Brian Morris
Bakunin, Historical Materialism, and Social Philosophy
1993

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Two chapters from Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom by Brian Morris which illustrate Bakunin's views in terms of historical materialism and social philosophy which have often been misunderstood or overlooked.

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characterising Bakunin's conception of the revolution and of anarchy is either political naivety or indicates an astonishing aberration of scholarship.

In a more systematic liberal appraisal of Bakunin, E. Lampert has stressed that an emphasis on the autonomy and freedom of the individual subject co-exists in Bakunin with a stress on human sociality. Bakunin, he writes, through emphasising the primacy of society over the individual, never "professed the belief in an illusory, hypostatised collective consciousness" and consistently spurned any notion of attachment to something outside man. Even at his most collectivist, Bakunin always emphasises the revolt of the human personality against all powers, collective or divine. But Bakunin could equally not be described as an "individualist," for all the operations in the life of an individual – liberty, consciousness, reason – had for Bakunin social meaning. And so Bakunin differed fundamentally from the other radical anarchist, Max Stirner.[52]

[52] Lampert, E. 1957. *Studies in Rebellion.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 160–61.

Historical Materialism

Bakunin's conception of reality, like that of Marx's, is dialectical, materialist and deterministic. Like other nineteenth-century theorists, Bakunin makes a distinction between two fundamentally contrasting approaches to reality, idealism and materialism, and argues strongly that only a materialist approach is a valid one. He poses the question in the extract subsequently published as *God and the State*:

> Who are right, the idealists or the materialists? The question once stated in this way, hesitation becomes impossible. Undoubtedly the idealists are wrong and the materialists are right. Yes facts are before ideas; yes, the ideal as Proudhon said, is but a flower, whose root lies in the material conditions of existence. Yes, the whole history of humanity, intellectual and moral, political and social, is but a reflection of its economic history.[1]

The social world, our humanity, is nothing other than the last and supreme development – at least on our planet and as far as we know – "the highest manifestation of animality." But Bakunin sees this as a dialectical progression, the development of culture being the "gradual negation of the animal element" in humans. Such development he sees as both rational and natural, historical and logical. Drawing on the ideas of Hegel and Comte, and aware of the developments in evolutionary biology – Bakunin was writing only a decade after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* – Bakunin summed up the materialist outlook as follows:

> One can clearly conceive the gradual development of the material world, as well as of organic life and

[1] Lehning, A. 1973. *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings.* London: Cape, p. 11.

> of the historically progressive intelligence of man, individually and socially. It is an altogether natural movement, from the simple to the complex, from the lower to the higher, from the inferior to the superior; a movement in conformity with all of our daily experiences and consequently in conformity also with our natural logic, with the distinctive laws of our mind, which, being formed and developed only through the aid of these same experiences are, so to speak, only its mental, cerebral reproduction or its recapitulation in thought.[2]

With this conception of reality as a kind of evolutionary process, and seeing human sociality and consciousnesses as a natural development, Bakunin denied any dualism between spirit and matter, humans and nature, which was intrinsic to the mechanistic philosophy of the Enlightenment. Being a part of nature, no rebellion against it by humans is possible: "Therefore man will never be able to combat Nature; he cannot conquer or master it." And he continues:

> Being the ultimate product of Nature on this earth, man, through his individual and social development, continues, so to speak, the work, creation, movement and life of Nature … Man's relations to this Universal Nature cannot be external, cannot be those of slavery or of struggle; he carries this Nature within himself and is nothing outside of it … It seems to me quite evident … that no revolt is possible on the part of man against what I call universal causality, or Universal Nature; the latter envelops and pervades man; it is within

[2] Maximoff, G.P. 1953. ed., *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism.* Glencoe: Free Press, p. 175.

and also one of movement and change. Bakunin saw all relationships both in nature and society, as being in a state of flux. The relationship between the individual and the collective is neither collapsed nor equated, nor is it seen in rigid dualistic terms. Bakunin's whole project was to delineate a society in which both liberty and sociality were safeguarded. Kelly's assertion that Bakunin resolved the fundamental problem of ethics and political theory – the relationship between liberty and equality as a conflicting goal – with the "stroke of a pen," considering them as one and the same thing,[49] indicates a woeful misunderstanding of Bakunin's argument. He did not – as we shall see – equate them or consider them as in inherent conflict; he argues that economic equality was a basic condition for liberty. Only supporters of capitalism see equality in conflict with liberty.

