

I believe neither in constitutions, nor in laws

Letter to George Herwegh

Mikhail Bakunin

August 1848

To Citizen George Herwegh.

Paris. [Rue St. Augustins] 40

9 [r. sur Cirque]

To George

My dear friend, since the letter that I have written from Cologne, which I do not know if you have received, I have no longer written a single word. Many things have changed since then, but not our friendship, not the confidence that we have in one another. The thoughts that are essential to us, the aspirations that are essential to us non plus. I am convinced that from the first hour of our reunion we will understand each other as well as completely as before. My faith, my religion are still more confirmed in the face of all the troubles and all the abjections, in the heart of which I have lived for some months. And far from losing all hope, I see, on the contrary, without the least illusion, how our world, the world approaches destruction.

I could tell you many things about Slavism, which would make you rejoice, but as I am occupied with the writing of a booklet on the subject, I do not wish to weary you or me; you will soon read a printed text that I have written. Germany offers at present a most interesting and singular spectacle; it is not a war of phantoms, but a war of shadows that take themselves for reality, yet experiencing at each moment their immeasurable weakness and showing it involuntarily. The official reaction and the official revolution compete in vanity and stupidity, showing in broad daylight all the empty phrases, debonair and weighty with philosophico-religious, politico-poetic content, that have so long haunted German heads. No, truly, we have often said it and repeated it, you and me, that this was the end for the bourgeoisie and the old civilization. We could believe truly what we said. But never, never would we have thought to be correct in this manner and to such an extent. The reaction, I mean by that the reaction in the broadest sense of the term, is one thought that age has made stupid. But the revolution represents more an instinct than a thought, and it acts, it propagates itself like an instinct and it is as an instinct that it delivers its first fights. That is why the philosophers, the literary men and politicians, all those who have a little system in their pocket all prepared and who want to constrain that bottomless ocean within some limits and in a predetermined show themselves to be so foolish and powerless; they are deprived of that instinct and fear to plunge into the waves of that ocean. But the revolution is there, dear friend, it is everywhere, it acts and ferments, I have felt and found it everywhere and I do not

fear the reaction. Well, Georges, grant me now that Proudhon, for whom you've always had an aversion, is now the only one in Paris, the only one in the political world of letters, who still understands something of it. He has given proof of his great courage; in this era stamped with evil and hypocrisy his speech was a real act, full of nobility. If he came to power and his negative doctrinarism became positive, we would in all probability be forced to combat him, for he also has, in fact, a little system in the background, but for the time being he is with us and, in any case, you should well admit that he has given proof of a great courage, worthy of admiration. Besides, I concern myself very little with the parliamentary debates, the era of parliamentary life, of constituent and national assemblies, etc. is over, and whoever will pose the question honestly, must admit that they no longer feel any interest or, or at least, only a limited and irrational interest for these outdated forms. I believe neither in constitutions, nor in laws. Even the best of constitutions would not satisfy me. It is something else that we need: effervescence and life, a new world without laws and therefore free. But the negotiations at Vienne interest me, however, for they allow us to understand in what state this empire remains, so long unknown. The shipwreck of Austria is for us, Slavs, but also for all the party of the revolution, an important question. Will France and Italy intervene or not? That does not scare me. The bourgeois clearly foresee that a war in Italy could transform itself into a general war, bringing with it the great revolution. Ruge is here; thus far at Frankfort he is recognized as one of the best, not to say the best. I still have not encountered him.

Farewell, my dear friend. I must go.

M.B.

Madame, I hope that you have not yet completely forgotten and that you will force Georgesto respond to me. What are you doing in Paris? Will you stay this winter? In any cases we will not fail, I hope, to meet againsoon, and then we have much to tell each other.

Your devoted,

M. B.

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Max Nettlau has pointed to this letter as the first evidence of anarchist leanings in Bakunin's
writings. Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur.

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