

Selected writings

Mikhail Bakunin

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Everything that lives, does so under the categorical condition of decisively interfering in the life of someone else...

The worse it is for those who are so ignorant of the natural and social law of human solidarity that they deem possible or even desirable the absolute independence of individuals in regard to one another. To will it is to will the disappearance of society... All men, even the most intelligent and strongest are at every instant of their lives the producers and the product. Freedom itself, the freedom of every man, is the ever-renewed effect of the great mass of physical, intellectual, and moral influences to which this man is subjected by the people surrounding him and the environment in which he was born and in which he passed his whole life.

To wish to escape this influence in the name of some ... self-sufficient and absolutely egoistical freedom, is to aim toward non-being.

To do away with this reciprocal influence is tantamount to death. And in demanding the freedom of the masses we do not intend to do away with natural influences to which man is subjected by individuals and groups. All we want is to do away with is factitious, legitimized influences, to do away with the privileges in exerting influence.

Juridically they are equal; but economically the worker is the serf of the capitalist ... thereby the worker sells his person and his liberty for a given time. The worker is in the position of a serf because this terrible threat of starvation which daily hangs over his head and over his family, will force him to accept any conditions imposed by the gainful calculations of the capitalist, the industrialist, the employer... The worker always has the right to leave his employer, but has he the means to do so? No, he does it in order to sell himself to another employer. He is driven to it by the same hunger which forces him to sell himself to the first employer.

The worker's liberty ... is only a theoretical freedom, lacking any means for its possible realization. and consequently it is only a fictitious liberty, an utter falsehood. The truth is that the whole life of the worker is simply a continuous and dismaying succession of terms of serfdom—“voluntary from the juridical point of view but compulsory from an economic sense—broken up by momentarily brief interludes of freedom accompanied by starvation; in other words, it is real slavery.

We see that the richest property owners ... are precisely those who work the least or who do not work at all.

It is evident to anyone who is not blind about this matter that productive labor creates wealth and yields the producers only misery, and it is only non-productive, exploiting labor that yields property... What is property, what is capital in their present form? For the capitalist and the property owner they mean the power and the right, guaranteed by the State, to live without working. And since neither property nor capital produces anything when not fertilized by labor—that means the power and the right to live by exploiting the work of someone else. The right to exploit the work of those who possess neither property nor capital and who thus are forced to sell their productive power to the lucky owners of both.

The State is the organized authority, domination, and power of the possessing classes over the masses the most flagrant, the most cynical, and the most complete negation of humanity. It shatters the universal solidarity of all men on the earth, and brings some of them into association only for the purpose of destroying, conquering, and enslaving all the rest. This flagrant negation of humanity which constitutes the very essence of the State is, from the standpoint of the State, its supreme duty and its greatest virtue. Thus, to offend, to oppress, to despoil, to plunder, to assassinate or enslave one's fellowman is ordinarily regarded as a crime. In public life, on the other hand, from the standpoint of patriotism, when these things are done for the greater glory of the State, for the preservation or the extension of its power, it is all transformed into duty and virtue. This explains why the entire history of ancient and modern states is merely a series of revolting crimes; why kings and ministers, past and present, of all times and all countries—statesmen, diplomats, bureaucrats, and warriors—if judged from the standpoint of simply morality and human justice, have a hundred, a thousand times over earned their sentence to hard labor or to the gallows. There is no horror, no cruelty, sacrilege, or perjury, no imposture, no infamous transaction, no cynical robbery, no bold plunder or shabby betrayal that has not been or is not daily being perpetrated by the representatives of the states, under no other pretext than those elastic words, so convenient and yet so terrible: "for reasons of state."

The only thing that the State can and must do ... is gradually to modify the right of inheritance so as to achieve its complete abolition as soon as possible... We claim that this right will necessarily have to be abolished because as long as inheritance lasts, there will be hereditary economic inequality—not the natural inequality of individuals, but the artificial inequality of classes—which will necessarily continue to be expressed in hereditary inequality of the development and cultivation of intelligence and will remain the source and sanction of all political and social inequality.

Will this abolition be just?

A man, we are told, has acquired through his labor several tens or hundreds of thousands of francs, 8 million, and he will not have the right to leave them as an inheritance to his children. Is this not an attack on natural right, is this not unjust plunder?

It has been proven 8 thousand times that an isolated worker cannot produce much more than what he consumes. We challenge any real worker, any worker who does not enjoy a single privilege, to amass tens or hundreds of thousands of francs, or millions. That would be quite impossible. Therefore, if some individuals in present-day society do acquire such great sums, it is not by their labor that they do so but by their privilege, that is, by a juridically legalized injustice. And since a person inevitably takes from others whatever he does not gain from his own, we have the right to say that all such profits are thefts of collective labor, committed by a few privileged individuals with the sanction of the State and under its protection."

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