

Bakunin for 21st Century Activists

Anarcho

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Mark Leier is a Canadian historian of working class history and the director of the Centre for Labour Studies at Simon Fraser University. An anarchist, he has written extensively on British Columbia's rich history of labour radicalism. His fourth book, **Bakunin: The Creative Passion** (Thomas Dunne Books, 2006), is an excellent biography of one of the founders of anarchism. We thought it would be good to ask him why Bakunin would be of interest to 21st century activists.

Q. So, first, why write a biography of Bakunin?

I first started thinking about a biography of Bakunin in the aftermath of some of the anti-globalization and anti-WTO protests, such as the "Battle in Seattle" and the terrible police brutality in Genoa that resulted in the death of Carlo Giuliani. The anarchist presence at these protests had the media and "terrorism experts" scrambling to explain what was going on. Of course they were trying to explain away anarchism, not to understand, and they relied on parodies of anarchism. When they tried to do historical analysis, they always took it back to Bakunin, painting him as the father of propaganda by the deed, which they always interpreted as blind violence and terror. That worsened after the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Towers. My first reaction was to blame the journalists and pundits, but when I went back to the English language works on Bakunin, such as Carr's book and Mendel's and Berlin's articles, it was obvious that there was no comprehensive book, aimed at a more general audience, that treated Bakunin seriously as an activist and a thinker. So I decided to try to do that. I didn't set out to write *the* biography of Bakunin or the most comprehensive biography; I tried to write a biography that used some primary research and that built on the splendid academic work on Bakunin that was not easily accessible to a non-academic audience.

Q. What would you say Bakunin has to offer today's radicals?

First, he offers some hope, hope in the importance of struggle. This was an activist who fought on the losing side all of his life, yet did not lose his passionate hope, his understanding, that the struggle itself was meaningful, for without it, the world would certainly get worse. While some see him as a quixotic figure, I see him as one who realistically assessed the opportunities for success and failure and decided to fight for an ideal even when he thought there was no immediate chance of victory.

Second, he offers a clear appraisal of what the radicals' targets should be. After all, capitalism and the state have not changed much since his time; Bakunin would recognize much in the 21st

century. He wrote powerful critiques of capital and the state that still serve as useful starting points for understanding the world, and he did so in accessible, evocative language.

Third, while there is a tendency to draw a dividing line between “classical anarchism” and contemporary anarchism and post-anarchism, a careful reading of Bakunin suggests that the “classical anarchists” wrestled with many of the same problems of goals, strategy, and tactics that anarchists face today. In fact, I believe that Bakunin offers a useful critique of today’s post-anarchism, for the ideas of postmodernism that inform post-anarchism are not as new as its advocates suggest. That is, Bakunin rejected the idealist thought of his day to become a materialist and a realist, and I believe materialism and realism offer a stronger foundation for criticism than idealism and some variants of post-modernism.

Q. What were Bakunin’s strengths and weaknesses as a thinker? As an activist?

Like most of us, his strengths and weaknesses often stemmed from the same source. As an activist, one of his strengths was his optimism, optimism not so much about the possibility of success so much as optimism about the necessity for radical analysis and action. At the same time, it is often the case that refusing to appreciate incremental change can be immoral. Let me give you an example. Many anarchists refuse to vote, for many very good reasons. At the same time, voting for a slightly more progressive party may mean real benefits for people. Even if that benefit is only, say, \$50 a month more for someone on welfare, that \$50 is crucial for some people. And so it may be that some practical politics should also inform anarchist ideas about what to do now. Of course I am simplifying the question and I would not presume to tell anarchists what should be done, but I offer this as an example where a straightforward argument on refusing to vote may not be as principled as it first seems. As a thinker, one of his great strengths was his ability to write passionate, inspiring prose. At the same time, he could be a little imprecise in his analysis. Political movements need all sorts of people: orators, analysts, rebels, educators, street-fighters, people who are angry, people who are compassionate, and nobody can be all these things all the time. So I have tried to appreciate Bakunin’s strengths rather than harp on the weaknesses.

Q. Given that Bakunin was right about Marxism (predicting that social democracy would become reformist and that the dictatorship of the proletariat would become the dictatorship over the proletariat), why do you think his ideas are not more accepted in radical circles?

