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Bakunin and the Invisible Legions, revisited

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Jacobin sense, still less a 'despotism'” [Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom, p. 144, p. 149]

Leninists and other Marxists claim that Bakunin was a secret authoritarian. They base this on the fact that Bakunin used the expression “invisible dictatorship” in some of his letters. However, this claim expresses a distinct, even wilful, misunderstanding of the role revolutionaries should play in popular movements and the ideas of Bakunin on this issue. In actual fact, the term “*invisible dictatorship*” does not prove that Bakunin or anarchists are secret authoritarians, for reasons we will explain. Marxists quote Bakunin’s terms “invisible dictatorship” and “collective dictatorship” out of context, using it to “prove” that anarchists are secret authoritarians, seeking dictatorship over the masses. More widely, the question of Bakunin and his “*invisible dictatorship*” finds its way into the most sympathetic accounts of anarchist ideas. For example, Peter Marshall writes that it is “*not difficult to conclude that Bakunin’s invisible dictatorship would be even more tyrannical than a... Marxist one*” and that it expressed a “*profound authoritarian and dissimulating streak in his life and work.*” [**Demanding the Impossible**, p. 287] So, the question of setting the record straight about this aspect of Bakunin’s theory is of more importance than just correcting a few Leninists. In addition, to do so will help clarify the concept of “leadership of ideas” many anarchists use to describe the role of anarchist groups in mass movements (for example, see the ACF’s pamphlet **The Role of the Revolutionary Organisation**). So, for both these reasons, this article, while initially appearing somewhat redundant and of interest only to academics, is of a far wider interest.

It is particularly ironic that Leninists (followers of a person who created an actual, **very visible**, dictatorship) accuse anarchists of seeking to create a “dictatorship” — but then again, irony and a sense of humour is not usually noted in Leninists and Trotskyists. In a similar fashion, they (quite rightly) attack Bakunin for being anti-Jewish but keep quiet strangely quiet on Marx and Engels anti-Slavism. Indeed, Marx once published an article by Engels which actually preached race hatred and violence — “*that hatred of the*

Russians was and remains the primary revolutionary passion of the Germans; and since the revolution it extends to the Czechs and the Croatians... we ... can safeguard the revolution only by the most determined terrorism against these Slavic peoples” and that the “stubborn Czechs and the Slovaks should be grateful to the Germans, who have taken the trouble to civilise them.” [cited in **Bakunin on Anarchism**, p.432] Obviously being anti-Slavic is okay, being anti-Jewish is not (they also keep quiet on Marx’s anti-Jewish comments). The hypocrisy is clear.

Actually, it is in their attempts to smear anarchism with closet authoritarianism that the authoritarianism of the Marxists come to the fore. For example, in the British **Socialist Workers Party** journal **International Socialism** number 52, we find this treat of “logic.” Anarchism is denounced for being “necessarily deeply anti-democratic” due to its “thesis of the absolute sovereignty of the individual ego.” Then Hal Draper is quoted arguing that “[o]f all ideologies, anarchism is the most fundamentally anti-democratic in principle.” [p. 145] So, because anarchism favours individuals being free and making their own decisions, it is **less** democratic than Fascism, Nazism and Stalinism! Makes you wonder what they mean by democracy if ideologies which actively promote leader worship and party/leader dictatorships are more “democratic” than anarchism! Of course, in actuality, for most anarchists individual sovereignty implies direct democracy in free associations (see, for example, Robert Graham’s “*The Anarchist Contract*” in **Reinventing Anarchy, Again**). Any “democracy” which is not based on individual freedom is too contradictory to be taken seriously.

Anarchists not Bakuninists

But to return to our subject. Anarchists have two responses to claims that Bakunin (and, by implication, all anarchists) seek an “invisible” dictatorship and so are not true libertarians. Firstly, and

Bakunin had been imprisoned in the Peter and Paul prison for his activities).

