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Mikhail Bakunin

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Communism

Mikhail Bakunin

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The latest issue of the Observer¹ contains an article, or rather the beginning of an article, on Communism, which has struck us very pleasantly. It is written with a dignity and calm that are truly astonishing in the Observer.

There are those who maintain that such a tone in the “Observer” is always a bad sign, and we confess that we have often shared this opinion. But this time, it seems to us, the case is somewhat different: apparently the “Observer” has realized the dangerous seriousness of Communism and has now decided to abandon his usual manner, unworthy of a serious man and a serious soul, and to examine this highly important subject with dignity and conscientiousness.

The future will show us whether we were mistaken. However, it is known that nothing acts so demoralizingly on a person as the consciousness that nothing good and noble is expected of him. And if the “Observer” really wants to improve, we do not want to make this task impossible for him by prematurely suspecting his purpose.

¹ The newspaper in question was Der Schweizerischer Beobachter (The Swiss Observer), which was published in Zurich and expressed the views of the conservative party.

On the contrary, we will try with all the means at our disposal to keep him on this more praiseworthy path.

In any case, Communism is a very important and dangerous phenomenon, and this says a lot. For a phenomenon can be dangerous, truly dangerous for society, only insofar as it contains at least a relative truth and finds its justification in the state of society itself. That which is merely accidental cannot be dangerous for a well-ordered state, for all the power and vitality of the state lies precisely in the fact that it preserves itself and can preserve itself from a thousand accidents of everyday life. The state must and can be above all misfortunes that arise from the ill-intentionedness of individuals. For this purpose the police exist, for this purpose the laws and courts exist, for this purpose the entire organization of the state exists. A thief and even a large gang of robbers may be dangerous for certain individuals in the state, but not for the state itself, as long as it remains a healthy and well-ordered organism.

The situation is entirely different with a phenomenon that has its source not in the arbitrariness and evil will of individuals, but in the shortcomings of the state organism, state institutions, the entire political body. In relation to such a phenomenon, the state has only two options: either to accept into its organism the law contained in it and to that extent reform itself peacefully, or to resort to force. But on this second path, every state will probably go to ruin, since the law that has entered the consciousness is insurmountable.

These are the reasons why we, together with the "Observer", consider communism a very important and extremely dangerous phenomenon. In order to avoid misunderstandings, we declare once and for all that we personally are not communists and that we have as little desire as the gentlemen of the "Observer" to live in a society organized according to Weitling's plan. This is not a free society, not a truly living association of free people, but an intolerable compulsion, a herd of animals united by force, pursuing exclusively material goals and knowing nothing about

This is the spirit that gave birth to communism. This spirit is now invisibly uniting all peoples without distinction of nationality. This spirit, the brilliant successor of Christianity, is now opposed by the so-called Christian governments and all monarchical rulers and lords, for they know full well that their imaginary Christianity, their selfish deeds will not be able to withstand its fiery gaze. And what are they doing, what means are they using, to prevent its victory? They try to develop national feeling in the people at the expense of humanity and love, they, Christian governments, propagate hatred and murder in the name of nationality!

Against them, Weitling and the communists are undoubtedly right, for according to the principles of Christianity itself, everything that opposes the spirit of love must be destroyed.⁴

⁴ The article "Communism" was left unfinished.<

world. But as long as Christianity still retained its power, it was also able, at certain great historical moments, to abolish the isolation of nations and to unite them all in one great common goal. The best proof of this can be found in the Crusades.

Now the power of Christianity over the state has disappeared. Modern states, it is true, still call themselves Christian, but they are no longer so. Christianity serves them only as a means, not as the source and goal of their existence. They live and act on principles that are completely opposed to Christianity. And the fact that they still call themselves Christian is hypocrisy, more or less conscious hypocrisy. In the following exposition we hope to prove this clearly and irrefutably. We shall examine the most important aspects of modern political life and show that Christianity is here only a weak shadow and that only the non-Christian is real.

