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Mikhail Bakunin's social conception of freedom

Harald Beyer-Arnesen

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May 30, 2014, marked the 200th anniversary of Bakunin's birth. The following is the text of bulleted notes for a presentation delivered in Boston a few years before Harald's death, and recently discovered tucked inside a copy of Maximoff's anthology. It has been lightly edited for publication; no doubt, Harald would have made more substantive revisions and elaborated several points.

The watchword of the Industrial Workers of the World, "An injury to one is an injury to all," should not only be understood as a moral imperative, or what the English historian E.P. Thompson referred to as a working class moral economy, but as a social fact of life. Fully understood, the IWW watchword contains a whole program and a social revolutionary strategy.

It also perfectly illustrates the core of the social conception of freedom that existed within the mainstream of classical anarchism, first and maybe most clearly articulated by the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, as for instance: "I am free only when all human beings surrounding me – men and women – are equally free."

Positively, Bakunin defined freedom as “consisting in the full development of all the material, intellectual and moral powers latent in every human being.” To Bakunin, freedom as individuality was a historical and material fruit of society, of mutual and thus social interaction and collective labor, and not of separation or isolation. The latter he perceived as a state of nothingness or absolute slavery, a knowledge not unknown to the master of the art of torture.

Bakunin’s conception of freedom was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Hegel, but maybe most clearly articulated through a critique of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the latter’s notion of the general interest or will, where every particular freedom was to be sacrificed and negated by an abstract common good, embodied in the sovereign state, and in accordance with the principle underlying any Mafia, traded for a real or imagined security. According to Rousseau, human beings could only be free outside of society, in separation, in a primitive natural state. Bakunin claimed that outside of society no one could be free, absolutely or relatively.

Whatever the specifics of Rousseau’s concept of freedom, which was to strongly influence the Jacobins of the French Revolution, who gave us the Justice of the guillotine, it shares with all statist conceptions of freedom – including that of so-called state socialists – in that the freedom of each is seen as limited by the freedom of all.

From such a perspective, the freedom of each might be said to be in a state of war with the freedom of all and it becomes hard to see how any freedom could survive at all. If this may seem absurd, it is none the less the generally accepted and dominant conception of freedom, and an understanding of freedom that has in the latter decades also made its inroads into self-defined anarchist circles, not least in regions with relatively weak anarchist traditions historically.

Such a conception of freedom could, in its classical bourgeois form, be illustrated by the example of a fiesta, a ball or dance party, where each and every guest was delegated their own separated

square yard of freedom to be confined within (their own ghetto of private property), free to call on the guards should any other person violate their restricted square yard of freedom, their private cell. Here surely the freedom of each would be delimited and negated by the freedom of all others.

Contrary to this, Bakunin claimed – and it is often overlooked even by anarchists what a radical turn this was – that the freedom of others constituted the very precondition for and the concrete extension of the freedom of each, and not its limitation. That, on the contrary, it was the unfreedom of others that limits and threatens my own, and that their unfreedom in the next instance becomes a weapon of oppression against me. Or in other words, in a social world an injury to one is in fact an injury to all.

Bakunin also claimed, despite the critical role he gave to the class struggle as a necessary means toward generalized human emancipation, that even our masters could not be free due to the very oppression and exploitation they imposed on us all. Something that is very well illustrated by the conditions in many U.S. cities, where the fear for the anger of the poor in dramatic ways restricts something as basic as the freedom of movement of the high and mighty, and where the absurdly overgrown prison industry even by normal capitalist standards forces the rich to turn their own homes into prison-like institutions.

Such a classical anarchist conception of freedom, if taken seriously, has radical implications for one's understanding of the social struggle and how you agitate within it. For instance, it logically implies that the freedom of men will be advanced by the emancipation of women, or posed negatively, that the oppression of women also serves to uphold the oppression and exploitation of men, and to restrict their freedom in real life terms. Likewise, as the history of the labor movement in the United States so sadly illustrates, the oppression of and discrimination against the so-called "black" workers simultaneously becomes, as the IWW realized from the very beginning, a tool in the hands of our masters for the oppression of

all workers. An injury to one worker sooner or later returns in all reality as an injury to all workers.

Of course, if you operate within the absurdity of a zero-sum game, this would not make sense, or even within a perspective – so typically within capitalist relations – that has lost the ability to see beyond the instant moment.

Unlike what is the case of bourgeois concept of philanthropy, solidarity within the classical labor movement – if not within the American Separation of Labor, AFL – implicated the understanding of common interest, where self-interest and common interest walked hand in hand. If such an understanding is now weak, it needs to be recreated as a fundamental building stone of a working class moral economy, on the road to abolition of the wage system, and thereby the state and class society as such.