This is not to suggest that all of Bakunin’s ideas on the role and nature of anarchist groups are accepted by anarchists today. Most anarchists would reject Bakunin’s arguments for secrecy and love of conspiracy, for example (particularly as secrecy cannot help but generate an atmosphere of deceit and, potentially, manipulation). Anarchists remember that anarchism did not spring fully formed and complete from Bakunin’s (or any other individual’s) head. Rather it was developed over time and by many individuals, inspired by many different experiences and movements. Because of this, anarchists recognise that Bakunin was inconsistent in some ways, as would be expected from a theorist breaking new ground, and this applies to his ideas on how anarchist groups should work within, and the role they should play, in popular movements. Most of his ideas are valid, once we place them into context, some are not. Anarchists embrace the valid ones and voice their opposition to the invalid ones.

In summary, any apparent contradiction (a contradiction which Marxists try hard to maintain and use to discredit anarchism by painting Bakunin as a closet dictator) between the “public” and “private” Bakunin disappears once we place his comments into context within both the letters he wrote and his overall political theory. In fact, rather than promoting a despotic dictatorship over the masses his concept of “invisible dictatorship” is very similar to the “leadership of ideas” concept used by many anarchists. As Brian Morris argues, those who, like Hal Draper, argue that Bakunin was in favour of depotism only come to “*these conclusions by an incredible distortion of the substance of what Bakunin was trying to convey in his letters to Richard and Nechaev*” and “[o]nly the most jaundiced scholar, or one blinded by extreme antipathy towards Bakunin or anarchism, could interpret these words as indicating that Bakunin conception of a secret society implied a revolutionary dictatorship in the

correspondence between Bakunin and his friends... was at all times motivated by the idea of offering advice, persuading, and clarifying. It was never written in a spirit of command, because that was not his style, nor would it have been accepted as such by his associates.” Moreover, there “is no trace or shadow or hierarchical organisation in a letter from Bakunin to Mora... On the contrary, Bakunin advises ‘direct’ relations between Spanish and Italian Comrades.” The Spanish comrades also wrote a pamphlet which “ridiculed the fable of orders from abroad.” [**Anarchist Organisation : The History of the FAI**, pp. 37–8, p.25 and p. 40] Indeed, as Max Nettlau points out, those Spaniards who did break with the Alliance were persuaded of its “hierarchical organisation... not by their own direct observation, but by what they had been told about the conduct of the organisation in the abovementioned countries” (which included England, where no evidence of any Alliance group has ever been recorded!) [cited by Casa, Op. Cit., pp. 39–40].

Moving on to the second issue, the question of why should the revolutionary organisation be secret? Simply because, at the time of Bakunin’s activism, many states were despotic monarchies, with little or no civil rights. As he argued, “nothing but a secret society would want to take this [arousing a revolution] on, for the interests of the government and of the government classes would be bitterly opposed to it.” [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 188] For survival, Bakunin considered secrecy an essential. As Juan Gomez Casas notes, “[i]n view of the difficulties of that period, Bakunin believed that secret groups of convinced and absolutely trustworthy men were safer and more effective. They would be able to place themselves at the head of developments at critical moments, but only to inspire and to clarify the issues.” [Op. Cit., p. 22] Even Marxists, faced with dictatorial states, have organised in secret. However, few, if any, anarchists would agree with this position now, shaped as it was by Bakunin’s personal experiences in Tsarist Russia and other illiberal states (and let us not forget that

this is the point we will concentrate upon in this section, Bakunin’s expression is taken out of context and when placed within its context it takes on a radically different meaning than that implied by critics of anarchism. Secondly, even **if** the expression means what the critics claim it does, it does not refute anarchism as a political theory (any more than Bakunin’s racism or Proudhon’s sexism and racism). This is because anarchists are **not** Bakuninists (or Proudhonists or Kropotkinites or any other person-ist). We recognise other anarchists as what they are, human beings who said lots of important and useful things but, like any other human being, they make mistakes and often do not live up to all of their ideas. For anarchists, it is a question of extracting the useful parts from their works and rejecting the useless (as well as the downright nonsense!). Just because Bakunin said something, it does not make it right! This common-sense approach to politics seems to be lost on Marxists. Indeed, if we take the logic of these Marxists to its conclusion, we must reject everything Rousseau wrote (he was sexist), Marx and Engels (their comments against Slavs spring to mind, along with numerous other racist comments) and so on. But, of course, this never happens to non-anarchist thinkers when Marxists write their articles and books.

