

# Bakunin

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Bakunin is strikingly relevant for our time, as contemporary society is becoming visibly totalitarian and acquiring features that are distinctly hostile to freedom. The real Bakunin was the product of the impact of German idealist philosophy and the French Revolution on the enlightened generations of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Just like many of his contemporaries, after reading Hegel and Feuerbach, Bakunin's state of mind was one of constant unrest and relentless protest against all the ideological, religious and metaphysical fetishes of the established powers. That is what the realization of philosophy comes to when the bourgeoisie helps abort its own revolution. In his own way, Bakunin inverted Hegelian idealism: reason, the "idea", full realization, and therefore, freedom, are not embodied in the State, but in people without States. They possess objectivity, truth and ethical existence; the State is nothing but a moment in their development. Consciousness and will merge and turn against the State and politics. Bakunin's writings would be incomprehensible in isolation from his life, of which they form a part, a life in constant conflict against all authority, secular or divine, liberal or absolutist. All his works are marked by the imprint of action, almost the sole motive and principle of his existence, which was soon associated with a revolutionary exaltation founded on two pillars: the passion for freedom and hatred for all forms of oppression. Every one of his letters, articles, programs and manuscripts pertain to an activist project that renders them intelligible; they are reflections of the struggles in which he engaged and they were conceived in specific situations, with precise objectives in mind. They had nothing in common with the tranquil state of mind of the scholar who, in the silence of a library, attempts to understand reality in the light of scientific research. In the beginning was the deed, as we read in *Faust*. The determinations of reality never stand still.

Bakunin declared that he was "a passionate seeker of the truth", which is incomprehensible in our postmodern age, and also that he was a no less passionate enemy of all political, juridical, economic and social lies that are used by those in power to assure their privileges and to rule the world. Although his thought was based on solid materialist philosophical foundations, in Bakunin we do not find a social theory properly speaking whose scope goes beyond the exigencies posed by the struggle, nor do we find any intention to construct a system with a closed worldview, a pre-packaged system fully equipped with its principles, first causes and ultimate goals. Having read Comte, Bakunin detested metaphysics, and the conceptual tools that he developed, taken from observation and knowledge, had no other purpose than to more accurately understand reality in order to reinforce the capacity for action.

He only wrote when a passionate conviction impelled him to do so. In Bakunin, we are not confronted by a theoretician, a professional writer or a scholar, although he had an abundance of imagination for creation and talent for writing, and more than enough erudition: he was above all a revolutionary, an agitator, a soldier of freedom, a constant conspirator against despotism, both in its old forms, based on traditional submission to the established order, and its more modern forms, disguised in the garb of liberty and the revolution. The most complete freedom and equality were for him the foundations of the only regime in which human beings can fully develop, conduct themselves with dignity and experience happiness. And this regime was incompatible with the State form. Political power and communal society are irreconcilable.

Human beings are not only rational and logical, but also passionate and prone to dream. His nature as a man of action conferred upon Bakunin's writings the lucidity of strategy, which obliges clear discernment due to the imperatives of the struggle; but they were also affected by the visionary profundity of the dream, which is so necessary for ennobling the aspirations for human emancipation. Both factors, the fruit of a dual intellectual and personal adventure, gave his ideas a power that is still felt today, since we must not forget that today's oppression is far more extensive and sophisticated than it was in his time; at the same time, however, his ideas are resistant to being adapted by epigones or enemies in order to convert them into a system, an ideology, or a recipe book of perennial truths for the decoration of execrable practices. Bakunin's romantic activism was always accompanied by an almost exhaustive knowledge of history and the most advanced thought of his time; this is why it is not easy to imitate him, either in practice or in theory. This is not to say that there have not been many attempts to misrepresent him, since recuperation and looting are the characteristics of an irrational present with abundant and pretentious ignorance. Once he had been decontextualized and purged of contradictions, or, more accurately, mummified and canonized, Bakunin was wielded as an authority, which he would have definitely found repugnant, to justify all-embracing doctrines of every type and to confer legitimacy on the libertarian ghetto, whether in its official or alternative version. He has even been cited as an authority by syndicalist and nationalist variants, by the founders of "specificist" parties and by the most irrational varieties of extremism. When revolutionary action goes into decline, truth also goes into decline and ideology advances. Ideology, however, is false consciousness, not anarchism. Anarchism is either revolutionary practice or it is nothing.

