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Mikhail Bakunin

M. Jourdain

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“It is only by tracing things to their origin,” writes Paine in his *Essay on Agrarian Justice*, “that we can gain rightful ideas of them,” and the deepest foundations of the Russian Revolution owe much to the violence and perfervid genius of Bakunin, a name less frequently in the mouths of men than that of his adversary, Karl Marx. Marx, who recognized in himself a pioneer, comes within well-known categories, and his doctrines can be clearly tabulated, but Bakunin is more elusive. He was not, in any respect, leader of a party, nor founder of a sect; his enemies did at a time label his friends Bakuninists, but these always rejected the term. Bakunin was the typical revolutionary, an expression of the spirit of Russia, which had been and is still dominated by political conditions. Only seventy years ago, Konstantin Arkasov was forbidden by the police to wear a beard because the government of the Czar, at that moment, regarded the wearing of a beard as a revolutionary symbol. Bakunin is the outcome of these conditions.

He was a Russian to the finger nails, a gigantic figure. “His was a titan’s figure with leonine head,” wrote Herzen, “his energy, his sloth, his great bulk, and his appetite assumed gigantic proportions.” “His giant bulk, his athletic figure, his great Rabelaisian face

attracted sympathy,” writes another observer.¹ The traits of the portraits from his enemies and followers agree, though Marx and his followers insist more on Bakunin’s defects, and Herzen and his intimates, on the defects of his qualities. To one, he is the “great serpent” ; to Herzen, “that avalanche of a Bakunin.”² In his *Diary* of 1848 Herzen notes that those well acquainted with him were already saying, “He is a man of talent, but a bad character.”

The leading traits of Bakunin’s character were an immense and childlike simplicity and demonic violence. As Herzen knew well, he was the wildest of dreamers. “Divorced from practical life,” as Herzen wrote to him, “from earliest youth immersed over head and ears in the German idealism out of which the epoch constructed a realistic outlook ‘as per schedule,’ knowing nothing of Russia either before your imprisonment or after your Siberian exile, but animated by grand and passionate desire for noble deeds, you have lived half a century in a world of phantoms and illusions, student-like unrestraint, lofty plans and petty defects.... When after ten years you regained liberty, you showed yourself to be as of old. a mere theorist, a man utterly without clear conceptions, a talker, unscrupulous in money matters, with an element of tacit but stubborn epicureanism and with a persistent itch for revolutionary activity.” Yet. “there was something childlike, frank and simple in his nature which was peculiarly charming,” according to Herzen. who was no prejudiced observer.

He was avid of anarchy, uneasy when leading a calm life; after his stay in Siberia he cries: “I was not made for this calm and peaceful existence, and after having been condemned, against my will, to so many years of rest, it is time for me to plunge again into active life.”³ Now in England, now in France, now in Germany, Italy and Switzerland, he is always the prey of a revolutionary fever,

mobility of mind, his incessant striving for remote ends, without any gratification in the present; even hatred for the present and for himself in the present; ever leaping from the special to the general.” And in another context he admits that Bakunin has sinned and made many mistakes, but that there is something in him that wipes away all his faults of character, “the principle of eternal movement hidden in the very deeps of his soul.”

M. Jourdain, “Mikhail Bakunin,” *The Open Court*, 34 (October, 1920): 591-599.

¹ B. Malon, “L’Internationale,” *Nouvelle Revue*, February 5, 1884, p. 749.

² *Correspondance de Michel Bakounine (1860-74)*, ed. M. Dragomanov, Paris, 1896.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

with deliberate resignation and free will. Since her definitive establishment as a unitary power, she has become a menace, a danger to the liberty of entire Europe. To-day. Germany is servility, brutal and triumphant.”²² In the Franco-Prussian War, he feared that the victory of Prussia would make an end of European progress for half a century,²³ and a few years later declared that he had set his hopes on the Slavs and Latins, who were to react against Pan-Germanism.