Selective Quoting

However, to return to our main argument, that of the importance of context. What does the context around Bakunin’s term “invisible dictatorship” bring to the discussion? Simply that whenever Bakunin uses the term “invisible” or “collective” dictatorship he also explicitly states his opposition to government (or official) power and **in particular** the idea that anarchist organisations should take such power. For example, the **International Socialist** review mentioned above quotes the following passage from “a Bakuninist document” to “prove” that the “principle of

anti-democracy was to leave Bakunin unchallenged at the apex of power”:

“It is necessary that in the midst of popular anarchy, which will constitute the very life and energy of the revolution, unity of thought and revolutionary action should find an organ. This organ must be the secret and world-wide association of the international brethren.”

This passage is from point 9 of Bakunin’s **“Programme and Purpose of the Revolutionary Organisation of International Brothers.”** In the sentence **immediately before** those quoted, Bakunin stated that “[t]his organisation rules out any idea of dictatorship and custodial control.” [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 172] Strange that this part of point 9 of the programme was not quoted! Nor do they quote Bakunin when he wrote, in point 4 of the same programme, “[w]e are the natural enemies of those revolutionaries — future dictators, regimentors and custodians of revolution — who... [want] to create new revolutionary States just as centralist and despotic as those we already know...” Nor, in point 8, that since the “revolution everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations... organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegations... [who] will set out to administer public services, not to rule over peoples.” [Op. Cit., p. 169, p. 172]

(As an aside, we can understand why Leninists would not willing to quote point 8, as Bakunin’s position is far in advance of Marx’s on the structure of revolutionary society. Indeed, it was not until 1917, when Lenin supported the spontaneously created Soviets as the framework of his socialist state — at least in rhetoric, in practice, he did not — that Marxists belatedly discovered the importance

felt free to participate: not to be talked at, but to exchange views.. “ [Bakunin on Anarchism, p. 386, pp. 405–6]

Moreover, we find Bakunin being out-voted within the Alliance, hardly what we would expect if they **were** top-down dictatorships run by Bakunin (as Marxists claim). The historian T.R. Ravindranathan indicates that after the Alliance was founded “Bakunin wanted the Alliance to become a branch of the International [Worker’s Association] and at the same time preserve it as a secret society. The Italian and some French members wanted the Alliance to be totally independent of the IWA and objected to Bakunin’s secrecy. Bakunin’s view prevailed on the first question as he succeeded in convincing the majority of the harmful effects of a rivalry between the Alliance and the International. On the question of secrecy, he gave way to his opponents...” [Bakunin and the Italians, p. 83]

These comments and facts suggest that the picture painted by Marxists of Bakunin and his secret societies is somewhat flawed. Moreover, if Bakunin **did** seek to create a centralised, hierarchical organisation, as Marxists claim, he did not do a good job. We find him complaining that the Madrid Alliance was breaking up (“The news of the dissolution of the Alliance in Spain saddened Bakunin. he intensified his letter-writing to Alliance members whom he trusted... He tried to get the Spaniards to reverse their decision”) and we find that while the “Bakuninist” Spanish and Swiss sections of the IWMA sent delegates to its infamous Hague congress, the “Bakuninist” Italian section did not (and these “missing” votes may have been enough to undermine the rigged congress). Of course, Marxists could argue that these facts show Bakunin’s cunning nature, but the more obvious explanation is that Bakunin did not create (nor desire to create) a hierarchical organisation with himself at the top. As Juan Gomez Casa notes, the Alliance “was not a compulsory or authoritarian body... [I]n Spain [it] acted independently and was prompted by purely local situations. The copious

must accept fully the decision of the majority. Thus the revolutionary association's 'rigorously conceived and prescribed plan,' implemented under the 'strictest discipline,' was in reality to be 'nothing more or less than the expression and direct outcome of the reciprocal commitment contracted by each of the members towards the others.'