But Kelly does Bakunin a further injustice. Not only does she link Bakunin's theory to a misreading of Hegel's idealism, thus seeing him involved in "quasi-religious ecstasy" looking forward to "the dissolution of the personality in a collective,"[50] she also follows Isaiah Berlin in unfairly foisting upon Bakunin a Jacobin conception of politics. She writes:

> Given that the use of force is the only way yet devised of eliminating tension between the individual and the whole, the proponents of the ideal of the unity of civil and political society are constrained by their own logic to propose a dictatorship which submerges the first in the second as a means to the goal of the ideal society.[51]

This may be an apt description of the kind of politics associated with Rousseau, Robespierre and Stalin, but to see it as

[49] Kelly, op. cit., p. 197.
[50] Kelly, op. cit., p. 255.
[51] Kelly, op. cit., p. 292.

she argues, was centrally concerned with "wholeness," and with the "eschatological vision of a unified human community" in which the individual is "submerged." She writes:

> For Bakunin, liberty was above all "wholeness": the dialectical overcoming of all duality, all conflict between subject and object, the part and the whole, in a unity with the Absolute which was at one and the same time the infinite self-assertion and the total dissolution of the individual ego.[47]

Bakunin was thus a kind of mystic, but a romantic mystic who found his absolute in the popular masses – the people. Such a thesis makes nonsense even of Hegel whose dialectic was one of "unity-in-opposition," not of mystical "union" – the "identity" theory of religious mystics and Schelling which Hegel indeed derided. As he put it in the "Phenomenology" this to palm off the Absolute as the night in which all cows are black. Hegel was concerned with advancing a concrete metaphysics and overcoming dualism – but not by collapsing or "dissolving" the oppositions. As an interpretation of Bakunin's social philosophy it is even more perverse, for unlike Kelly, Bakunin had a good understanding not only of Hegelian idealism, but of the emerging science of sociology and anthropology. The influence of Comte is evident in much of his work, and he was a close friend of two important early anthropologists/geographers, Elisée and Elie Reclus, as Cole rightly points out.[48]

Although one may find occasional thoughts about the need for a revolutionary to identify him or herself with the people, it is patently clear from Bakunin's writings that he saw the relationship between the individual an society as a "dialectical" one and being dialectic means that it is a unity-in-opposition,

[47] Kelly, op. cit., p. 194.
[48] Cole, op. cit., p. 222.

> and outside of him, and it constitutes his whole being.[3]

It followed from this that everything in the world was in a sense determined or conditioned; the world was not chaotic, nor did humans have "free will" which Bakunin suggested was a theological concept:

> Nature, notwithstanding the inexhaustible wealth and variety of beings of which it is constituted, does not by any means present chaos, but instead a magnificently organised world wherein every part is logically correlated to all the other parts, [moreover] all things are governed by inherent laws which constitute their own particular nature; that each thing has its own peculiar form of transformation and action[4]

But Bakunin's notion of order was Hegelian. He saw it as a creative process rather than a mechanistic and static condition.

> In Nature itself, that marvellous interrelationship and network of phenomena is certainly not attained without struggle. Quite the contrary, the harmony of the forces of nature only appears as the actual result of that continual struggle which is the very condition of life and movement … If order is natural and possible in the universe, it is solely because this universe is not governed according to some system imagined in advance and imposed by a supreme will. Natural laws are inherent in nature, that is to say they are not fixed by any authority. These laws are only simple

[3] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 91.
[4] Maximoff, op. cit., pp. 54–55.

