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Bakunin & the Historians Revisited

Review Essay

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When I reviewed the English-language literature on the pioneering Russian-born anarchist Mikhail Bakunin in 1992, there was only one decent biography in print, and it focused almost exclusively on his (very productive) final years in Italy. As we conclude the Bakunin bicentenary two new histories have been published – Mark Leier’s excellent *Bakunin* (reviewed in ASR 47, which while sometimes overly casual is far and away the best comprehensive work in English – I still prefer Ravindranathan’s *Bakunin and the Italians* for the final years), and John Randolph’s intriguing study of the intellectual life that surrounded Bakunin as he came of age. PM Press will release in March an English translation of Wolfgang Eckhardt’s *The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs. Marx in the International Working Men’s Association*. Eckhardt argues that this represented a schism between parliamentary party politics and social-revolutionary concepts that continues to resonate to the present day.

While the quality (if not the quantity) of this literature is far superior to that which inspired my original essay, Bakunin still has not received his due. English-readers have access to only a small sample of Bakunin's writings. However, new English-language translations of Bakunin's essays and letters are being regularly posted to Shawn Wilbur's blog.bakuninlibrary.org (some are working drafts, others completed), even if one often wishes for more contextual information (which might well be provided when his eagerly awaited *Bakunin Reader* is published by PM Press).

There has also been a bit of a flurry of denunciations by academics (largely post-modernists), much of it part of a larger war on rationalism and social revolution. Exemplary in this regard is Saul Newman, who drags a largely imagined Bakunin into his postmodernist analysis of power. Brian Morris has issued a pamphlet for the bicentenary of Bakunin's birth, *Bakunin and the Human Subject* (building upon his 1993 *Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom*), which succinctly refutes this post-modern school of falsification.

Randolph's *The House in the Garden* is a richly documented account of the intellectual currents that swirled around the Bakunin family estate. We see here a young Bakunin, beginning to work out his philosophy (albeit already influential in introducing contemporary European philosophy to what was an intellectual and economic backwater) and like his peers somewhat inclined to interpret daily life through rather idealized lenses. Randolph offers a nuanced account of Bakunin's effort to liberate his sister Varvara from her unhappy marriage, which makes it clear (though some reviewers argue otherwise) that throughout this episode he worked to support her in her efforts to realize her own destiny, even if he did not fully appreciate the social constraints which limited her ability to do so. Randolph offers a valuable exploration not only of the influences that shaped Bakunin, but of wider themes in Russian

intellectual history in a period when it was increasingly clear that the old order could not be sustained.

Morris' *Bakunin and the Human Subject* offers a spirited defense of its subject. "Harassed, denigrated, jailed, ridiculed and misunderstood in his own day, [Bakunin] was now being intellectually assaulted by liberal and Marxist scholars in the most appalling ... fashion." (3) Morris first responded with his 1993 book explicating Bakunin's theory of social revolution, and now with this pamphlet which unfortunately must engage not only these longstanding detractors, but a new torrent of misrepresentation by writers who purport to be anarchists.

Much of the pamphlet is devoted to the assault on Bakunin by "post"-anarchists, who rather than embracing Bakunin's sophisticated, humanist approach instead propose to build a denatured anarchism upon the bones of the sterile philosophy of the likes of Stirner. These professional theorists misrepresent Bakunin and the anarchist tradition so systematically that it is difficult to attribute the results to a failure of the intellect. They reject even the idea that human beings (to quote Todd May, a pioneer in this line of obfuscation) "possess characteristics that enable one to live justly with others in society." (Morris, 8)

Morris (10), like Saltman, sees Bakunin as an evolutionary naturalist, who saw a world in a constant creative process of becoming, albeit within material constraints arising out of the past and the inter-relatedness of the natural world. While posties deny the fundamentally social character of humanity, instead suggesting "like Ayn Rand... that societies do not exist, but only individuals" (Morris, 20), Bakunin noted that we were so much social animals that it is impossible to think of humanity apart from society. Bakunin articulated both negative and positive conceptions of liberty – of the development and full enjoyment of our capacities – which he contrasted to the illusory freedoms extolled by the liberals of his day. "All his life," Morris (27, 29) concludes, "Bakunin ... [worked] to outline the kind of society that was conducive to human liberty and solidarity

– a truly human society. It was one that was both socialist and libertarian, and no one as far as I am aware has improved on Bakunin’s essential ideas. ... As a social theorist as well as a political thinker, Bakunin was well ahead of his time.”

So far ahead that the post-anarchists find themselves returning to concepts which Bakunin and the broader anarchist movement long ago rejected, finding their conception of human freedom too limited, and their reliance upon abstractions like nation and state too dangerous. Thus, Newman (one of many in this tradition) rejects class analysis, rationality, sociability, even humanity itself. (Instead we are urged to embrace the void and develop a “politics” of disruption and unpredictability – explicitly abandoning any notion of emancipation. It is an arid philosophy which has found no social base outside of the academy, where it appeals precisely because it poses no danger to established centers of power.)

Saltman’s book, not widely available and which escaped my notice in the original essay, argues that political theorists would do well to stop ignoring Bakunin; “his work can serve as a powerful corrective to the tendency of twentieth-century regimes to sink into bureaucratic and repressive forms of authority.” (xi) Saltman sets out to correct common misperceptions, to systematically present Bakunin’s political theory, and to explore Bakunin’s revolutionary strategy.

Many of their misconceptions appear to be based upon these critics’ unfamiliarity with Bakunin’s actual writing, attempts to impose life-long theoretical consistency (something rarely found in any serious thinker), and efforts to view his life and work through psycho-historical lenses. Saltman concludes (16), “these authors were [evidently] more interested in dismissing Bakunin’s arguments for political reasons than they were in assessing his thought...”

Saltman argues that Bakunin was a deeply materialist philosopher who made important contributions to our understanding of the nature of the state, bureaucracy, science,

revolutionary vanguards and the potential of the peasantry as a revolutionary force. His thought was grounded in a materialist approach that challenged the abstractions imposed by actual and aspiring rulers (with often fatal consequences) with lived experience, a humanist orientation, and respect for the evolving constraints of our natural environment. Bakunin, he concludes, “provide[s] a theoretical grounding that places collectivist anarchism well within the mainstream of useful political analysis... With Bakunin’s work, ... [anarchism] gained the stature of a full-fledged political philosophy, worthy of equal consideration among the various political perspectives on the modern world.” (170)

And yet, as Morris demonstrates, philosophers and political scientists have been unable to rise to the challenge, preferring to fall back on their shibboleths and epithets – on their fundamentally religious acceptance of the state, capitalism, and other authoritarian institutions – rather than confront the world as it is, as Bakunin sought to do.

Discussed in this essay:

Jon Bekken, “Bakunin and the Historians,” *Libertarian Labor Review* 13 (1992), pages 30–32.

Mark Leier, *Bakunin: The Creative Passion*. Thomas Dunne Books, 2006. Reviewed in ASR 47.

Brian Morris, *Bakunin and the Human Subject*. Published by the author for the Anarchist Federation, pamphlet, 2014.

Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*. Lexington Books, 2007.

John Randolph, *The House in the Garden: The Bakunin Family and the Romance of Russian Idealism*. Cornell University Press, 2007, 304 pages, hardcover.

Richard Saltman, *The Social and Political Thought of Michael Bakunin*. Greenwood Press, 1983.