[**The Social and Political Thought of Michael Bakunin**, p. 115]

While many anarchists would not agree 100 per cent with this set-up (although we think that most supporters of the **“Platform”** would) all would agree that it is **not** hierarchical. If anything, it appears quite democratic in nature. Moreover, comments in Bakunin's letters to other Alliance members support the argument that his revolutionary associations were more democratic in nature than Marxists suggest. In a letter to a Spanish comrade we find him suggesting that *“all [Alliance] groups... should... from now on accept new members not by majority vote, but unanimously.”* In a letter to Italian members of the IWMA he argued that in Geneva the Alliance did not resort to *“secret plots and intrigues.”* Rather:

“Everything was done in broad daylight, openly, for everyone to see ... The Alliance had regular weekly open meetings and everyone was urged to participate in the discussions... The old procedure where members sat and passively listened to speakers talking down to them from their pedestal was discarded.

It was established that all meetings be conducted by informal round-table conversational discussions in which everybody

of workers' councils. In other words, Bakunin predicted the rise of workers' councils as the framework of a socialist revolution — after all the Russian soviets were, originally, *“a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations.”* It must be embarrassing for Leninists to have one of what they consider as a key contribution to Marxism predicted over 50 years beforehand by someone Marx called an *“ignoramus”* and a *“non-entity as a theoretician.”*)

Similarly, when we look at the situations where Bakunin uses the terms “invisible” or “collective” dictatorship (usually in letters to comrades) we find the same thing — the explicit denial **in these same letters** that Bakunin thought the revolutionary association should take state/governmental power. For example, in a letter to Albert Richard (a fellow member of the anarchist “Alliance of Social Democracy”) Bakunin states that *“[t]here is only one power and one dictatorship whose organisation is salutary and feasible: it is that collective, invisible dictatorship of those who are allied in the name of our principle.”* He then immediately adds that *“this dictatorship will be all the more salutary and effective for not being dressed up in any official power or extrinsic character.”*

Earlier in the letter he argues that anarchists must be *“like invisible pilots in the thick of the popular tempest... steer[ing] it [the revolution] not by any open power but by the collective dictatorship of all the allies — a dictatorship without insignia, titles or official rights, and all the stronger for having none of the paraphernalia of power.”* Explicitly opposing *“Committees of Public Safety and official, overt dictatorship”* he explains his idea of a revolution based on *“workers hav[ing] joined into associations... armed and organised by streets and **quartiers**, the federative commune.”* [Op. Cit., p. 181, p. 180 and p. 179] Hardly what would be expected from a would-be dictator?

As Sam Dolgoff notes, *“an organisation exercising no overt authority, without a state, without official status, without the machinery of institutionalised power to enforce its policies, cannot be defined as a dictatorship... Moreover, if it is borne in mind that this passage is part*

of a letter repudiating in the strongest terms the State and the authoritarian statism of the 'Robespierres, the Dantons, and the Saint-Justs of the revolution,' it is reasonable to conclude that Bakunin used the word 'dictatorship' to denote preponderant influence or guidance exercised largely by example... In line with this conclusion, Bakunin used the words 'invisible' and 'collective' to denote the underground movement exerting this influence in an organised manner." [Bakunin on Anarchism, p. 182]

Influence, not Power

This analysis is confirmed by other passages from Bakunin's letters. In a letter to the Nihilist Sergi Nechaev (within which Bakunin indicates exactly how far apart politically they were — which is important as, from Marx onwards, many of Bakunin's opponents quote Nechaev's pamphlets as if they were "Bakuninist," when in fact they were not) we find him arguing that:

"These [revolutionary] groups would not seek anything for themselves, neither privilege nor honour nor power... [but] would be in a position to direct popular movements ... [via] the collective dictatorship of a secret organisation... The dictatorship... does not reward any of the members... or the groups themselves... with any... official power. It does not threaten the freedom of the people, because, lacking any official character, it does not take the place of State control over the people, and because its whole aim... consists of the fullest realisation of the liberty of the people.

"This sort of dictatorship is not in the least contrary to the free development and the

Essential Works of Lenin, p. 74] Hence Trotsky's comments at the Communist Party's 1921 congress that "*the Party [is] entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers' democracy!*" and that it is "*obliged to maintain its dictatorship... regardless of temporary vacillations even in the working class*" come as no surprise [quoted by M. Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. 78]. They are just the logical, evil consequences of vanguardism (and, of course, it is the Party — upholders of the correct ideology, of "scientific" socialism— which determines what is a "*passing mood*" or a "*temporary vacillation*" and so dictatorship is the logical consequence of Leninism). The validity of Bakunin's argument can easily be recognised. Little wonder anarchists reject the concept of vanguardism totally.