> manifestations or else continual fluctuations of the development of things and of combinations of these very varied, transient but real facts.[5]

Like Spinoza and Godwin, Bakunin argues that as the human subject was essentially determined by the natural and social milieu, it was futile to posit the notion of "free will" or to attribute a precise plan to people's actions. Bakunin wrote:

> Socialism, being founded upon positive science, absolutely rejects the doctrine of free will. It recognises that whatever is called human vice and virtue is absolutely the product of the combined action of Nature and Society. All individuals, with no exception, are at every moment of their lives what Nature and Society have made them … Hence it clearly follows that to make men moral it is necessary to make their social environment moral. And that can be done in only one way; by assuring the triumph of justice, that is, the complete liberty of everyone in the most perfect equality for all. Inequality of conditions and rights, and the resulting lack of liberty for all, is the great collective iniquity begetting all individual iniquities.[6]

Many have seen Bakunin's stress on social and natural determinism as completely incompatible with the emphasis he also makes on the free human agent. But unless one thinks in terms of absolutes – something which liberal critics of Bakunin continually accuse him of doing – then there is no intrinsic incompatibility between freedom and necessity. Another philosopher of freedom, Spinoza, is often criticised on these same grounds.

[5] Lehning, op. cit., p. 208.

[6] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 155.

tars"[45] – while liberals stress his supposed collectivism. Both interpretations are grossly unjust to Bakunin – indeed wilful.

The extracts above should make it clear that Bakunin saw the human subject as an essentially social being, and found no justification for the society/individual opposition. His stress on rebellion, individuality, and liberty was always counterpoised with an equal stress on sociality and human social solidarity. One o fhte most perceptive of socialist historians, G.D.H. Cole, sums up well Bakunin's social philosophy:

> Bakunin's social theory began, and almost ended, with liberty. Against the claims of liberty nothing else in his view was worth consideration at all. He attacked, remorselessly and without qualification, every institution that seem to him to be inconsistent with liberty … Yet he was very far from being an individualist, and he had the most utmost scorn for the kinds of liberty that were preached by the bourgeois advocates of laissez-faire. He was, or believed himself to be, a socialist as well as a libertarian, an no one has insisted more strongly than he on the evils of private property and of the competition of man with man. When he wrote about the nature of society he always laid emphasis on the immense impact of social environment on the individual, stressing fully as much as Durkheim the social origin … of men's ideas.[46]

The "collectivist" orientation of Bakunin's thought had been proposed by Aileen Kelly, who, like Berlin and Carr, tends to see these ideas as having totalitarian implications. Bakunin,

[45] Marx, K. et al. 1972 *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism.* Moscow: Progress Publishers, p. 152.

[46] Cole, G.D.H., 1954. *History of Socialist Thought, Vol. II, Marxism and Anarchism 1850–1890.* London: Macmillan, p. 219.

> and a multitude of sentiments, prejudices and habits, in the material as well as the mental sphere and constitutes what we call public opinion. It envelops man from the moment of his birth … hence the immense power which society exercises over men.

But Bakunin continues,

> … this power may be just as much beneficial as harmful. It is beneficial when it contributes to the development of knowledge, material prosperity, liberty, equality and brotherly solidarity, harmful when it had opposite tendencies.[44]

Bakunin all his life was concerned with an attempt to outline the kind of society that was conducive to human liberty and solidarity – a truly human society. It was one that was both socialist and libertarian and no one, as far as I am aware, has improved much on Bakunin's essential ideas. All contemporary societies are characterised – if liberals like Kelly removed their tinted glasses – by violence, poverty, repression, pollution and plunder, and the theoretical alternatives to social anarchism – orthodox communism, liberal democracy and fascism – are all morally and politically bankrupt.

Finally, something needs to be said on how Bakunin saw the relationship between the individual and society, for he has been accused both of being an "extreme individualist" and an extreme "collectivist," completely "submerging" the individual in the collectivity. Marxists tend to stress individualism – Marx accused Bakunin of merely translating "Proudhon's and Stirner's anarchy into the crude language of the tar-

[44] Lehning, op. cit., p. 150.