I think his ideas are not more accepted precisely because he was right. If patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel, pragmatism is the first refuge of the scoundrel. Bakunin always shines a critical light on the compromisers and those who insist that we have to settle for less. Now, as I suggested above, sometimes compromise is all you can do, and a little may be better than nothing, but Bakunin’s insistence that we must always strive for more, even when we compromise, is a stinging rebuke to those who say, “this far, but no further.”

Q. There are lots of distortions and misrepresentations attached to Bakunin. What do you think are the worse?

As you suggest, this would be a long list. Among the worst – the belief that he believed in terror for the sake of terror. His arguments about violence were much more sophisticated and complicated than that, but they have been reduced to absurd notions by his critics and sometimes by his supporters. His arguments about bandits as a revolutionary force have often been misinterpreted – the social bandits of Russia that he talked about were very different from, say, motorcycle gangs or criminal gangs. Not every outlaw is an anarchist – some more closely re-

semble fascists, whatever understanding we have for the fact that social forces created them. Bakunin's anti-Semitism has been greatly misunderstood. At virtually every talk I've given on Bakunin, I'm asked about it. Where it exists, it is repellent, but it takes up about 5 pages of the thousands of pages he wrote, was written in the heat of his battles with Marx, where Bakunin was slandered viciously, and needs to be understood in the context of the 19th century.

Q. Bakunin is well known for his love of secret societies? How central were they in his thought? Do we have any reliable information on how they worked internally?

In my opinion, the secret societies have been greatly exaggerated. In some cases, they didn't exist beyond Bakunin and a few friends, and so functioned like affinity groups, not revolutionary cells; in other cases, they had good reason for being secret, for open groups were an invitation for arrest and imprisonment. The important point is that as an anarchist, Bakunin did not believe in secret, conspiratorial coups but in open action and propaganda. The idea that he believed the social revolution would be accomplished by small sects is simply wrong.

Q. What is known of the process behind creating the early documents for these groups? Documents like "The Program of the Alliance" are usually published as authored by Bakunin, but where they collective statements that he then finalised?

It varies – some pretty clearly seem to be his own work, while others are clearly more collective statements. He wrote incessantly, and re-wrote incessantly, not to say obsessively, working and re-working the material over time, and he clearly incorporated the ideas of others as he went. He didn't live in a closet or an ivory tower, and his ideas evolved as he worked with other people.

Q. Can ideas which reflect the economic and political structures of the nineteenth century be drawn upon to find new solutions to new problems?

I think that if Bakunin were dropped into our society today, he would be impressed with the technological progress but dismayed by the lack of social and political progress. Many of the same problems that existed in his day are still here today, and in many ways, we have declined, not progressed. The tsar's prisons, for example, were regarded as the worst in Europe, but in many ways, the treatment of prisoners such as Bakunin was better than that found in US prisons today.

Q. What is the relationship of Bakunin to Proudhon's anarchism?

Bakunin was undoubtedly influenced by Proudhon's sense of justice and liberty, and by his personality, but intellectually, the influence was rather limited. Bakunin believed that Proudhon had not made the intellectual breakthrough to a materialist understanding of the world. For Bakunin, that understanding that ideas do not exist in some pure form but come out of real, lived experience, opportunity, and constraints was crucial. For good or ill, Bakunin was a sophisticated intellectual, aware of contemporary trends and thought. Proudhon was not, and so was less of an intellectual influence on Bakunin. But anarchism is not just an intellectual position; it is also an ethical one and a moral one. In that sense, Proudhon's anarchism, what Bakunin thought of as his "instinctual" understanding of anarchism, was important.

Q. How instrumental was Bakunin in creating modern anarchism, given that many French mutualists (like Eugene Varlin) had independently come to similar conclusions?