He, like Herzen, looked on the Russian people as predestined to establish the social revolution. His writings are blank as far as constructive ideas are looked for: at one moment he considers the significance of the Russian *mir*, a village community. In the opinion of the folk, he said, the soil belongs to the folk alone, to the tillers of the soil, and this outlook enfolds all the social revolutions of the past and future. By instinct, he continues, the Russians are socialistic, by nature they are revolutionary; the Russians therefore will institute the freedom of the world.²⁴ In 1866, however, he had strongly criticized Herzen’s mystic belief in the Russian *mir* from which he hoped so much, and speaks of its arbitrary and despotic patriarchalism, the complete repression of the individual and the corruption of its members, always ready to sell right and justice for ten liters of brandy.²⁵

Bakunin’s stock of ideas was borrowed, for he assimilated those of others with facility. After subtracting what he owes to Feuerbach, to Auguste Comte, to Proudhon and to Marx, there is little small change left. What remains is his fervor, his belief in the imminent revolution that was so intense that he mistook, in Herzen’s phrase, the second month of gestation for the ninth. No one could approach him without catching, if but for a time, his revolutionary fire. The final word upon him is Belinski’s who speaks of his “savage energy, restless, stimulating and profound

²² *God and the State*, pp. 28-29.

²³ “Lettre a Esquiros,” *Oeuvres*, Vol. IV, p. 233.

²⁴ Masaryk, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 460.

²⁵ *Correspondance*, p. 223.

in which agitation took the place of action. He had an immense confidence in human passions, and wished for a millennium in which the triumph of the proletariat would give free scope to those dammed up by social conditions. One of the phrases he was fond of repeating to his friends was: “We must let loose evil passions.” In 1848 he wrote: “We need something very different from a constitution ; we need storm and life, a world that is lawless and consequently free.”⁴ In Gue’s *Reminiscences* we are told that Bakunin was asked what were his aims and beliefs. “I believe in nothing,” was the answer, “I read nothing. I think of but one thing: twist the neck, twist it yet further, screw off the head; let not a trace of it remain.” The same spirit, of which he was fully conscious, burns in the form of his work. He begs that a manuscript he has submitted may remain in its unattenuated violence, because, he says, “it is part of my nature, and nature cannot be transformed.”⁵

His violence at moments was closely akin to the fervor of madness, and to some of his friends his feverish temperament, his brusque transitions from love to hatred of his fellow men seemed the symptom of a restless and unbalanced imagination. Blind to the real nature of the men he came in contact with, he was equally devoid of real knowledge of the world he lived in, and when living in a villa near Locarno, he had thoughts of boring a tunnel through which his followers could make their entry unnoticed into Italy and organize a rising! His strange credulity, his desultoriness, his rashness and Slav torpor were characteristic of a man who expects a miracle—the miracle of revolution. As a set-off against his impulsiveness, his ignorance of the real, his often aimless and turbulent activity, it must be said that he never shrank from the risks of his actions and was always willing to set his life upon a

⁴ Quoted in Masaryk, *The Spirit of Russia*, Vol. I, p. 457.

⁵ *Correspondance*, p. 287.

cast, a quality which deserves recognition when contrasted with the hesitating Herzen and the calculating Marx.⁶

Bakunin's life, like his temper, was stormy. He was born in 1814; his father, a wealthy retired diplomatist, lived at his estate in the government of Tver, his mother was related to Muraviev-Apostol, one of the executed Decabrists. He entered the School of Artillery in St. Petersburg, and was sent as an ensign to a regiment stationed in the government of Minsk where he found barrack life monotonous and spent a great deal of the day on his bed in his dressing-gown.⁷ The Polish insurrection had just been crushed. This, according to Guillaume, "acted powerfully on the heart of the young officer, and contributed to inspire in him the horror of despotism." At any rate, he resigned his commission in 1834 and went to Moscow where he threw himself into the study of German philosophy and became a devout Hegelian. In 1839 he was still a Hegelian, and Ogareff, who was then in Moscow, speaks of him to Herzen as "plunged in the philosophy of Hegel when he is by himself; and if he is in company, he is immersed in chess, so that he is deaf to the conversation."⁸ Ogareff and Herzen lent Bakunin a considerable sum to allow him to continue his studies in Berlin, and this was the beginning of a prolonged stay outside the borders of Russia, in Berlin, Dresden and Paris. In 1842 he was a confirmed revolutionary, as we see by his article in the *Deutsche Jahrbücher*, under the pseudonym of Jules Elizard. The Russian government demanded him to return, and on his refusal, deprived him of his civil rights. Bakunin removed himself to Paris from 1843 to 1847, years which were important in the formation of his opinions, for it was in Paris that he met Proudhon, and also Marx and Engels. his lifelong antagonists.

⁶ Masaryk, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 479.