It seems, however, that it is the liberal critics themselves who think in terms of absolutes and dualisms rather than Bakunin or Spinoza. Bakunin makes it clear that liberty is not something absolute, nor is social determinism. He acknowledged that biological dispositions and attributes – physiological heredity – also had an influence on human behaviour.[7] He also placed, as we shall see, an important emphasis on the individual as a creative agent, both determining as well as being determined by natural and social conditions. The world itself in fact, was seen as a creative process. Bakunin therefore argued for a rational understanding of liberty, which denied the notion of free will – that is, "the presumed faculty of the human individual to determine himself freely and independently of any external influencer"; such a notion of freedom, which removed humans from the principle of universal causality, Bakunin thought was nonsense. Two extracts will suffice to indicate his own understanding of the concept as something quite different from the metaphysical notion of free will.

> True, man, with the aid of knowledge and the thoughtful application of the laws of nature, gradually emancipates himself, but not from the universal yoke which he bears with all the living beings and the existing things that come into and disappear in the world. Man only frees himself from the brutal pressure exercised upon him by his own external world – material and social … Such is the only rational meaning of the word liberty; that is, the rule over external things, based upon the respectful observations of the laws of nature. It is independence from the pretensions and despotic acts from men; it is science, work, political revolt and along with all that, it is finally the well thought-out and free organisation of

[7] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 154.

> the social environment in conformity with the natural laws inherent in every human society. The first and last condition of this liberty rests then on absolute submission to the omnipotence of nature.[8]
>
> The liberty of man consists solely in this; that he obeys natural laws because he has himself recognised them as such, and not because they have been externally imposed upon by an extrinsic will whatever, divine or human, collective or individual.[9]

Bakunin thus came to contrast a materialist approach, with its emphasis on natural causality and freedom, with metaphysical idealism. The latter approach, instead of "wisely accompanying the progressive and real movement from the world called inorganic to the world organic, vegetable animal and then distinctly human,"[10] begins with God, conceptualised either as a person or divine substance. Following Comte he sees religion and idealist metaphysics in historical terms, as an earlier form of human understanding. "The first thinkers," he wrote "were necessarily theologians and metaphysicians." And he posits materialism (positive science) and idealism (religious metaphysics) as two contrasting forms of understanding. He sums up the contrast in the following words:

> Materialism starts from animality to establish humanity; idealism starts with divinity to establish slavery and to condemn the masses to perpetual animality. Materialism denies free will and ends in the establishment of liberty; idealism in the name of human dignity, proclaims free will, and, on the

[8] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 96.
[9] Lehning, op. cit., p. 130.
[10] Lehning, op. cit., p. 116.

> Society antedates and at the same time survives every human individual, beings in this respect like Nature itself. It's eternal like Nature, or rather, having been born upon our earth, it will last as long as the earth. A radical revolt against society would therefore be just as impossible for man as a revolt against nature, human society being nothing else but the last great manifestation of creation of Nature upon this earth. And an individual who would want to rebel against society … would play himself beyond the pole of existence.[41]

And Bakunin suggests that while an individual may well react against society, especially when influenced "by feelings coming from outside and especially from an alien society, but the individual cannot leave this particular society without immediately placing himself in another sphere of solidarity and without becoming subjected to new influences."[42]

Some writers have inferred from this that while Bakunin was hostile to the State he was quite happy to allow social pressure in the form of public opinion. Gray, for instance, writes that while Bakunin was delivering us from a visible tyranny (the State) he may be subjecting the human race to an even more "grievous tyranny" – public opinion.[43] On this issue Bakunin writes:

> Social tyranny is often overwhelming and deadly, but it does not exhibit the character of imperative violence, of legalised, formal despotism, which distinguishes State authority … it exerts its domination by means of conventions, morals,

[41] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 144.
[42] Maximoff, op. cit., pp. 168–69.
[43] Gray, A. 1946. *The Socialist Tradition: Moses to Lenin.* London: Longmans, p. 362.

velop his whole humanity. The principle he suggests must be translated into a problem:

> To organise society, in such a manner that every individual, man or woman, should, at birth, find almost equal means for the development of his or her various faculties and the full utilisation of his or her work.[38]