Secret Hierarchies?

Having shown that the role of Bakunin's revolutionary organisations is drastically different than that suggested by the selective quotations of Marxists, we need to address two more issues. One, the so-called hierarchical nature of Bakunin's organisations and, two, their secret nature. Taking the issue of hierarchy first, we can do no better than quote Richard B. Saltman's summary of the internal organisation of these groups:

"The association's 'single will,' Bakunin wrote, would be determined by 'laws' that every member 'helped to create,' or at a minimum 'equally approved' by 'mutual agreement.' This 'definite set of rules' was to be 'frequently renewed' in plenary sessions wherein each member had the 'duty to try and make his view prevail,' but then he

[cited by Richard B. Saltman, **The Social and Political Thought of Michael Bakunin**, p. 107, p. 108 and p. 141]

Therefore Bakunin cannot be considered a vanguardist in the Leninist sense (or as a precursor to Lenin, as some claim). He recognised that socialist politics derive from working class experience, rather than “science” and from outside the working class (as Lenin and Karl Kautsky argued). Bakunin, as can be seen, was aware that socialist ideas came from working class experience and the aim of anarchist organisations was to encourage and aid the process by which they became explicit. Indeed, Bakunin (in his discussion of the evils of the idea of god) presents an excellent summary of why Leninist ideas of vanguardism always end up created the dictatorship of the party rather than socialism. As he put it:

”[F]rom the moment that the natural inferiority of man and his fundamental incapacity to rise by his own effort, unaided by any divine inspiration, to the comprehension of just and true ideas, are admitted. it becomes necessary to admit also all the theological, political, and social consequences of the positive religions. From the moment that God, the perfect supreme being, is posited face to face with humanity, divine mediators, the elect, the inspired of God spring from the earth to enlighten, direct, and govern in his name the human race.” [**God and the State**, p. 37]

In **What is to be Done?**, Lenin argued that socialist “consciousness could only be brought to [the workers] from without... the working class, exclusively by its own efforts, is able to develop only trade union consciousness” and that the “theory of socialism” was developed by “the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals” and, in so doing, replaced God with Marxism [**The**

*self-development of the people, nor its organisation from the bottom upward... for it influences the people exclusively through the natural, personal influence of its members, who have not the slightest power...to direct the spontaneous revolutionary movement of the people towards... the organisation of popular liberty... This secret dictatorship would in the first place, and at the present time, carry out a broadly based popular propaganda... and by the power of this propaganda and also by **organisation among the people themselves** join together separate popular forces into a mighty strength capable of demolishing the State.”* [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, pp. 193–4]

The key aspect of this is the term “natural influence.” In a letter to Pablo, a Spanish member of the Alliance, we find Bakunin arguing that the Alliance “will promote the Revolution only through the **natural but never official influence** of all members of the Alliance...” [**Bakunin on Anarchism**, p. 387] This term was also used in his public writings. For example, we find in one of his newspaper articles Bakunin arguing that the “very freedom of every individual results from th[e] great number of material, intellectual, and moral influences which every individual around him and which society... continually exercise on him” and that “everything alive... intervene[s]... in the life of others... [so] we hardly wish to abolish the effect of any individual’s or any group of individuals’ natural influence upon the masses.” [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 140, p. 141]

Thus “natural influence” simply means the effect of communicating which others, discussing your ideas with them and winning them over to your position, nothing more. This is hardly authoritarian, and so Bakunin contrasts this “natural” influence

with “official” influence, which replaced the process of mutual interaction between equals with a fixed hierarchy of command and thereby induced the “*transformation of natural influence, and, as such, the perfectly legitimate influence over man, into a right.*” [cited by Richard B. Saltman, **The Social and Political Thought of Michael Bakunin**, p. 46]

As an example of this difference, consider the case of a union militant (as will become clear, this is the sort of example Bakunin had in mind). As long as they are part of the rank-and-file, arguing their case at union meetings or being delegated to carry out the decisions of these assemblies then their influence is “natural.” However, if this militant is elected into a position with executive power in the union (i.e. becomes a full-time union official, for example, rather than a shop-steward) then their influence becomes “official” and so, potentially, corrupting for both the militant and the rank-and-file who are subject to the rule of the official.

