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Book Review: *Bakunin. Selected Texts 1868–1875*

(Edited and Translated by A.W. Zurbrugg), Anarres
Editions –Merlin Press, 2016, 310 pp.

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April 11, 2017

Mikhail Aleksandrovic Bakunin (1814–1876) is a towering figure of the revolutionary ideas and a key figure to the development and expansion of socialist thought in the world at the end of the 19th century. Recently, we commemorated the 200th anniversary of his birth, yet he remains an underappreciated revolutionary thinker and activist, best known for his polemics with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the early 1870s. There are already some great compilations in the English language of his work, to be sure. Among this, we can find Sam Dolgoff's '*Bakunin on Anarchism*' and G.P. Maximoff's '*The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism*'¹. Both of them provide a splendid recollections of excerpts from some of his key writings and put them in the context of his revolutionary trajectory (Dolgoff) or in the context of the system of ideas he developed in the final decade of his

¹ Another excellent compilation is Arthur Lehning's '*Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*'.

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Retrieved on 22nd December 2021 from www.anarkismo.net

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activities (Maximoff). Since the quality of both compilations is of such a high standard, it is no idle question to wonder why Merlin Press has edited a new collection of essays of Bakunin, instead of bringing us a re-edition of some of the old compilations.

First of all, the need of a new edition on Bakunin is justified in the fact that his ideas have been largely ignored if not misrepresented in the English-speaking world. Apart from '*God and State*' and '*State and Anarchy*', most of Bakunin's writings are incredibly difficult to find. Most of his actual ideas, are largely ignored even by libertarian socialist activists. As a matter of fact, most of Bakunin's texts were developed in the context of a feverish revolutionary activism during most of his life time, lacking the systematic approach of other revolutionary thinkers of his time. The lack of a systematic body of text, does not equal lack of systematic thinking, however, as Maximoff already proves in this compilation. This collection includes some documents which appear in English for the first time, many of which were extremely influential for the radical movements of European countries such as Italy, Switzerland, Spain and France. This reason alone should suffice for us to welcome this new addition to the existing bibliography on Bakunin in English language.

Secondly, this new edition is in tune with the growing view of Bakunin as someone who '*helped define gradually emerging forms of revolutionary, libertarian or anarchist socialism. It was not so much that he invented new ideas, rather he helped organise and shape a new form of political thinking*' (p.2). Much of this new way of thinking was being expressed in various, sometimes contradictory forms, in the context of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA), this broad coalition of workers of various languages, traditions and persuasions which was to dominate the political landscape of the progressive forces between the 1860s to the 1870s, at least in Europe. This edition is not only providing us with a selection of letters, lectures, articles and speeches –which are the ways in which most of his work is to be found-, but it also does so in the

particular context of Bakunin's participation in the workers' movement in the period of 1868 to 1875. The dates chosen exclude some of the early libertarian writings of Bakunin for the period 1864–1867, a period whose importance was captured in both '*Bakunin and the Italians*' of T.R. Ravindranathan (1978) and in the first chapters of '*Italian Anarchism, 1864–1892*' of Nunzio Pernicone (1993) as being critical in the genesis of his libertarian thought. Rather, this careful selection of A.W. Zurbrugg focuses on the writings for the period when he joins formally a section of the IWA in Geneva until the time he dies. This period is witness to the full maturation of his ideas in the context of his interactions with a broader movement. It is in the context of this movement that anarchist socialism would eventually become articulated into a consistent thought/praxis. The image we get of Bakunin in this book is less so that of the 'Father of Anarchism', as he has often been dubbed, and more so that of an 'orchestra director', bringing together different players into a coherent force.

A third reason why this is a timely and justified edition, is the careful annotations around the texts, the prologues to each one of the documents and the fascinating introduction which puts Bakunin rightly in his context. The texts are also organised along chronological lines, to give a sense of how his thought evolved in the context of the development of a libertarian current within the IWA. He was not writing from an intemporal and ahistorical bubble. Bakunin's writings often make full sense if read in the light of the polemics and debates that he took part in, which were also part of a broader context and developments. He wrote to workers and socialists of his time, taking for granted a number of references that would escape most modern readers. Many of his expressions and ideas, taken out of this particular context (such as his supposed apoliticsm), can be misleading. Most of his ideas were not the product of any idle musings, but came about under the need to react to the pressing needs of his time, in the midst of a struggle without quarters against the system of exploitation

which was consolidating under the triumphant emergence of the modern State and capitalism since the outbreak of the republican revolutions in the late 18th century.

The fourth and most powerful of reasons to publish this new edition, is that the ideas in this book represent a most useful resource to people in the struggle for a better world in the present times. Although Bakunin was an offspring of his time and a proper understanding of his ideas cannot be divorced from his context, his ideas are full of useful insights for our present and the strength of his convictions still manage to inspire us in the 21st century. In one way or another, his untamed egalitarian and libertarian outlook is now more relevant than ever, if we manage to understand the basic premises of his thought as opposed to reproducing old formulae. It is this urgency and relevance which make Bakunin's words uncannily prophetic. In 'God and State', he claimed that *'History then appears to us as the revolutionary negation, now slow, apathetic, sluggish, now passionate and powerful, of the past. It consists precisely in the progressive negation of the primitive animality of man by the development of his humanity. (...) Whence it results that the antiquity of a belief, of an idea, far from proving anything in its favour, ought, on the contrary, to lead us to suspect it. For behind us is our animality and before us our humanity; human light, the only thing (...) that can emancipate us, give us dignity, freedom, and happiness, and realise fraternity among us, is never at the beginning, but, relatively to the epoch in which we live, always at the end of history. Let us, then, never look back, let us look ever forward; (...) If it is justifiable, and even useful and necessary, to turn back to study our past, it is only in order to establish what we have been and what we must no longer be, what we have believed and thought and what we must no longer believe or think, what we have done and what we must do nevermore'* (New York: Dover, 1970, p.21).

Although the 20th century may have seemingly signalled the eclipse of libertarian forms of socialist thought under the bureaucratic weight of 'real socialism', Bakunin views are an urgent re-

minder of what socialism *could be*. His voice, in spite of some antiquated expressions, resonates a hundred and a half years later with the same vital energy. As such, this book is not so much an attempt to better understand the ideas of a socialist thinker of the past, as it is to explore the possibilities of an alternative socialist future through the ideas developed by a broad movement of which Bakunin became a centre of gravity. Indeed, some of the new trends in progressive thinking –such as the insistence on direct democracy and the rejection of authoritarian styles of leadership– were pioneered by this broad movement over a century ago –it may be surprising for some readers, how contemporary some of the concerns and inclinations expressed in this volume sound. Given the scale of the multiple crises looming over our world, this is a book that anyone interested in a viable future for humanity, regardless if s/he identifies or not as anarchist, ought to read.