Aileen Kelly suggests that Bakunin's "own need to achieve self-realisation as a real or integrated personality" was the key to his personality,[39] but completely ignores the fact that self-actualisation – the full development of the individual – was Bakunin's own conception of positive liberty. Other writers from Jung to Maslow have posited "self-actualisation" as a crucial need or drive of the human personality, although this has largely been theorised, as Russell Jacoby (1975) notes, within a context of "social amnesia." Bakunin, unlike these humanistic psychologists, was fully aware that positive liberty – "self-realisation" – was only possible in a society where people were not subject to coercive constraints and economic exploitation. Kelly's suggestion[40] that "freedom" and "equality" for Bakunin were simply "fine-sounding ethical categories" and that his writings lack any "serious analysis of social and political questions" (she accepts the warped opinion of Engels), is just perverse. Her own study is somewhat pathetic in that she nowhere seriously engages herself in Bakunin's own critique of liberal ideology, the State, capitalism, and Marxism – all real social and political issues.

Third, Bakunin argues that while the State is in a sense artificial and can be eliminated, society is the natural medium for the human subject and cannot be rebelled against. He writes:

[38] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 156.
[39] Kelly, op. cit., p. 97.
[40] Kelly, op. cit., p. 199.

> ruins of every liberty, founds authority; materialism rejects the principle of authority, because it rightly considers it the corollary of animality, and because on the contrary, the triumph of humanity which is the object and chief significance of history, can be realised only through liberty.[11]

In Hegelian fashion, Bakunin sees human history as a world process, as the progressive move towards greater freedom, first with the development of life, then, with human culture and consciousness, humans establish a degree of autonomy from the world of nature, finally, with the potential establishment of a truly human society, the freedom of the individual. Human freedom for Bakunin can only be in nature and society, not something independent from the world.

He poses the question as to why religion and the belief in God came into being. Since humans are at one with Nature and are essentially material beings, how did this duality – of spirit (divinity) and nature – come into being, and take such a deep root in human consciousness.[12] Drawing on the ideas of Spinoza, Feuerbach and the left-Hegelians, Bakunin offers many tentative suggestions: religion is related to fear and insecurity; it is the first awakening of human reason, "the first gleam of human truth through the divine veil of falsehood" – the use of the faculty of abstraction to understand the world; it reflects a "deep discontent" – an instinctive and passionate protest against the wretchedness of much human existence. He does not deny that religion may have been a "historic necessity" and does not wish to affirm that it has always been an "absolute evil" in human history,[13] nevertheless, Bakunin's essential attitude to religion, and to metaphysical philosophy generally, is a critical one. He sees it, like Freud and Marx, as limiting human

[11] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 173.
[12] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 106.
[13] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 116.

capacity for reason and free-thinking and as bolstering hierarchical structures and despotic regimes. We have noted earlier Bakunin's thoughts on the Paris Commune and on Mazzini's defence of religion.

Bakunin implies, with Feuerbach, that God (religion) is but a "mirage," one in which humans, through faith or ignorance, discover their own image, but in an inverted-divinized-fashion. "God being everything, the real world and man are nothing. God being truth, justice, goodness, beauty, power and life, man is falsehood, iniquity, evil, ugliness, impotence and death. God being master, man is slave." And he continues in famous, oft-quoted phrases:

> The idea of God implies the abdication of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of known liberty, and necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind, both in theory and practice … he who desires to worship God must harbour no childish illusions about the matter, but bravely renounce his liberty and humanity.
>
> If God is, man is a slave; now man can and must be free; then, God does not exist.
>
> I defy anyone whosoever to avoid this circle.[14]

There have been some anarchists who have continued to believe in God, but have interpreted the latter concept either in terms of the human spirit or, have taken great care, as Bakunin hinted, not to give any positive definition of divinity at all. They use it as a "generic name of all that seems grand, good, beautiful, noble, human to them." Bakunin concluded that "If God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him."[15]

Bakunin had some very harsh things to say about religion: it debased and corrupted people, it was cruel and based on the

[14] Lehning, op. cit., p. 125.

[15] Lehning, op. cit., pp. 127–128.

