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Bakunin's Predictions

Noam Chomsky

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It's a tragedy and catastrophe that the Left has accepted the idea of humans as historical products, simple reflections of their environment.

Because what follows from that, of course, is that there's no moral barrier to molding them to be anything that you like.

If humans don't have any inner nature, any inner instinct for freedom, if it's not fundamental to their nature to have free, creative, productive work under their own control, if that's not part of their nature, then there's no moral reason for allowing them that space.

You can just mold them into anything you want them to be.

And you can be the central committee, or you can be the managers of the corporation, or the directors of a fascist state, or whatever.

It's quite interesting that modern intellectuals have moved into one or the other of those directions overwhelmingly. Bakunin predicted this in the late 19th century. It's a prediction of the social sciences that has become so dramatically true that it's one of the best ever.

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He was arguing with Marx, and it was well before Leninism. He predicted very presciently that the rising class of intellectuals, who were just becoming identified as a class in modern industrial society, would essentially go in one of two directions.

Some intellectuals would believe that the struggles of the working class would offer them an opportunity to rise and take state power into their own hands. And at that point, he said, they would become the red bureaucracy who would create the worst tyranny the world had ever known, of course all in the interests of the workers. That's one direction.

The other intellectuals would realize that you're never going to get power that way. Therefore, the way to get power would be to associate yourself with what we would nowadays call state capitalism and just become a servant of its ruling class. Then you become one of the managers or an ideologue and so on for the state capitalist system.

And as he put it, those people will "beat the people with the people's stick." In other words, they'll talk about democracy, but they'll really be beating people with the stick of democracy, which they'll turn into a mechanism of coercion.

So there are some intellectuals who think you can get power by exploiting popular struggles and others who think you're going to get power by associating yourself with the people who already have economic power.

And I think that was a very accurate description of the century that followed him [Bakunin]. Remember, this is fifty years before the Bolshevik revolution. But he predicted its form very precisely and also its ideological background.

He also predicted quite accurately what happens in modern industrial state capitalism societies. And looking at it now from the retrospect of 100 years we can see this development very clearly.

And I think it explains an odd fact about 20th century intellectual life, namely how easy it's been for people to shift from one position to another. So the same person who's a Stalin apologist

one year is a super American patriot the next, supporting every atrocity, working in the Hoover Institute, and associating with the most reactionary institutions.

That transition, which is called The God That Failed change, which was somewhat authentic in the early years with people like Salonie (sp?) and others, eventually became a joke.

In fact, we're seeing it in Russia right now. The worst commissars are now the ones who are the most passionate about the free market and investing and enriching yourself and so on.

They made the transition very easily, and that goes way back.

I think the reason there's no real transition. It's just a different estimate of where power lies, but with the same underlying ideology.

The ideology is that you beat the people with the people's stick.

In fact, if you look at modern democratic theory in the West, it's remarkably similar to this. It's remarkably Leninist in its character.

If you think of leading tendency in modern democratic theory in the West, in the strand of political thinking like Carol Laswell and others, who's one of the founders of contemporary political science.

And in the general sphere you have the Wilsonian intellectuals, the progressive intellectuals of whom Walter Lippmann was the most striking example in the United States, a progressive intellectual in the 1920s.

All of these people developed theories of democracy, and it's very interesting that they're very Leninist in their character.

The conception is that in a democracy there are two classes of citizens. There's the general public, whom Lippmann calls ignorant and meddling outsiders. And Glasswell says they're too stupid to do anything, that we should not be overcome by dogmatism about the common man who's too stupid to do anything.

So there are the ignorant and meddling outsiders, they're about 90% of the population. And then there are the responsible men, the wise men, the smart people, the people with the integrity

and honor, the intellectual aristocracy – whatever you call them – and they have to rule.

They have to make the decisions; they have to do the thinking, and so on.

The role of the masses, the ignorant and meddling outsiders, is just to show up every couple of years, decide which of the smart guys is going to be their leader, and then go home.