Although Bakunin has become synonymous with anarchy, his definitive anarchist activity took place only during the last period of his life, between 1863, the year of the defeat of the Polish insurrection in which he participated, and 1873, the year of his retirement and the expansion of Prussian imperialism. In 1864 he broke with democratic pan-Slavism and renounced any intention to transform, by way of a democratic and social revolution, the cause of the peoples without history, such as the Slavs, into a universal cause. The realization of freedom in history would then have other protagonists for him, that is, humble and downtrodden peoples without distinction, beginning with the Italians, who were then engaged in open revolt against the Church and the aristocracy. The transformation of universal society would be effected "on the basis of freedom, reason, justice and labor", as we read in the program of the "International Brotherhood", the first practical formulation of revolutionary anarchism. Empires were tottering like idols with feet of clay; any proposed course of action had to take into account the possibility of the imminence of a popular revolution that would dissolve the States and reorganize society "from the bottom-up and from the circumference to the center". Bakunin proclaimed that he was a socialist democrat and a federalist, at least up until 1868, when he broke with the radical and progressive republican

bourgeoisie. Then he flirted, like Proudhon, with the double meaning of the word “anarchist”, but even so, his supporters were becoming more and more likely to lay claim to the adjectives “anti-state” or “anti-authoritarian”. Following his break with the League of Peace and Freedom, the “people” in the abstract sense of the word would, for him, cease to be the subject that realizes freedom and equality in history, a mission that he would from then on attribute to the working classes.

Bakunin had a peculiar idea of class. The revolutionary subject was constituted by separating itself as much as possible from the established power and its norms. The proletarians were capable of revolution only if they were not corrupted by material and political interests. By keeping themselves morally intact, they would conserve all their energy and potential for revolt; they would never allow themselves to be deceived by charismatic leaders or programs alien to the logic of the world of labor, their world. The more indifferent they were towards bourgeois values, and the more they turned their backs on bourgeois civilization, the greater would be the harvest of the seeds of socialism that lie dormant within them. Evidently, the sectors of the working class that were not corrupted by politics and authority, the most disinherited and the most impoverished, constituted the “flower of the proletariat”, the absolute negation of class society, those who bore in their instincts and their aspirations the resplendent future of freedom. The interests of the most favored or integrated layers of the working class could not be universal interests, and therefore could not serve as motive forces for a process of radical transformation. In the hands of bourgeoisified workers, the idea of class played the same mystifying function as the fatherland, the nation or the race. It had to be used with caution. Furthermore, his absolute refusal to consider the sufficient development of the productive forces as the obligatory precondition for revolution brought Bakunin into conflict with the Marxist socialists. Bakunin thought that there could be a revolution in countries where the proletariat was not highly developed and capitalism was weak; in such a revolution the principal role of protagonist would fall to the peasantry, the natural class, alongside of whom the artisanal proletariat and the déclassé urban youth were mere auxiliary forces. Moreover, a revolution was much more likely in such countries than in those where the revolution would have to be based exclusively on the factories. In retrospect, the Mexican, Russo-Ukrainian and Spanish Revolutions corroborate the accuracy of his assessment.

His application for membership in the International Workingmen’s Association was the culmination of the process that had begun when he renounced democratic nationalism. At this point, for Bakunin the political emancipation of the working people, that is, the abolition of the State and of the political class, had to be absorbed in their economic emancipation, that is, the liberation of labor from the yoke of capital. History would reach its end when freedom is complete. The organization of the productive forces and public services would have to be carried out collectively and horizontally, without either coercion or the imposition of any authority whatsoever; and therefore on the ruins of the State. This is why such a regime is defined as collectivism. For Bakunin, the word “communism”, which he associated with the doctrines of Cabet, Weitling and Marx, had the connotation of a barracks-style form of organization mediated by authority. Capitalist society was based more on the principle of authority than on that of property. The development of capitalism required an increasingly more centralized State where all its subjects were citizens. Citizenship is the modern form of servitude. The condition of political dependence of the masses went hand in hand with their economic dependence; they mutually reinforced one another. The accuracy of his analyses would be revealed by the Paris Commune. With the out-

break of war between France and Prussia, the first serious opportunity for proletarian revolution arose. Bakunin saw the defeat of Napoleon III as opening up the possibility of transforming a war between States into a revolutionary war. Only a popular revolution that represented the communes could save Europe from the reactionary forces represented by Prussia and the Russian Empire, but the provisional government of the French bourgeoisie drowned all such attempts in blood. The end of the Commune marked the victory of the European counterrevolution.