A number of interesting points emerge from Bakunin's discussion. First, Bakunin makes it clear that the religious idea that one can achieve freedom or salvation outside society – as with mystics or anchorite saints – is misconceived. The notion of a solitary and abstract individual is just as much an abstraction as is God, he writes, and to become concerned with the liberty inherent in the divine soul is to become anti-social. Life outside of society, outside of all known influences, "a life of absolute isolation, is tantamount to intellectual, moral and material death."[35]

Second, Bakunin postulated not only a negative conception of liberty – consisting of rebellion against all forms of authority – but also a positive conception of liberty. (Berlin and Fromm also wrote about two forms of liberty without ever acknowledging Bakunin.) The positive concept of liberty, which Bakunin conceived as "an eminently social matter," he defined as follows: "It is the full development and full enjoyment of all human faculties and powers in every man, through upbringing, scientific education, and material prosperity."[36] He speaks too of the only freedom truly worthy of the name – "the freedom which consists in the full development of all the material, intellectual and moral power which are found in the form of latent capabilities in every individual. I mean that freedom which recognises only those restrictions which are laid down for us by the laws of our own nature … Thus, instead of trying to find a limit from them, we should consider them as the real conditions of and the real reason for our freedom"[37] – this in response to Rousseau. Elsewhere he writes of the need to proclaim anew the great principles of the French revolution; that every person should have the material and moral means to de-

[35] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 169.

[36] Lehning, op. cit., p. 149.

[37] Lehning, op. cit., p. 196.

> become man, nor does he achieve awareness or realisation of his humanity, other than in society and in the collective movement of the whole society; he only shakes off the yoke of internal nature through collective or social labour … and without his material emancipation there can be no intellectual or moral emancipation for anyone … man in isolation can have no awareness of his liberty. Being free for man means being acknowledged, considered and treated as such by another man, and by all the men around him. Liberty is therefore a feature not of isolation but of interaction, not of exclusion but rather of connection … I myself am human and free only to the extent that I acknowledge the humanity and liberty of all my fellow … I am properly free when all the men and women about me are equally free. Far from being a limitation or a denial of my liberty, the liberty of another is its necessary condition and confirmation.[33]

Isaiah Berlin refers to all this as "glib Hegelian claptrap" and one of his devotees concurs, referring to Bakunin's "extraordinary abstract ideal of liberty."[34] But Bakunin's concept of liberty is not abstract at all, rather concrete, suggesting that human freedom only has meaning within a social context and, moreover, as we shall see, can be meaningful only in a society which not only acknowledges personal freedom but has as a degree of economic equity that makes such liberty possible. Bakunin's critique of Rousseau has gone unheeded by most liberals, who themselves have a far more abstract conception of liberty, happily acknowledging it even in the context of the State and rampant economic exploitation.

[33] Lehning, op. cit., pp. 146–148.

[34] Kelly, A. 1982. *Mikhail Bakunin: A Study in the Psychology and Politics of Utopianism.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 198.

key ritual of sacrifice; it dishonoured human labour; it supported privilege and despotism; it was a key obstacle to the emancipation of society in hampering human reason. It had helped humans to make the "first step towards humanity," but now it was a hindrance and fetter to full human emancipation. As with Marx, and other materialist scholars, Bakunin was a firm believer in social evolution, and held that "the subsequent progressive development of various theologies can be explained naturally as the reflection of the development of humanity in history."[16] It thus follows that free-thought propaganda, though useful in itself, would not eradicate religion, for people go to church, as they go to the pothouse (pub), to alleviate their misery. "Give them a human existence and they will never go into a pot-house or church. And it is only the Social Revolution that can and shall give them such an existence."[17] The socialist historian, Alexander Gray, suggests that it might be a useful exercise for theological students to require them to write a reasoned refutation of Bakunin's writings on religion.[18] No refutation has ever been forthcoming from this or any other quarter.

Bakunin's philosophical writings on Nature present in embryonic form, an ecological approach to the world, one that is materialist and historical, and stresses the essential continuity and organic link between humans and nature. But Bakunin seems to have had very much an urban aesthetic feeling towards nature, in contrast to his two anarchist "disciples" who were to make, towards the end of the nineteenth century, important contributions to ecological theory – Elisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin. Bakunin's contributions to sociology, however, were much more significant, indeed they were profound, for he offered important insights into the sociality of the hu-

[16] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 115.

