer.

Social classes and class struggle

For Bakunin, social classes are fundamental features of capitalist society and they are constituted from social production and reproduction.

In human society [...] the differences in classes is, still, very marked, and the whole world will know to distinguish the noble aristocracy from the financial aristocracy, the upper bourgeoisie from the petit bourgeoisie, and the latter from the proletariats of the factories and cities; in this way too, the big landowner from the farmer and the peasant who cultivates their land; the farmer from the simple proletarian of the countryside.³

In this excerpt a few concrete social classes are, more or less clearly, distinguished: nobility, landowners, bourgeoisie, proletariat (of the city and the countryside) and peasantry. In other texts, the author points out the existence of yet other concrete social classes: “priestly class,” “bureaucratic class” and “tattered proletariat.”⁴ Thus, in addition to the classes listed above, there are at least three others: the clergy, bureaucracy and the marginalized in general, or “lumpen-proletariat,” according to Marxian terminology.

In discussing the criteria for the definition of the social classes, Bakunin points to the notions of domination and privilege as the primary foundation.⁵ Thanks to the relevance of the economic sphere in the social dynamic, economic privileges and domination constitute key criteria in this conceptualization: “exclusive ownership of the land,” a privilege of the nobility of its time, and “monopoly of capital and both industrial and commercial companies,” privilege of the bourgeoisie of its time, constitute the bases of economic domination both of the owners of the means of

¹ BAKUNIN, Mikhail [1869]. “Aux Compagnons de l’Association Internationale des Travailleurs du Locle et de la Chaux-de-Fonds. Article 4.” In: *Oeuvres Complètes*, IISH, Amsterdam, 2000.

² CORRÊA, Felipe. *Teoria Bakuniniana do Estado*. São Paulo: Intermezzo/Imaginário, 2014, pp. 101–110.

³ BAKUNIN, Mikhail [1867–1868]. *Federalismo, Socialismo e Antiteologismo*. São Paulo: Cortez, 1988, pp. 15–16. [“Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism”]

⁴ BAKUNIN, Mikhail [1869]. “Aux Compagnons...” Op. Cit.; BAKUNIN, Mikhail [1873]. *Estatismo e Anarquia*. São Paulo: Imaginário, 2003, pp. 79, 30. [“Statism and Anarchy”]

⁵ In this text, domination is a central category that includes, among other sub-categories, the economic exploitation. (Cf. Errandonea, 1989)

production and distribution in relation to the wage workers of the city and countryside, as well as of the landowners in relation to peasant farmers or even smallholders; the difference between rich and poor, based on the ownership of capital, also implies another important economic privilege and contributes to class domination.

Ownership of the means of production, including the land, of distribution and of capital implies, according to the author, “the exploitation of the subjected labour, or forced by hunger, of the popular masses” and thus increases social inequality, making the rich get richer and the poor poorer.⁶

However, the economic criteria are not the only ones in this conceptualization. The bureaucracy, Bakunin continues, constitutes a “class of privileged [...] men” that has “solidarity with the interests of the state” and, because of this, devotes itself “body and soul to its prosperity and existence,” by means of the control of the state’s administration that it has and all that this implies. He also points out “the artificial and forced development of the stupidity of the masses,” privilege of the clergy of its time, based on the capacity that it has to promote a certain understanding of the world.⁷ For him, another criteria capable of strengthening this vision of reality is the “difference in instruction and education,” that can support class domination, in which “a mass of slaves” is subjugated by “a small number of rulers.”⁸

Thus, in addition to economic criteria the author points out other criteria that are relevant to his definition of social classes: ownership of the means of administration, control and coercion, as well as ownership of the means of the production of knowledge.

In short, it can be said that social classes are defined starting with the category of domination and are forged in a triadic relationship, covering economics, politics and culture; they provide, therefore, a social stratification which demonstrates different privileges.

In the economic sphere, the ownership of the means of production, including land, of distribution and of capital; in the political sphere, the ownership of the means of administration, control and coercion; in the cultural sphere, the ownership of the means of the production of knowledge. In general terms, economic privileges imply exploitation of labour, political privileges imply political-bureaucratic domination and physical coercion and cultural privileges imply cultural alienation.

Taking into account the nineteenth century analyzed by Bakunin, the ruling classes – or “privileged classes”/“upper classes,” as he generally calls them – included: the nobility/landlords (owners of the lands), the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production and of capital), bureaucracy (owners of the means of administration, coercion and control) and clergy (owners of the means of knowledge production). The dominated classes encompassed: proletariat of town and country (salaried workers), peasants (farmers or smallholders) and marginalized (the unemployed, beggars, destitute, illiterate, thieves etc.). Obviously there are fractions of classes and “grey areas” that are placed between these large categories.

