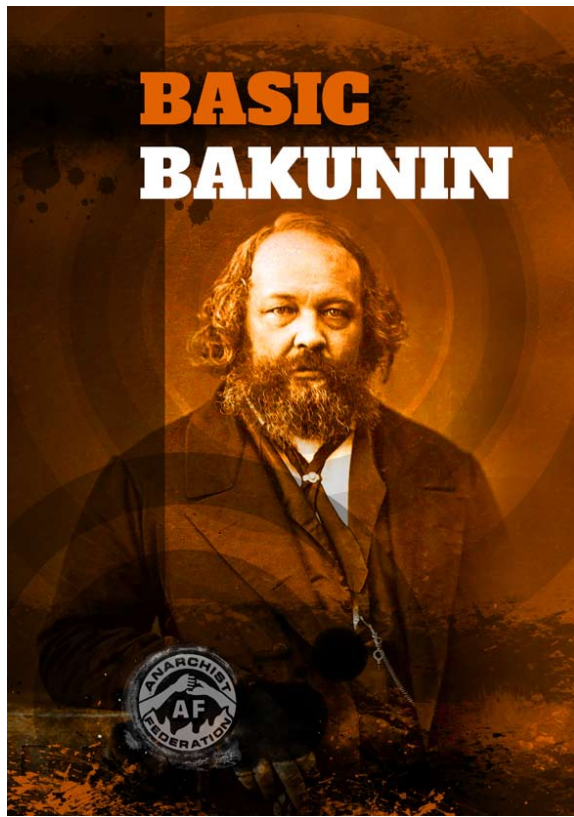


# Basic Bakunin

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This edition is dedicated to Colin Parker, one of the founding members of the Anarchist Communist Federation (later shortened to the Anarchist Federation) who drafted the first edition and has provided invaluable insight into each revision, helping to keep the revolutionary flame alive.



## **Introduction**

This pamphlet will examine the anarchist ideas of Mikhail Bakunin. Despite having often been reviled, distorted or ignored since, these ideas were a huge influence upon the 19<sup>th</sup> century socialist movement. On reading this pamphlet, we hope that it will become apparent that Bakunin has a lot to offer us today, that his ideas make up a coherent and well-argued body of thought, and show that there is good reason for him to be described as the grandfather of modern anarchism.

Bakunin held some views that are rightfully rejected in the modern anarchist movement, such as the left-wing Slavic nationalism of his youth and the anti-Semitism he carried through his whole life, but we can simultaneously criticise those negative aspects of his character whilst still drawing upon those ideas which do stand up to scrutiny.

## Glossary

The following terms will be used in this pamphlet:

### *Absolutism*

A system of government where power is held by one person or a very select group of people.

### *Anarchism*

An economic and political system based upon removing oppressive and exploitative structures in society (such as capitalism and the state), and building a society where everyone has an equal input into decisions that affect their life.

### *Authoritarianism*

A form of government where obedience to a formal authority is required and a hierarchy is maintained.

### *Bourgeois*

Also known as the ruling class or capitalist class. Those who own the land, housing and work places and have their needs met through the work of others.

### *Capitalism*

An economic and political system based around exploiting those forced to sell their labour, in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit.

### *Class*

A set of people given a shared title based on something they hold in common.

### *Communism*

An economic and political system based around common ownership of the means of production (such as factories, fields and workshops), where goods are made available based upon need and ensuring the well-being of all.

### *Consensus*

Having general agreement from everyone involved in a decision.

### *Determinism*

A set of philosophical ideas that say the for every event, including human actions, there exist conditions that could cause no other event. This position argues that everything happens due to the conditions that came before (also known as cause and effect), and that there could have been no other outcome possible.

### *Egalitarian*

A person who believes in the equality of all people.

### *Emancipation / Liberation*

Gaining the maximum possible freedom to made political and economic choices for yourself, and with this being available to everybody.

### *Hierarchical*

The nature of hierarchy. A system in which members of an organization or society are ranked according to relative status or authority.