At one level, of course, we are all anarchists at heart, and so it is not surprising that people move in similar directions. And similar social conditions impel people to act and think in similar ways. Anarchism in particular would seem to be a movement in which it would be a mistake to attribute the creation or founding of a movement to a single person. But I think anarchism is not just living without authority; it is also a political theory, a set – or sets, sometimes in

conflict! – of ideas. In tracing the evolution of ideas, historians are often limited to those who left records, either their own written work, works written about them, records of organizations, and the like. That is unfair, but it is the way the past works. So Bakunin’s influence, his “credit” for creating modern anarchism, is in large part due to his prominence as a writer and activist. He was very effective as a writer and famous – infamous, perhaps, as an activist, and a powerful and inspirational thinker. It is unfair to say he created modern anarchism, but he did much to make it intelligible and accessible, and in that sense, deserves some credit.

Q. Is the high esteem of Bakunin in anarchist circles an example of radicals subscribing (unknowingly) to a “great men” perspective on history?

It depends on what you mean by “great man history.” Few of us would deny that some people are inspirational, or have articulated our thoughts more carefully than we have, or have taken on roles that we admire. In that sense, I have no quarrel with “great person history.” But the more usual meaning is to insist that history is only made by “great men and women of power,” of kings and queens and magnates. That is a reactionary notion of history that serves power, not people. No one would cast Bakunin as that sort of “great man.” Many people know Bakunin’s aphorism about authority – how he would absolutely acknowledge the authority of the bookmaker on questions involving boots. But even then, Bakunin insisted he would not bow down to that authority and would not do whatever the bookmaker recommended. So too with Bakunin: we can choose to listen to him and acknowledge his work as an anarchist thinker and activist without conceding for a moment that we must bow to him as the authority on anarchism. Having said, I do think that there is much of interest and utility in his work, though others may disagree. And few anarchists have ever treated Bakunin as an authority the way some Marxists have consulted Marx for everything from understanding history to fixing their faucets.

Q. I remember reading an article which argued, with some evidence, that Bakunin was gay and his tolerance of Sergey Nechayev was down to lust. Any comments?

It is always fun to speculate on why people do what they do, but without facts, the speculation is meaningless. One of the points I wanted to make in the book is that the psycho-history approach to Bakunin is deeply flawed because the theories of psycho-history are very weak and the evidence for the claims about Bakunin is simply non-existent. People are complex, their motivations and reasons often unclear to themselves and impossible for historians to understand completely. I have heard the argument that Bakunin was gay, but have not seen any evidence. Without evidence, any speculation is possible, but it’s also meaningless. I would be happy to change my opinion if evidence were found, but to date, I haven’t seen any. There is no question that Bakunin tolerated some nasty behaviour and ideas from Nechayev longer than he might have; but more important, I think, is that he did repudiate Nechayev’s conception of the revolutionary as an amoral agent and terrorist.

Q. Do you think that a merger of Bakunin and Marx is possible? What would each give to such a synthesis? What would it be called?

In some ways, that synthesis has always been there. Alvin Gouldner called Bakunin the first “post-Marxist,” meaning someone who built on Marx’s insights and focused on questions that Marx had not thought much about or was mistaken about, such as the nature of the state, the problems of vanguardism, and the ambiguous role of the “revolutionary intellectuals” and their relationship to radical and working class movements. Of course much of Marx’s insight was his own ability to synthesize ideas from different fields, from philosophy, socialist theory, and political economy, and Bakunin was in substantial agreement with Marx on many issues. On

some issues where they disagreed, they misunderstood each other and in fact were more similar than they allowed; on other issues, their personalities and dislike for each other clouded the controversies. But I think it is fair to say that Marxism becomes more palatable and inspiring the more it approaches anarchism, while anarchism becomes more powerful as a way to view to world critically the closer it approaches the best Marxist traditions.

Q. You have also written extensively on the IWW. Do you think revolutionary unionism can grow in influence again?

If we change the question a little, to ask, will revolutionary workers' movements grow in influence again, I think the answer is, if they do not, we are in grave danger. I doubt they will take the very same form they did in the past, but workers' movements have always risen, declined, and risen again in new forms to meet new conditions. Clearly the world can not continue as it has; the old choice, socialism or barbarism, still faces us. Here I am using socialism in the old sense, not as state socialism, Bolshevism, and the like. And no group can build socialism – anarchism – other than the working class. Whether it will or not is the question.

Q. Many anarchists at the time pointed to the obvious links between revolutionary unionism with Bakunin's anarchism, would you agree? Has Bakunin anything to give for today's union activists?