But since Christianity has ceased to be the cement that binds and inspires the European states, what still binds them together, what preserves in them the sanctity of concord and love that Christianity proclaimed to them? The holy spirit of freedom and equality, the spirit of pure humanity, revealed to people in thunder and lightning during the French Revolution and, like the seeds of a new life, carried everywhere by revolutionary wars. The French Revolution is the beginning of a new life. Many are so blind that they think that they have overcome and tamed its powerful spirit. Miserable people, how terrible will their awakening be! No, the revolutionary drama is not yet over. We were born under a revolutionary star, we live and, without exception, will die under its influence. We are on the eve of a great world-historical revolution, we are on the eve of a new struggle, all the more dangerous because it will be not simply political but also fundamentally religious in nature. We should not indulge in illusions: it will be a question of nothing less than a new religion, the religion of democracy, which under the old banner with the inscription "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" will begin its new struggle, a struggle for life and death.

the spiritual side of life and the high pleasures it provides. We do not even think that such a community could ever be created, for we are so faithful to the sublimated, more or less consciously inherent power of truth in all people that we can be completely calm in this regard. But on the other hand, we are quite convinced that Communism does contain elements that we consider to be of the highest importance, even more than important: at its basis lie the most sacred rights and the most humane demands, and in them lies that great, wonderful force that has a striking effect on the mind. The Communists themselves do not understand this invisible force. But only in it and only thanks to it do they represent something, without it they are nothing. Only this force has made the Communists from nothing into something strong and formidable in a short time, for it must not be hidden from oneself: Communism has now become a world question that no statesman can ignore, much less resolve simply by force.

Apparently, the "Observer" thinks that Communism is the direct result of German philosophy and radicalism and differs from both of them only in that it has the courage and conscientiousness to express openly and clearly views that the latter either clothe themselves in incomprehensible philosophical jargon or completely hush up.

As for the supposed silence of the philosophers and radicals, we do not think that the "Observer" seriously made this accusation. It was only a joke on his part, for in reality he himself, on the contrary, is convinced and knows very well that the whole strength of the radicals lies in publicity and that silence is the necessary lot of the so-called conservative party, which needs the people only as a means and does not see them as an end. He knows very well that self-government of the people is the principle underlying all the views of the radicals, and that the latter worked especially for the improvement of the schools and the development of public education, for they were convinced that the people can govern themselves only insofar as they are of age and independent, and that

only through education can they be raised to adulthood and independence. In a word, the "Observer" knows very well that the main goal of the radicals is the liberation of the people from the guardianship of the noble and the rich as such, and therefore we will not waste any more time refuting the accusation, which, however, as has already been said, was a simple joke.

Philosophy and radicalism have, it is true, much in common with communism. In order to really understand a phenomenon, it is of course not enough to emphasize only that aspect which is common to other phenomena. It is also necessary to become familiar with its essential differences, otherwise we must inevitably come to the assertion that everything turns out to be one, for there is not a single thing in the physical and spiritual world that would have nothing in common with all other things.

In any case, philosophy touches on communism in very many points. And it could not be otherwise. The life and course of development of mankind are not an indifferent collection of random events, but a necessary and internally rationally organized procession of a single spirit, which is reflected entirely in each separate manifestation of its inner essence, just as the general vitality and general sensitivity of the human organism are rooted in its smallest parts.

Therefore, modern philosophy must necessarily have much in common with communism, since both were born from the spirit of our time and represent its most significant revelations. What is the goal of philosophy? Knowledge of truth. But truth is not something entirely abstract and ethereal, and therefore it can and even must exert a significant influence on social relations, on the organization of society. It is already said in the Gospel: "They shall know the truth, and the truth shall set them free." These few words express the entire aspiration of philosophy, and that this aspiration has not remained fruitless can be judged from modern history and from the history of the French Revolution. Not long before the Revolution, the working, best part of the French people was in the most

of the future temple of freedom and equality, they succeeded only because they were reborn in the stormy ocean of popular life.

Thus, the protest of Communism against the principle of nationality is much more important and significant than the protest of the enlightened cosmopolitans of the last century. Communism does not proceed from theory, but from practical instinct, from the popular instinct, and the latter is never wrong. Its protest is the mighty verdict of humanity, whose holy and only saving unity is still violated by the narrow egoism of nations.