Indeed, this notion of “*natural*” influence (or authority) was also termed “*invisible*” by Bakunin — “[i]t is only necessary that one worker in ten join the [International Working-Men’s] Association **earnestly and with full understanding of the cause** for the nine-tenths remaining outside its organisation nevertheless to be influenced invisibly by it...” [The Basic Bakunin, p. 139] So, as can be seen, the terms “invisible” and “collective” dictatorship used by Bakunin in his letters is strongly related to the term “*natural influence*” used in his public works and seems to be used simply to indicate the effects of an organised political group on the masses. To see this, it is worthwhile to quote Bakunin at length about the nature of this “invisible” influence:

“It may be objected that this... [invisible] influence... suggests the establishment of a system of authority and a new government... [but this] would be a serious blunder. The organised effect of the International on the

This means that while social struggle is radicalising, it also has to combat years of pro-state and pro-capitalist influences. So even if an anarchist consciousness springs from the real conditions of working class life, because we live in a class society there are numerous counter-tendencies that **inhibit** the development of that consciousness (such as religion, current morality the media, pro-business and pro-state propaganda, state and business repression and so on). This explains the differences in political opinion within the working class, as people develop at different speeds and are subject to different influences and experiences. However, the numerous internal and external barriers to the development of anarchist opinions created by the process of “manufacturing consent” can be, and are, weakened by rational discussion as well as social struggle and self-activity. And this is where the anarchist group can play a part, for there is an important role to be played by those who have been through this process already, namely to aid those going through it.

The role of the anarchist group, therefore, is **not** to import a foreign ideology into the working class, but rather to help develop and clarify the ideas of those working class people who are moving from “instinct” to the “ideal” and so aid those undergoing that development. They would aid this development by providing propaganda which exposes the current social system (and the rationales for it) as bankrupt as well as encouraging resistance to oppression and exploitation. The former, for Bakunin, allowed *the “bringing [of] a more just general expression, a new and more congenial form to the existent instincts of the proletariat... [which] can sometimes facilitate and precipitate development... [and] give them an awareness of what they have, of what they feel, of what they already instinctively desire, but never can it give to them what they don’t have.”* The latter “*is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda*” and “*awake[s] in the masses all the social-revolutionary instincts which reside deeply in the heart of every worker*” so allowing instinct to become transformed into “*reflected socialist thought.*”

tion makes them ... socialists. They are socialists because of all the conditions of their material existence.” [quoted by Richard B. Saltman, **The Social and Political Thought of Michael Bakunin**, p. 100, **The Basic Bakunin**, pp. 101–2]

Needless to say, instinct in itself is not enough (if it was, we would be living in an anarchist society!) and so Bakunin, like all anarchists, stressed the importance of self-liberation and self-education through struggle in order to change “*instinct*” into “*thought*.” He argued that there was “*but a single path, that of emancipation through practical action... [by] workers’ solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means trade unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds... [Once the worker] begins to fight, in association with his comrades, for the reduction of his working hours and for an increase in his salary...and become[s] increasingly accustomed to relying on the collective strength of the workers ... The worker thus enlisted in the struggle will necessarily ... recognise himself [or herself] to be a revolutionary socialist.*” [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 103]

In addition to recognising the importance of popular organisations (such as trade unions) and of direct action in developing libertarian socialist thought, Bakunin also stressed the need for anarchist groups to work with these organisations and on the mass of the population in general. These groups would play an important role in helping to clarify the ideas of those in struggle and undermining what Chomsky terms “*the Manufacture of Consent*,” the process by which the population at large are influenced to accept the status quo and the dominant elites viewpoint via the education system and media. It is this “*manufacture of consent*” which helps explain why, relatively speaking, there are so few anarchists even though we argue that anarchism is the natural product of working class life. While, objectively, the experiences of life drives working class people to resist domination and oppression, they enter that struggle with a history behind them, a history of education in capitalist schools, of reading pro-capitalist papers, and so on.

masses... is nothing but the entirely natural organisation — neither official nor clothed in any authority or political force whatsoever of the effect of a rather numerous group of individuals who are inspired by the same thought and headed toward the same goal, first of all on the opinion of the masses and only then, by the intermediary of this opinion (restated by the International’s propaganda), on their will and their deeds.