### *Idealism*

A set of philosophical ideas that say that reality as we know it exists solely in our minds, and it is these thoughts that create change around us. Someone following this school of thought is called an idealist.

### *Libertarian*

One who advocates maximising individual rights and minimising the role of the state.

### *Materialism*

A set of philosophical ideas that say that physical thought and action creates changes around us. Someone following this school of thought is called a materialist.

### *Marx, Karl*

Karl Marx (5 May 1818 – 14 March 1883) was a German philosopher, economist, sociologist, historian, journalist, and revolutionary socialist. Marx's work in economics laid the basis for the current understanding of labour and its relation to capital, and has influenced much of subsequent economic thought. Bakunin and Marx, while in broad agreement about the way capitalism functions, ended up as figureheads of a disagreement over how to oppose capitalism.

### *Mutual Aid*

Acting in cooperation with another group.

### *Praxis*

The cycle of using your ideas and skills to plan practical actions, then having the outcome from those actions used to refine and improve your ideas and skills. This in turn informs future actions, which then improve the next wave of ideas, and so on.

### *Socialism*

An economic and political system based around the social ownership of our places of work and co-operative management of the economy. Similar to communism, however not always in agreement on how society should be managed or how produce should get distributed.

### *Solidarity*

Unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest; mutual support within a group.

### *State, The*

The collected institutions that create and enforce laws created by a small minority of people within a given territory. Through laws the state claims that only it has the right to grant the use of violence. The state uses the law to justify and protect a capitalist economy.

## **Class**

Bakunin saw revolution in terms of the overthrow of one oppressing class by another oppressed class and the destruction of political power as expressed as the state and social hierarchy. According to Bakunin, society is divided into two main classes which are fundamentally opposed to each other. The oppressed class, he variously described as commoners, the people, the masses or the workers, makes up a great majority of the population. Under usual conditions it is not conscious of itself as a class, though it has an instinct for revolt and whilst unorganised, is full of vitality. The numerically much smaller oppressing class however is conscious of its role and maintains its ascendancy by acting in a purposeful, concerted and united manner.

The basic differences between the two classes, Bakunin maintained, rests upon the ownership and control of property, which is disproportionately in the hands of the minority class of capitalists. The masses, on the other hand, have little to call their own beyond their ability to work.

He correctly identifies that wealth is generated by working people but that we are denied the fruits of our labour.

“Since labour, which is the production of wealth, is collective, wouldn’t it seem logical that the enjoyment of this wealth should also be collective?”<sup>1</sup>

Bakunin was astute enough to understand that the differences between the two main classes are not always clear cut. He pointed out that it is not possible to draw a hard line between the two classes, though as in most things, the differences are most apparent at the extremes. Between these extremes of wealth and power there is a hierarchy of social strata which can be assessed according to the degree to which they exploit each other or are exploited themselves. The further away a given group is from the workers, the more likely it is to be part of the exploiting category and the less it suffers from exploitation. Between the two major classes there is a middle class or middle classes who are both exploiting and exploited, depending on their position of social hierarchy.

In contrast to Marx’s ideas about the urban proletariat being the primary revolutionary force in society, Bakunin instead considered both urban and rural workers together as the masses who are the most exploited and who form, in Bakunin’s view, the great revolutionary class which alone can sweep away the present economic system. Unfortunately, the fact of exploitation and its resultant poverty are in themselves no guarantee of revolution. Extreme poverty is, Bakunin thought, likely to lead to resignation if the people can see no possible alternative to the existing order. Perhaps, if driven to great depths of despair, the poor will rise up in revolt. Revolts however tend to be local and therefore, easy to put down. In Bakunin’s view, three conditions are necessary to bring about popular revolution. They are:

- Sheer hatred for the conditions in which the masses find themselves
- The belief that change is a possible alternative
- A clear vision of the society that has to be made to bring about human emancipation

Without these three factors being present, plus a united and efficient self-organisation, no liberation can possibly come from a revolution.