Or perhaps the "Observer" does not want to know anything about humanity? Is the idea of humanity really nonsense for him, an empty word? That would be strange! For he is not only an "Observer," but a Christian "Observer," and as such he should well know that the emphasis on the idea of humanity in the face of the isolated and strictly self-contained nations of the pagan era was one of the greatest works of Christianity.

All men, all without exception, are brothers, teaches the Gospel, and only when they love one another is the invisible God present in them, the redeeming and liberating truth, adds John. Consequently, the individual, however high and moral his motives, cannot partake of the truth unless he lives in society. Not in the individual, but only in fellowship is God present, and thus the virtue of the individual, the living, fruitful virtue, is possible only through the holy and miraculous union of love, only in fellowship. Outside fellowship, man is nothing, in fellowship, he is everything. And when the Bible speaks of fellowship, it least of all means separate, narrowly self-contained communities or nations. Primitive Christianity knows nothing about national differences, and the fellowship it preaches is the fellowship of all people of humanity.

Thus Weitling is entirely true to primitive Christianity when, in the name of a single and indivisible humanity, he rejects the divisive principle of nationality. Christianity, too, appeared at first one-sidedly as a negation, as the destruction of all national differences. Later, rational differences arose again within the Christian

because in their present form they do not carry out their principle and, instead of being living and free bearers and organs of a single humanity, they callously and egoistically rebel against that divine unity in which alone they can achieve their true purpose.

We must beware of confusing the cosmopolitanism of the Communists with the cosmopolitanism of the last century. The theoretical cosmopolitanism³ of the last century was cold, indifferent, reflective, without ground or passion. It was a dead and sterile abstraction, a theoretical construct devoid of even the slightest spark of productive, creative fire. Against this lifeless and soulless shadow, the demonic negative element of nationality was undoubtedly right and actually achieved a complete victory over it.

On the contrary, Communism cannot be accused of lacking passion and fire. Communism is not a phantom, not a shadow. It contains a warmth and a heat that are straining with enormous force toward the light, the flame of which can no longer be extinguished and whose explosion can become dangerous and even terrible if the privileged educated class does not facilitate this transition to the light with love and sacrifices and a full recognition of its world-historical mission. Communism is not a lifeless shadow. It arose from the people, and a shadow can never be born from the people. The people — and by the people I mean the majority, the broadest mass of the poor and oppressed — the people, I say, have always been the only creative soil from which all the great deeds of history, all the liberating revolutions, have arisen. Whoever is alien to the people, all his deeds are cursed in advance. One can create, really create, only in real electric contact with the people. Christ and Luther came from the common people, and if the heroes of the French Revolution with a mighty hand laid the first foundation

³ In the 1840s, the term cosmopolitanism meant adherence to the supranational idea of the unity of the human race, the solidarity of peoples and countries as parts of one humanity. In relation to communism, this term in Bakunin did not quite adequately express its international character.

deplorable position. They did not own even one-third of the land, their very labor, their only means of existence, was burdened by all sorts of obstacles, and yet it was precisely this part of the population that bore the entire burden of state taxes, and in addition they were forced to pay special taxes in favor of the clergy and the aristocracy. We are not even talking about the other humiliating duties imposed on the poor people. The courts were so arranged that the nobles always turned out to be right against the people. The people, in a word, were oppressed in all respects by the nobility. And why? Not because they were weak, God forbid, the people are never weak, but because they were ignorant and allowed themselves to be deceived by the Catholic priests, who explained to them that the king, the nobility and the clergy were given to them by God's grace and that the people must serve them, bow down before them and suffer humiliation from them in order to receive the kingdom of heaven for this. "You are stupid, you are not capable of understanding us correctly, therefore rely on us, we will guide you" — so the priests told the people, and the poor people, in whom so much faith and so much common sense are always hidden, really believed that they were stupid, and suppressed in themselves, as the offspring of the devil, all doubts, all liberating thoughts. What freed the people from this spiritual slavery? Philosophy. The philosophers of the last century were mistaken in many things, they overlooked much that was holy and beautiful, but they faithfully fulfilled their providential mission, which consisted in making the people feel themselves, in bringing them to the consciousness of their dignity and their unchangeable sacred rights. History always judges better and more generously than petty, blind and therefore spiteful parties, and for this reason it will undoubtedly preserve their names among the names of the liberators and best servants of humanity.