“But the governments... impose themselves violently on the masses, who are forced to obey them and to execute their decrees... The International’s influence will never be anything but one of opinion and the International will never be anything but the organisation of the natural effect of individuals on the masses.” [Op. Cit., pp. 139–40]

Therefore, from both the fuller context provided by the works and letters selectively quoted by anti-anarchists **and** his other writings, we find that rather than being a secret authoritarian, Bakunin was, in fact, trying to express how anarchists could “naturally influence” the masses and their revolution. As he himself argues:

“We are the most pronounced enemies of every sort of official power ... We are the enemies of any sort of publicly declared dictatorship, we are social revolutionary anarchists... if we are anarchists, by what right do we want to influence the people, and what methods will we use? Denouncing all power, with what sort of power, or rather by what sort of force, shall we direct a people’s

revolution? By a force that is invisible ... that is not imposed on anyone ... [and] deprived of all official rights and significance.” [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, pp. 191–2]

Continually opposing “official” power, authority and influence, Bakunin used the term “invisible, collective dictatorship” to describe the “natural influence” of organised anarchists on mass movements. Rather than express a desire to become a dictator, it in fact expresses the awareness that there is an “uneven” political development within the working class, an unevenness that can only be undermined by discussion within the mass assemblies of popular organisations. Any attempt to by-pass this “unevenness” by seizing or being elected to positions of power (i.e. by “official influence”) would be doomed to failure and result in dictatorship by a party — “triumph of the Jacobins or the Blanquists [or the Bolsheviks, we must add] would be the death of the Revolution.” [Op. Cit., p. 169]

This analysis can be seen from Bakunin’s discussion on union bureaucracy and how anarchists should combat it. Taking the Geneva section of the IWMA, Bakunin notes that the construction workers’ section “simply left all decision-making to their committees... In this manner power gravitated to the committees, and by a species of fiction characteristic of all governments the committees substituted their own will and their own ideas for that of the membership.” [Bakunin on Anarchism, p. 246] To combat this bureaucracy, “the construction workers... sections could only defend their rights and their autonomy in only one way: the workers called general membership meetings. Nothing arouses the antipathy of the committees more than these popular assemblies... In these great meetings of the sections, the items on the agenda was amply discussed and the most progressive opinion prevailed...” [Op. Cit., p. 247]

Given that Bakunin considered “the federative Alliance of all working men’s [sic!] associations... [would] constitute the Commune”

made up of delegates with “accountable and removable mandates” we can easily see that the role of the anarchist federation would be to intervene in general assemblies of these associations and ensure, through debate, that “the most progressive opinion prevailed.” [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 170, p. 171] Rather than seek power, the anarchists would seek **influence** based on the soundness of their ideas, the “**leadership of ideas**” in other words. Thus the anarchist federation “unleashes their [the peoples] will and gives wider opportunity for their self-determination and their social-economic organisation, which should be created by them alone from the bottom upwards... The [revolutionary] organisation... [must] not in any circumstances... ever be their [the peoples] master... What is to be the chief aim and pursue of this organisation? **To help the people towards self-determination on the lines of the most complete equality and fullest human freedom in every direction, without the least interference from any sort of domination... that is without any sort of government control.**” [Op. Cit., p. 191]

Vanguardism?

Some Marxists (including Marx himself) claim that Bakunin held what today would be termed a “vanguardist” position — namely that working class people can only become socialists by outside influence (in the case of Lenin, by the influence of the vanguard party). Anarchists, on the other hand, argue that rather than being the product of “outside” influence, (libertarian) socialist ideas are the natural product of working class life. In other words, (libertarian) socialist ideas come from **within** the working class. Bakunin was no exception. For example, he constantly referred to the “socialist instinct” of the working classes and argued that the socialist ideal was “necessarily the product of the people’s historical experience” and that workers “most basic instinct and their social situa-