Bakunin had no doubts that revolution must necessarily involve destruction to create the basis of the new society. He stated that, quite simply, revolution means nothing less than war, that is the physical destruction of people and property. Spontaneous revolutions involve, often, the vast destruction of property. Bakunin noted that when circumstances demanded it, the workers would destroy even their own houses, which more often than not, do not belong to them. The negative, destructive urge is absolutely necessary, he argued, to sweep away the past. Destruction is closely linked with construction since the “*more vividly the future is visualised, the more powerful is the force of destruction.*”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakunin — From Out of the Dustbin, ed. Robert M. Cutler.

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to Selected Works of Bakunin, Arthur Lehning.

Given the close relationship between the concentration of wealth and power in capitalist societies, it is not surprising that Bakunin considered economic questions to be of paramount importance. It is in the context of the struggle between labour and capital that Bakunin gave great significance to strikes by workers. Strikes, he believed, have a number of important functions in the struggle against capitalism. They are necessary as catalysts to wrench the workers away from their ready acceptance of capitalism; they jolt them out of their condition of resignation. Strikes, as a form of economic and political warfare, require unity to succeed, thus welding the workers together. During strikes, there is a polarisation between employers and workers. This makes the latter more receptive to the revolutionary propaganda and destroys the urge to compromise and seek deals. Bakunin thought that as the struggle between labour and capital increases, so will the intensity and number of strikes. The ultimate strike is the general strike. A revolutionary general strike, in which class conscious workers are infused with anarchist ideas will lead, Bakunin thought, to the final explosion which will bring about anarchist society.

“Strikes awaken, in the masses of people, all the socialist-revolutionary instincts that reside deep in the heart of every worker ... [and] when those instincts, stirred by the economic struggle, are awakened in the masses of workers, who are arising from their own slumber, then the propagation of the socialist-revolutionary idea becomes quite easy.”<sup>3</sup>

Bakunin’s ideas are revolutionary in the fullest sense, being concerned with the destruction of economic exploitation and social/political domination and their replacement by a system of social organisation which is based upon solidarity and mutual aid. Bakunin offered a critique of capitalism (in which authority and economic inequality went hand in hand), and state socialism (which is one sided in its concentration on economic factors whilst grossly underestimating the dangers of social authority).

## State

Bakunin based his consistent and unified theory of social relations upon three connected points, namely:

- Human beings are naturally social (and therefore they desire social solidarity)
- Human beings are more or less equal
- Human beings want to be free

His anarchism is consequently concerned with the problem of creating a society of freedom within the context of an egalitarian system of mutual interaction. The problem with existing societies, he argued, is that they are dominated by states that are necessarily violent, anti-social, and artificial constructs which deny the fulfilment of humanity.

Whilst there are, in Bakunin’s view, many objectionable features within capitalism, apart from the state (e.g. the oppression of women, wage slavery), it is the state which nurtures, maintains

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<sup>3</sup> Vsesvetnyi Revoliutsionnyi Soiuz Sotsial’noi demokratii [World Revolutionary Union of Social Democracy], M. Bakunin, in Archives Bakounine, 8 vols. in 9 by 1984 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961–), quoted in Out of the Dustbin.

and protects the oppressive system as a whole. The state is defined as an anti-social machine which controls society for the benefit of an oppressing class or elite. It is essentially an institution based upon violence and is concerned with its maintenance of inequality through political repression. In addition the state relies upon a permanent bureaucracy to help carry out its aims. The bureaucratic element, incidentally, is not simply a tool which it promotes. All states, Bakunin believed, have internal tendencies toward self-perpetuation, whether they be capitalist or socialist and are thus to be opposed as obstacles to human freedom.

It might be objected that states are not primarily concerned with political repression and violence and that liberal democratic states, in particular, are much interested in social welfare. Bakunin argues that such aspects are only a disguise, and that when threatened, all states reveal their essentially violent natures.

And developments within Britain over the last couple of decades tends to substantiate another feature of the state which Bakunin drew attention to – the tendency towards authoritarianism and absolutism. He believed that there were strong pressures in all states to move towards military dictatorship but that the rate of such development will vary according to factors such as demography, culture and politics.