⁷ *Correspondence*, Preface, p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

mechanically. When it begins to break up, nothing can arrest the process, and sooner or later this Empire is bound to make an end of itself."¹⁹ Total disorganization and destruction, chaos, pandestruction is to him a prerequisite of the new heaven and a new earth, the new society that will spontaneously upbuild itself from the ashes of the old order. Private property as well as the State must be destroyed, and Bakunin does not hesitate to speak of this anarchy as the "complete manifestation of the folk-life," and from this soil he expects absolute equality to flower. Forms of life, he imagined, would spring up from the soil thus deeply ploughed; and he inveighed against those who asked for an indication of the conditions of the future society. "It seems to us criminal that those who are already busied about the practical work of revolution should trouble their minds with this nebulous future, for such thoughts will merely prove a hindrance to the supreme cause of destruction."²⁰ To him as to some other passionate visionaries, the end justifies all means: poison, the knife and the noose were permitted in the holy war, "for the revolution sanctifies all equally." Terrorism he considered an accelerating instrument and a means of producing general panic. Of some of his methods Bakunin, to judge by a letter written in 1874, seems to have wearied, for his final word is that "no solid, no living structure can be built upon a foundation of Jesuitical deception, and revolutionary actions must not rely upon vile and base passions. The Revolution will never triumph unless it has a humane and high ideal."²¹

Influenced, no doubt, by his profound difference with Marx and his sympathy with Latin races, Bakunin distrusted Germany, the type of the sovereign and autocratic State. "In Germany," he writes, "one breathes the atmosphere of an immense political and social slavery, philosophically explained and accepted by a great people

¹⁹ *Correspondance*, p. 244.

²⁰ Masaryk, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 452.

²¹ *Correspondance*, p. 379.

The State is a stumbling-block in the way of liberty, for it guarantees the *status quo*—”to the rich, their wealth, and to the poor, their poverty.” The Church is the main prop of the State, and must therefore be destroyed. “If God exists, man is a slave: but man can and must be free, therefore God does not exist.” “As slaves of God, men must likewise become slaves of Church and State, in so far as State is sanctified by Church.” Atheism is therefore to him a prime necessity, and in the program for the Peace Congress at Geneva (1867) antitheology was set besides federalism and socialism as the third essential demand.¹⁵ He amusingly turns Voltaire’s famous saying inside out: “If God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him.”¹⁶

The State is the cause of civil and external war, and is the “most flagrant, cynical and complete negation of humanity.”¹⁷ Bakunin’s medicine for the real world of society was revolution and the destruction—pandestruction he calls it—of the existing order. There is no doubt he found a childish and acute pleasure in the stimulus of revolutionary activities, in the hubbub of insurrections, the tumults of the streets and public places, the-tremor of anticipation and preparation, the agitated and continuous meetings and all-night sittings of committees, even in the minor weapons of the revolutionary, invisible ink and cypher. In attempting to formulate the philosophic principles of revolution, he goes so far as to presuppose an unborn need of revolt as a primary psychical element.¹⁸ When actual revolutionary activities were impossible, he would find a cognate pleasure in the passionate negation of the social order.

He had no approval for reform and repair of the fabric of the State as it stood, but aimed at revolution from the prime foundation. Our State, he writes, “has nothing organic in it, and is held together

¹⁵ Masaryk, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 446.

¹⁶ *God and the State*, London, 1910, p. 16.

¹⁷ “Federalisme, socialisme et antitheologisme,” *Oeuvres*, Vol. I, p. 148.

¹⁸ See letter of Herzen, quoted in *Correspondance*, Preface, p. 67.

In November, 1847, as the result of a speech at a Polish banquet commemorating the rising of 1830, Bakunin was expelled from France at the instance of the Russian ambassador Kisseleff, and the report was circulated that he was a secret agent of the Russian government, disavowed because he had gone too far. After a short stay in Brussels he returned to Paris after the February revolution and flung himself heart and soul into the organization of the workers. Caussidiere, who hoped to “create order out of chaos,” was somewhat embarrassed by Bakunin’s zeal and said of him: “What a man! the first day of a revolution he is a treasure: the next day he ought to be shot.” After leaving Paris he attended the Slav Congress at Prague, was leader of the Prague rising, and afterward took a leading part in the rising at Dresden which dominated that city for five days in May, 1849. Bakunin, who had been almost dictator in this brief space, was captured, at the same time as Richard Wagner: and his vivid and restless career was changed for the bitter lot of a prisoner.