Yes, Bakunin, or the ideas that he represented, were hugely influential in building revolutionary unionism. In some ways, the IWW represented that synthesis between Bakunin and Marx we talked about earlier. As for today's union activists, that radical vision and tradition can be hugely inspiring; the attempt to grapple with big ideas is essential; the insistence on organizing from the periphery to the centre, not from the centre out, is fundamental.

Q. Your second book, "Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy", deals with the institutionalization of a non-revolutionary labour movement. Do you think that this would affect even a revolutionary union? Can it be avoided? If so, how?

I suspect any group of two or more people starts running into problems of power and authority and decision-making! But you're right, the question is the institutionalization of power. One of the things I argue in Red Flags and Red Tape is that people with some power – and the power of these early labour bureaucrats was limited – often make the wrong decision for the right reasons. That is, they were trying to build working class militancy, trying to move workers to resistance, trying to create a labor newspaper, trying to form new organizations – all worthy aims. But precisely because they were not immediately accountable, they made their decisions in a vacuum, without input and consensus from union members. That separated them from the members and created a bureaucracy: rule by office holders. The other thing I argue is that a union can be militant and revolutionary without being democratic; alternatively, though rare, a union could be conservative and democratic. So the dangers of bureaucracy are always there. The way to avoid is to ensure that institutions that let officials make important decisions by themselves are not created in the first place.

Q. What areas of working class and anarchist history need investigating? Is there anything you think budding anarcho-historians should be looking into?

I have three answers here. The first is that there has been an explosion of work in working class and anarchist history in recent years. A lot of it has been published by university and academic presses, and that is great, but we also need people to make that work more accessible and to synthesize it. Second, there are huge areas of working class and anarchist history that need investigating. The "ethnic" press of these movements has not been adequately explored, at

least not in North America; the ways in which anarchism has sometimes retreated to academia, but remained influential nonetheless is important to unearth; the writers and activists who have pushed that synthesis of Marx and Bakunin need to be explored. Here I'm thinking of people such as Paul Mattick, who never called himself an anarchist but was as anti-authoritarian and anti-vanguard as Bakunin, and Erich Fromme as just a few examples. And I am sure there are many, many other areas that need exploration. But the third answer, and really, these are observations and suggestions, not answers, is for anarchists to write about every aspect of history from an anarchist perspective. That is, there is no reason why anarchist history should only study anarchism. It could study governments and capitalism and war and every other historical topic from an anarchist perspective. That would be exciting work.

Q. Richard Dawkins has provoked a lot of responses with his "The God Delusion, would Bakunin have approved? And is it not a strange omission by Dawkins that Bakunin's "God and the State" is missing from it?

Bakunin would likely have approved of Dawkins's atheism, but I suspect he would think Dawkins's particular critique was a little naive. While Bakunin was a ferocious atheist, he understood the appeal of religion to the oppressed. If you want to "cure" religion, he insisted, you had to remove poverty and oppression. If religion were not a social institution, a social power, but a matter of individual belief, then it wouldn't much matter what people believed, for it would not intrude on their lives. At the same time, they would soon realize that if they wanted things to change, they could make those changes without appeal to a non-existent power. If they wanted to understand the world, knowledge would be available to them and while they could continue to believe in anything they wanted, when they wanted to work in the world, they would understand that science – real knowledge of whatever field – differs from religion in that it has to deliver or it gets discarded. Take away its social power, and religion is no longer an issue. Blaming people for seeking some small solace isn't helpful.

Q. Finally, Bakunin had a pretty eventful life. Fighting on the barricades in 1848, solitary confinement, escaping from Siberia, fighting Marx in the International, taking part in insurrections in the 1870s. When you were writing your biography did you think it would make a good film? And who would play Bakunin? Marx?

I often thought it would be a great film, or, at least, one I'd like to see. But Spielberg and Scorsese haven't returned my calls. Robbie Coltrane would be my choice to play Bakunin, and he already has the beard from the Harry Potter series. Marx is a little trickier; but someone with the intensity of Robert De Niro could pull it off, though that particular casting does boggle the mind. Personally, I'd love to see Jack Nicholson pull one of his famous hissy fits with a faceful of yak hair glued on as he kicked and shouted about Bakunin's ideas on the commune.....

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