For Bakunin, a free and egalitarian society could not be born from a directory that unilaterally dictates laws. Freedom could only arise from freedom, not from submission to an authority, even if this authority proclaims that it is revolutionary. As a result, Bakunin would never even consider the possibility of emancipation guided by the State, whether a people's State or a proletarian State, since the suppression of the State was the starting point, the precondition without which the revolution would be nothing but an ephemeral fiction. He rejected the establishment of an authoritarian center that, on the pretext of organizing the revolution, would enthrone a red bureaucracy, the new ruling class. Such centralist plans could only function in a country like Germany with a servile population and a disciplined factory proletariat. Not in Spain, for example, a country with hardly any factories, where Fanelli carried out his famous mission to found the first sections of the International in Spain, with well-known repercussions. It is obvious that such views would sooner or later have to result in an open clash with Marx's Jacobinism and with the reformism of his followers, who were convinced believers in the peaceful or violent conquest of political power in the name of the working class. Marx did not spare any efforts in his attempt to expel Bakunin from the IWA. We are not at all interested here in describing the dishonest procedures used by Marx, or Bakunin's secret organizations, however. The victory of the reactionary forces in France, Austria, Germany, Italy and Spain inaugurated a long period of reaction. Revolutionary passion was nowhere to be found among the masses, the general movement went into decline and no flanking maneuvers could create a force to be reckoned with. Bakunin, at the end of his life, confirmed the fact that the revolution "had gone to sleep" and that it would be no easy matter to wake it up again.

The International split into two parts, and both fractions soon dissolved. The subsequent development of the workers movement proceeded in two opposite directions that would never converge, which is why the Marx-Bakunin debate has persisted for so many years. In fact, however, history has rendered all forms of anarchism and Marxism obsolete; there have been so many capitalist innovations, so many debatable affairs, that becoming embroiled in that particular debate would be sterile. The differences of opinion, the particular problems of the time, and the antipathies that separated Marx and Bakunin in 1872 do not obviate the critical contributions of either, some of which are still relevant today, in the midst of full-blown global turbo-capitalism. The dead part is what has been used to manufacture ideological monstrosities baptized with the names of "Marxism" and "Bakuninism". However, while Bakunin has hardly anything to do with the milieu that lays claim to his heritage, Marx has even less to do with his spurious heirs. Marx's disciples shaved off his beard during the Russian Revolution, where his teachings were transformed into the cruel religion of a totalitarian State; as for the Bakunin, his followers turned his teachings into a gradualist, federalist and democratic statism in the Spanish Revolution. A new bourgeoisie of ideologues, delegates and functionaries is always born from the ashes of a betrayed and annihilated revolution, adapting their masters' words to their own pharisaical prose.

After Bakunin's death on July 1, 1876, the dissolution of the IWA, and the resurgence of reaction, the workers movement entered a defensive, underground phase, characterized by constant organizational work and propaganda. For anarchism, this was the time of its ideological stabilization, which led to diverse tactics and orientations. The passage of anarchism from being a doctrine of action, of facts, intertwined with the workers movement, so characteristic of Bakunin, to the anarchism of propaganda, of ideas, external to the movement, typical, for example, of Kropotkin, Grave, Reclus and Malatesta, entailed the separation of doctrinal activity from the class struggle. The libertarian conception of the world suffered irreparable damage. Bakunist materialism, based on the dialectical relation between thought and action, individual and society, revolutionary subject and objective reality, yielded to a vulgar, ahistorical, eclectic, determinist and scientific materialism. A petrified opposition to rationalist optimism based on study and science engendered an individualist anarchism based either on will and love, or else on egoism, by introducing Stirner into the anarchist pantheon. In this manner, revolution and insurrection, communist ideal and pragmatic resistance, constructive effort and destructive passion, individual interest and collective interest, were separated. Anarchism became an ideology, or, more accurately, a doctrinal ensemble for three or four factions, the exclusive purview of doctrinaires of proven faith, and no longer the conscious expression of the revolutionary workers movement. Libertarian thought and class struggle were no longer two aspects of a single reality that was manifested in the movement of history, and were divided into the preserve of thinkers and moralists on the one side, and neutral or inert nature on the other, dominated by the principle of causality. This deviation, which also affected the Marxist camp, was the mother of every kind of confusion, giving rise to an array of individualist, naturist, economic, syndicalist and communist beliefs, destined to multiply, increasingly undermining the possibilities that anarchists might be able to influence the social process.

It cannot be said that all the accumulated labors of agitation were in vain, nor that the revolt that inspired those labors was insincere, and to the extent that it was based on reality anarchism was still capable of contributing brilliant pages to history. The forces of order, however, have registered one victory after another, and therefore humanity is constantly declining. It is clear that humanity will not be able to get out of the sewer in which it finds itself except by way of a profound revolution, but is such a revolution really desired? Does humanity even possess the means by which it can formulate its desires? We hope that the time will come when the answer to these questions will be an unequivocal yes. In the meantime, the only thing that is driving the state apparatus and the market towards disaster is their own contradictions. Building spaces for freedom, solidarity and equality in the present chaos would seem to be the most reasonable outlook, but as Bakunin himself might say: what an outlook!

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