He was condemned to death by the Saxon government in January, 1850, but the sentence was commuted and he was delivered to Austria which claimed the privilege of dealing with him. Again he was condemned to death, and the sentence was again commuted. Finally the Russian government in its turn claimed him, and from 18? 1 to 1854 he was imprisoned at St. Petersburg. He was visited in prison by Count Orlov, who told him that Czar Nicholas wished to have his confession. Bakunin, knowing that he “was at the mercy of the bear, that his activities were well known and that there was nothing to hide,” wrote a letter to the Czar. According to Herzen the Czar said on reading this. “He is a good fellow and clever; he ought to be kept behind prison-bars.” Later Alexander II struck Bakunin’s name from the list of offenders to whom amnesty was granted. At another prison, Schlüsselburg, he suffered from scurvy and his health broke down completely; finally, after eight years of prison life, he was exiled to the comparative freedom of Siberia, whence he escaped by way of Japan and America to London.

For some years he lived in Italy, where he founded the Alliance of Socialist Revolutionaries. In 1867 he took part in the Congress of the League of Peace and Liberty at Geneva, and drew the League's attention to the newly founded International Working Men's Association. Bakunin did not at first believe that the latter would prove a success, and did not join it until 1868. His later exclusion from the Internationale, in 1872, was but a symptom of the conflict between Bakunin's group and the followers of Marx. The two men were antipathetic. Bakunin, who always recognized Marx's superior and systematic genius, who translated the Communist Manifesto for Herzen's *Kolokol* and began to translate the first volume of Marx's *Kapital*, distrusted Marx's temperament, which was lacking, as he believed, "the instinct for liberty." "I have always praised him," Bakunin writes to Herzen. "and more than that, I have recognized his greatness."⁹ "I should never forgive myself if I had tried to destroy or weaken his beneficent influence, for the pleasure of revenging myself on him."¹⁰ "He calls me," Bakunin once wrote, "a sentimental idealist, and he was right; I called him vain, treacherous and sly, and I was also right." The Bakuninist following accused the German group of Socialists of self-seeking and trafficking for the prizes of civilization, and of carefulness for forms of law and order, while on the other hand the Marxian group accused their opponents of having no sound ideas of law or order, and of being visionaries and anarchists. By this time Bakunin's health was broken, and except for short intervals his last years were passed in retirement at Lugano in a villa lent him by Cafiero. In 1876, the old revolutionary, who would have preferred death on the barricades, died peacefully in a hospital at Berne.

Bakunin's written work, like his life, is fragmentary and interrupted. He was an organizer of revolts in which he stood in the forefront of the barricades, and most of his writing was done in

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

the feverish interval between two insurrections. He was, as he himself said, no artist, and was quite without the shaping and architectonic gift.¹¹ His writings are chaotic, largely aroused by some passing occasion, abstract and metaphysical, except when they deal with current politics. "He does not come to close quarters with economic facts, but dwells usually in the regions of theory and metaphysics."¹² His essay in the *Deutsche Jahrbucher* is a vivid expression of the revolutionary mood of his circle and his day, and is interesting from its philosophical conception of democracy as an outlook on the universe, a spirit moving upon the face of the waters. "The essence, the principle of democracy is the most general, the most all-embracing, the most intimate of factors; it is what Hegel speaks of as the spirit which reveals itself and develops itself in history."¹³ His hopes are set on the imminence of revolution; in Russia he saw lowering clouds gathering, the heralds of storm: "The atmosphere is sultry and pregnant with tempests. To the proletariat we say: 'Open the eyes of your mind, let the dead bury their dead, realize at last that the spirit, the ever-young, the ever-reborn is not to be discovered in mouldering ruins!' To the compromisers we say: 'Throw open your hearts to the truth, clear your minds from pitiful and blind wisdom, free yourselves from the theorist's arrogance and the slave's dread, which have withered your souls and paralyzed your movements!' Let us put our trust in the eternal spirit which only destroys and annihilates because it is the unsearchable and eternally creative source of all life! The desire for destruction is also a creative desire."¹⁴ Even more fragmentary is his *God and the State*, the most detailed of his philosophical writings published, which breaks off abruptly. The thesis is the development of his simple statement that the Church and the State were his two bugbears.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 892: "Je ne suis pas artiste, et le talent d'architecte en littérature me fait complètement défaut" (1869).

¹² B. Russell, *Roads to Freedom*, p. 62.

¹³ Masaryk, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 437.

¹⁴ "L'empire knouto-germanique" (2d edition), *Oeuvres*, Vol. III, p. 160.