The class struggle manifests itself in the particular social relations between different agents according to their position in the social structure: workers and bosses, farmers and landowners etc. However, its manifestation on a larger scale involves the general social relations, shaped by

⁶ BAKUNIN, Mikhail [1868]. “La Russie: la question révolutionnaire dans les pays russes et en Pologne.” In: *Oeuvres Complètes*, IISH, Amsterdam, 2000.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ BAKUNIN, Mikhail [1869]. *Instrução Integral*. São Paulo: Imaginário, 2003, p. 59. [“Integral Education”]

two broad groups of dominators and dominated, which extrapolate the social structure and also involve the interests and the position taken in the conflict.

From a particular concrete historic-conjunctural universe, of nineteenth-century Europe, Bakunin establishes a theoretical model – and therefore, more abstract and general –, which proposes to reduce the set of concrete social classes of his time to two broad groups:

All these different social and political existences are today reduced to two main categories, directly opposed one to the other, and natural enemies of one another: the *political classes*, comprised of all the privileged, both of land as well as capital, or even just of bourgeois education, and the *working classes* disinherited both of capital and of land, and deprived of any education and any instruction.⁹

Although this quote does not include all the criteria used by the author in their definition of classes, it shows that the concrete social classes in a given context can be reduced to two groups, which are permanently in conflict. They are here called the “political classes” and “working classes,” but they could be named, more aptly, the dominant classes and the dominated classes, oppressor classes and oppressed classes, superior classes and inferior classes, privileged classes and dispossessed classes.

The basis of this reduction is not the centrality of these categories in a given historical moment nor its perspective for future evolution, but the class interests and the role played by these classes in the process of the class struggle more generally. Such permanent conflict founded on the structural position of the agents, but potentiated by their consciousness and their actions, constitutes the Bakuninian concept of class struggle.

The class struggle is characterized, in this more general way, by the contradiction of these two groups motivated by determined interests that, although they have in the structural position of the agents a greater influence of determination, they are not derived mechanically from them and may be influenced by other factors, strengthening or cooling the process of struggle.

Bureaucracy as a social class

According to Bakunin’s thought, the bureaucracy is a social class, which he conceptualizes and explains how it arises, structures itself and relates to other classes. For the author, as seen, the political criteria are incorporated into the very definition of social classes and in his way of achieving social stratification.

As sustained by Gaston Leval, for Bakunin, the political domination of the state implies a class domination, not only through the direct relation with the dominant classes in general, but because it has the structural capacity itself to reproduce another dominant class: the bureaucracy.¹⁰

The bureaucracy is a social class with a political base consisting of a privileged minority that has ownership of the means of administration, control and coercion of the state. It is, as shown by Bakunin, “a body of politicians, privileged in fact, not in right, which, dedicated exclusively to the conduct of a country’s public affairs, ends up forming a kind of aristocracy or political oligarchy.”¹¹ Their privileges – ownership of power, the monopoly of political decision-making

⁹ BAKUNIN, Mikhail [1867–1868]. *Federalismo, Socialismo... Op. Cit.* p. 16.

¹⁰ LEVAL, Gaston. “Bakunin e o Estado Marxista.” In: Alexandre Skirda *et alii*. *Os Anarquistas Julgam Marx*. São Paulo: Imaginário, 2001.

¹¹ BAKUNIN, Mikhail [1871]. *Deus e o Estado*. São Paulo: Imaginário, 2000, p. 36. [“God and the State”]

– are always enjoyed by a minority, since the majority do not fit in the state; they are important aspects of the bureaucracy and form the basis of the domination exercised by it.

René Berthier adds, taking Bakunin's analysis of the German bureaucracy as a basis:

The bureaucracy is in first place an emanation of the state, its social base, the layer that sustains the illusion of the rationality and necessity of the state. It is what makes the state a reality, an effective power that gives it content. The bureaucracy embodies the idea of the state at the same time as it is its apparatus. [...] The bureaucracy ends up being confused with the state, with its cascading hierarchies constituting what Bakunin called the "priestly body of the state."¹²

As the modern state emerges and is strengthened, it conforms to the bureaucracy that, even though coming from different classes, gives meaning and content to the state itself, and ends up defending the interests of the state itself, establishing its own interests as a separate class, justified by the need for rational management of policy. Ownership of the means of administration, control and coercion of the state, beyond the political benefits relative to power, also imply economic advantages for the members of the bureaucracy, which can be more or less temporary, constituted through hereditary means, exclusive recruitment from certain social strata or "democratically" elected from among the population.

Berthier continues, highlighting that "the bureaucracy may tend to be autonomous from the state, just as the state tends to become autonomous in relation to society."¹³ This tendency to autonomization of the bureaucracy is always forged in a permanent tension with the dynamics of relations between state and civil society in general, and between the state and social classes in particular. From a structural perspective, there is a constant tension, more latent or manifest, between the class origin of the members of the bureaucracy and the bureaucratic class itself. Their interests, although they do not originate mechanically from their structural position, are certainly influenced by it and, in the process, the tension between class origin and bureaucracy shows itself to be relevant. Independent of this conflict, the bureaucratic class tends to develop its own interests, even though seeking to reconcile them with others.