To this day, philosophy continues its stubborn struggle, a life-and-death struggle, against all prejudices, against everything that has hindered people from achieving their high, sacred goal, the realization of a free and fraternal society, the realization of the king-

dom of God on earth. It still has much to do, much to fight against, in order to tear off the veil of lies that the conservative friends of the people, in their selfish interests, throw over the people. But she has the courage of truth, and she will win and must win, since truth, knowledge of truth is her only weapon. She fights in the light, and her enemies — in the darkness of night. Her enemies awaken in the people crude, dark passions, the demonic, while she, on the contrary, relies only on the godlike, bright side of human nature, she appeals to the high passion of freedom, love and knowledge. And God, truth will ultimately triumph over darkness.

This is the point of contact between philosophy and communism: both strive for the liberation of people. But here begins their essential divergence. Philosophy is essentially only theoretical, it moves and develops only within the framework of knowledge; communism in its present form, on the contrary, is only practical. This indicates both the advantages and disadvantages of each of these phenomena in relation to the other. True, thought and deed, truth and morality, theory and practice are ultimately one and the same, a single inseparable essence. True, the greatest merit of modern philosophy lies in the fact that it has recognized and cognized this unity, but with this knowledge it has reached its limit — a limit which it as a philosophy cannot cross, for on the other side of this limit begins a higher essence than it — a real, animated by love and flowing from the divine essence of primitive equality, the communion of free people, the this-worldly realization of what constitutes the divine essence of Christianity, true communism.

“And for him (Weitling),— says the “Observer”, —as for the “Swiss Republican”, every national feeling is stupidity, nonsense. There are only people, not nations proper, only citizens of the world, not citizens of states.”

Another mystification! Oh, the “Observer” is a rogue, a Christian one, it is true, but still a rogue. Sometimes he jokes so subtly that his jokes can be taken for truth, but he is too clever to really

have such an opinion of the “Republican”, and too moral to say seriously what he himself cannot believe. What, the “Republican” declares every national feeling to be stupidity and nonsense? Does not the “Observer” know that the “Republican” has always considered it outrageous, shameful high treason if anyone, for the sake of the victory of his own political views, whether these views are true or false, should promote the interference of foreigners in the affairs of his fatherland? The independence and proud independence of Switzerland in relation to all influences of foreign governments — has not this been the constant aim of the “Republican”, and has he not sufficiently proved it by his conduct, for example, in the affair of the Council, in the complications with Louis Bonaparte, and in the Herwegh affair²?

We will not reproach Weitling for ignoring the significance of nationality: this is a mistake, but a necessary mistake, an inevitable stage in the development of communism. Every great historical phenomenon, even Christianity, remains at first one-sided, a mere negation of what exists. Thus, Christianity at first, of course, rejected art, because art was then inseparably linked with paganism. But later it again recognized art as reborn from the Christian principle. And thus Christian art arose. It is exactly the same with communism. Now it rejects all nationality, not because the principle of nationality was essentially bad. Communism knows nothing about this yet, because in general it is still very little developed theoretically and scientifically, because it is still far from comprehending its own principle in all its truth and in all the fullness of the conclusions that follow from it. But communism denies all nationalities

² The issue concerns a diplomatic conflict between the governments of Switzerland and France during the time of Louis Philippe in connection with the Swiss government’s rejection of the French government’s demand to expel Prince Louis Bonaparte (the future Napoleon III), who had settled in Switzerland after an unsuccessful coup d’état. The Swiss government yielded to pressure from the German governments and expelled the German poet and revolutionary democrat G. Herwegh from Zurich in 1843.