[17] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 120.

[18] Gray, A. 1946. *The Socialist Tradition: Moses to Lenin.* London: Longmans, p. 356.

man species, insights that anticipate the theories of many pragmatists, existentialists and social scientists writing more than fifty years later.

Social Philosophy

> *Organic life, having begun with the simplest, hardly organised cell, and having led it through the whole range of transformation – from the organization of plant life to that of animal life – has finally made man out of it.*[19]

For Bakunin, human beings, like everything else in nature, are entirely material beings, and the mind, the thinking faculty with the power to receive and reflect on different external and interal sensation, is the property of an animal body. As with all animals, humans, Bakunin writes, have two essential instincts or drives: egoism, the instinct for self-preservation, and the social instinct which is ultimately concerned with the preservation of the species.[20] What is called society or the human world has no other creator that the human species who is impelled, as are other living creatures, by a force or instinctive will within the organism. Bakunin refers to this as the "universal life current" and associates it with "universal causality" – thus suggesting that by natural laws, Bakunin meant something closer to Freud's libido or Tao, rather than "mechanistic laws."[21] Bakunin's writings on the will, clearly derived from Schopenhauer (whom he read with interest in his last years though he was critical of the philosopher's individualism) have a biological rather than a moral import (as with Kant) and, as with Nietzsche, evidently anticipate Freud.

[19] Maximoff, G.P. 1953. ed., *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism.* Glencoe: Free Press, p. 84.

[20] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 146.

[21] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 95.

ety (State) – which Bakunin suggests is essentially an idealist theory – Bakunin outlines his own materialist theory. This he postulates in ways much more enlightening than either Hegel or Marx, or the later Durkheim, that is, he stresses the fundamentally social nature of the human subject. Bakunin writes:

> Society, preceding in time any development of humanity constitutes the very essence of human existence. Man is born into society, just as an ant is born into an ant-hill or a bee into its hive; man is born into society from the very moment that he becomes a human being, that is, a being possessing to a greater or lesser extent the power of speech and thought. Man does not choose society; on the contrary he is the product of the latter…[31]
>
> Society is the basis and natural starting point of man's human existence, and it follows that he only realises his individual liberty or personality by integration with all the individuals around him and by virtue of the collective power of society. According to the materialist theory … instead of diminishing or constricting the freedom of the individual, society creates it. Society is the root and branch, liberty the fruit. Therefore, in every era man must find his liberty, not at the beginning, but at the ends of history, and it may be said that the real and total emancipation of every human individual is the true great objective and ultimate goal of history.[32]

And Bakunin continues:

> The materialist … definition of liberty flatly contradicts the idealists. It is as follows: Man does not

[31] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 157.

[32] Lehning, op. cit., p. 145.

most cynical, the most complete negation of humanity."[28] He then develops a critique of the State, which we will discuss further in a later section.

In his study "The Krouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution" Bakunin takes up again the critique of those he calls "doctrinaire liberals" and the "individualist, egoist, base and fraudulent liberty extolled by the school of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and every other bourgeois liberalism."[29] According to these liberals – who don't hesitate to support a coercive State when it serves their interests –

> … the freedom of the individual is not a creation, an historical product of society. They claim that it is previous to any society, and that every man bears it from birth onwards, together with his immortal soul, as a divine gift. It follows that only outside of society is man complete …
>
> What emerges from this theory is that our society proper does not exist; it utterly ignores natural human society, the real starting point of all human civilisation and the only medium in which the personality and liberty of man can really be born and grow. All it acknowledges is, at one extreme, the individual … and at the other the State. (Liberals are well aware that no historic State has ever been based on a contract, and that they have all been founded by violence and conquest. But they need this fiction of the free contract as the basis of the State, so they grasp it without further ado.[30]

Against this liberal conception of the individual, which sees a fundamental antithesis between the free individual and soci-

[28] Dolgoff, S. 1973. ed., trans, introd. *Bakunin on Anarchy.* New York: Knopf, p. 133.

[29] Dolgoff, op. cit., p. 261.