In the historical analysis that he performs of the state, Bakunin points out that it is established as an instrument of class domination and as a result of class conflict. In this process, it forms a determined *modus operandi* that implies generalized domination and with which the bureaucracy is directly linked.¹⁴

When people begin to administer the state, "the inflexible logic of its condition and other imperative reasons dictated by certain considerations of hierarchical order and political interests overlap," since "the demands of a certain situation are always stronger than feelings, ulterior motives and good intentions." Over time, the state structure is strengthened and becomes able to give continuity to relations of domination since they are able, to a large extent, to shape the interests of their members and conform them in a distinct social class. The structure of the state was created to ensure class domination and thus remains, independent of the will of the members

¹² BERTHIER, René. "Elementos de uma Análise Bakuniniana da Burocracia." In: BERTHIER, René; VILAIN, Éric. *Marxismo e Anarquismo*. São Paulo: Imaginário, 2011, p. 72.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ BAKUNIN, Mikhail [1871]. "Três Conferências Feitas aos Operários do Vale de Saint-Imier." In: *O Princípio do Estado e Outros Ensaios*. São Paulo: Hedra, 2008.

of the bureaucracy, regardless of their class origin. “Once integrated into this class [bureaucratic class],” these agents “become, in one way or another, enemies of the people.”¹⁵ Even if they don’t want to, the agents of the bureaucracy are condemned to promoting domination since they embody an essentially dominating structure.

The bureaucracy has a relatively autonomous existence in relation to the other dominating classes. The defense of the interests of the dominant classes being the state’s reason for being, as Jean-Cristophe Angaut points out, the operation of the bureaucracy can occur in different ways, in its relationship with the other dominating classes:

Firstly, the state defends the interests of one of the three socially dominant classes (landed nobility, bourgeoisie or clergy) excluding those from the rest of society: depending on the case, the state will take the form of a feudal monarchy, a censitary constitutional regime or a theocracy. In the second case, which seems the most common, or even the most decisive for the formation of the state, the three ruling classes find themselves united against the people they exploit. Without it being possible to know whether there is a link with this predominant characteristic of the union of the privileged against the exploited, Bakunin says, then, that to the triple social exploitation is added an exploitation by the state itself, an exploitation that it qualifies politically and that can, at certain times, come into contradiction with the three other forms of exploitation (feudal, capitalist and religious), the point of the state, very accidentally, takes up the defense of the exploited. But, again, it is the union of the interests of the dominant that seems to prevail, such that the specific class that has given rise to the statist phenomenon does not delay in uniting with the other three to ensure social exploitation.¹⁶

Seeking to generalize the historic cases evaluated by Bakunin in his time and establishing a conceptual standardization in relation to what was discussed, it is possible to say that, for him, the bureaucracy can relate to the other dominating classes in two ways. One, less frequent, when it simply defends the interests of one of them, as in the cases posed and, also, in the case of the bourgeois state. Another, more frequent, when the bureaucracy is added to them to establish a concerted domination over the oppressed classes in general and that has not only an economic or political, but social basis, involving all the types of previously discussed domination.

Another relevant aspect is that the author recognizes that, in its dynamics, it sometimes occurs that the state defends the interests of the dispossessed in relation to the privileged: there are periods in which “the government becomes even more hostile to the privileged classes than to the people.” Its “survival instinct” ends up forcing it, in some cases, to contradict the logic of class domination; even though, “these periods do not last long, since the government, whatever it is, cannot live without classes and these without the government.”¹⁷

According to Angaut’s explanation, this occurs in some circumstances when the bureaucracy, causing the state to mediate class conflicts, undermines the interests of the other dominating

¹⁵ BAKUNIN, Mikhail [1873]. *Estatismo e Anarquia*. Op. Cit. p. 77.

¹⁶ ANGAUT, Jean-Christophe. *Liberté et Histoire chez Michel Bakounine* (PHD thesis), 2 vols. Université Nancy 2, 2005, pp. 436–437.

¹⁷ BAKUNIN, Mikhail [1867]. “Essência da Religião.” In: *Essência da Religião / O Patriotismo*. São Paulo: Imaginário, 2009, p. 63.

classes in the name of the long-term guarantee of the continuity of class domination. This is not established by an interest of the state in defending the dominated classes, but by the need to ensure the functioning of the system.¹⁸ For this reason, in determined situations the state acts against the interests of the dominant classes, be it against all of these classes, one of them or some of its members in particular.

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¹⁸ ANGAUT, Jean-Christophe. *Liberté et Histoire... Op. Cit.*, p. 437.

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