[30] Lehning, op. cit., pp. 140–141.

Bakunin also stresses the fundamental importance of work in the constitution of the human subject:

> Every animal works; it lives only by working. Man as a living being, is not exempt from this necessity, which is the supreme law of life. He must work in order to maintain his existence, in order to develop in the fullness of his being.[22]

And Bakunin emphasises that human work has a progressive quality.

Bakunin goes on to suggest that three fundamental principles constitute the essential conditions of all human development: 1) human animality, the "material" aspects of the human subject discussed above; 2) human thought, which represents a "new element" in the historical process, and 3) rebellion. Thought and rebellion are seen as two faculties that combine the "progressive action throughout the history of mankind and consequently create all which constitutes humanity in man."[23] Bakunin recounts the Genesis myth where Jehovah expressly forbids Adam and Eve from touching the fruit of the tree of knowledge. "But here steps in Satan, the eternal rebel, the first freethinker and the emancipator of worlds. He makes man ashamed of his bestial ignorance and obedience, he emancipates him and stamps upon his brow the seal of liberty and humanity, in urging him to disobey and eat the fruit of knowledge."[24] Thus, rebellion, human emancipation and knowledge are seen as intrinsically linked by Bakunin. In his study "Beyond the Chains of Illusion," Erich Fromm notes how in Greek and Hebrew myths the

[22] Maximoff, op. cit., pp. 87–88.

[23] Maximoff, op. cit., p. 84.

[24] Lehning, A. 1973. *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings.* London: Cape, p. 112.

capacity for disobedience constituted the beginning of human history,[25] yet he makes no mention of Bakunin.

But the most important insights of Bakunin relate to his discussions on the essential social nature of the human subject, and on his postulate that human freedom and rationality are intrinsically bound-up in society. These discussions are closely linked to his critique of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a critique that has been lost on many liberal scholars who still largely continue to see the subject in asocial terms.

In his address to the League for Peace and Freedom, entitle "Federalism, Socialism and Anti-Theologism" (1867), Bakunin concluded the proposal with a long diatribe against Rousseau's theory of the State. He was concerned that Rousseau's democratic theory was not only a justification for the State, but made human freedom and sociality into rigid antithetical concepts. We can trace his argument against Rousseau's "social contract" theory by quoting some relevant extracts. Bakunin writes:

> Man is not only the most individual being on earth, but also the most social. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was surely mistaken in his belief that primitive society was established by a free contract, effected by savages. But Rousseau is not alone in his assertion. The majority of modern jurists and publicists, whether of the Kantian or any other individualist liberal school … take the tacit contract as their point of departure. A tacit contract … What terrible nonsense! An absurd and, worse, a pernicious fiction!
>
> The implications of the social contract are in fact fatal, because they culminate in the absolute domination of the State. And yet the principles seems extremely liberal at first sight. Before arranging their contract, individuals are assumed to have enjoyed absolute liberty, because this theory holds that only man in his natural, wild State is totally free …
>
> So here we have primitive men, each one totally free … enjoying his freedom only as long as he does not come into contact with another and remains immersed in absolute individual isolation … In order not to utterly destroy one another, they form an explicit or tacit contract by which they relinquish a part of themselves so as to safeguard the rest. This contract becomes the basis of society, or rather of the State, for it must be noted that there is no room in the theory for society, only for the State, or rather that society is totally absorbed by the State.[26]

And Bakunin continues by making an important distinction between society and State, earlier made by both Tom Paine and Godwin:

> Society is the natural medium of the human collectivity, regardless of contracts. It progresses slowly, through the momentum imparted by individual initiatives, not through the mind and will of the legislator. There may be many unarticulated laws that rule it, but these are natural laws, inherent in the social body … If it follows that they are not to be confused with the judicial and political laws proclaimed by some legislative authority.[27]

Bakunin goes on to suggest that individual liberty ends where the State begins, and that it is "the most flagrant, the

[25] Fromm, E. 1962. *Beyond the Chains of Illusion,* London: Sphere Books, p. 158.

[26] Lehning, op. cit., pp. 136–37.

[27] Lehning, op. cit., pp. 136–37.