Finally, Bakunin noted that states tend toward warfare against other states. Since there is no internationally accepted moral code between states, then rivalries between them will be expressed in terms of military conflict. In his own words:

“So long as States exist there will be no peace. There will only be more or less prolonged respites – armistices concluded by the perpetually belligerent states – but as soon as a state feels sufficiently strong to destroy this equilibrium to its advantage, it will never fail to do so.”<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to Marx’s ideas about the state, Bakunin maintained that all forms of government were unjust and that true democracy could not simply be instilled by degrees or by putting the right people in charge, but required a total transformation of society.

## Religion

God as an idea was deeply repulsive to Bakunin and flew in the face of reason and rational thought. He saw the idea of God as a human creation, an absolute abstraction without reality, content and determination. In other words it is absolute nothingness. God and religion are both human fantasies, a distortion of life on earth. The belief in God destroys human solidarity, liberty, co-operation and community. Human love becomes transferred to the nonsense of love for something which does not exist and into religious charity. For Bakunin, God and religion were the enemies of all oppressed classes and indeed their role was to contribute to exploitation and oppression in concert with the ruling class. The acceptance of the idea of God was for Bakunin the denial of humanity, freedom and justice. He argued that if God is truth, justice and infinite life then humanity must be “*falsehood, gross injustice and death*”.<sup>5</sup> Bakunin further argues that by accepting the existence of God humanity becomes enslaved, and that because humanity is capable of intelligence, justice and freedom, it follows that there is no such thing as God.

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<sup>4</sup> The Immorality of the State in The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, G. P. Maximoff.

<sup>5</sup> God and the State, M. Bakunin.



Religions for Bakunin are the result of human fantasy in which heaven is a mirage. Once installed, God naturally becomes the master to whom people bow down. Of course, Bakunin recognized that God does not exist and that religion is a human form of organising and controlling the masses. He proposed that whoever takes it upon themselves to become prophet, revealer or priest (God's representative on earth) becomes the teacher and leader. From that role religious leaders end up "*commanding, directing and governing over earthly existence*".<sup>6</sup> So, slaves of God become slaves of the Church and State insofar as the latter is given the blessing of organised religion. The organised religions of the world, particularly Christianity, have always allied themselves with domination and even persecuted religions discipline their followers, laying the ground for a new tyranny. All religions, but again especially Christianity, were in the words of Bakunin "*founded on blood*".<sup>7</sup> How many innocent victims have been tortured and murdered in the name of the religion of love and forgiveness? How many clerics, even today, asks Bakunin, support capital punishment?

Bakunin believed that God does not exist, and that this is good enough reason for opposing religion. However he also states that religions must be combated because they create an intellectual slavery which, in alliance with the state, results in political and social slavery. Religions demoralise and corrupt people. They destroy reason and "*fill people's minds with absurdities*".<sup>8</sup> Religion is an ancient form of ideology which, in alliance with the state, can be reduced to a simple statement — 'We fool you, we rule you.'<sup>9</sup>

## **Bourgeois Democracy**

Political commentators and the media are constantly singing the praises of the system of representative democracy in which every few years or so the electorate is asked to put a cross on a piece of paper to determine who will control them. This system works well insofar as the capitalist system has found a way of gaining legitimacy through the illusion that somehow the voters are in charge of running the system. Bakunin's writings on the issue of representative democracy were made at the time when it barely existed in the world. Yet he could see on the basis of a couple of examples (the United States and Switzerland) that the widening of the franchise does little to improve the lot of the great mass of the population. True, as Bakunin noted, politicians are prepared to issue all sorts of promises, but these all disappear the day after the election. The workers continue to go to work and the bourgeoisie takes up once again the problems of business and political intrigue.

Today, in the United States and Western Europe, the predominant political system is that of liberal democracy. In Britain the electoral system is patently unfair in its distribution of parliamentary seats, insofar as some parties with substantial support get negligible representation. However, even where strict proportional representation applies, the Bakunist critique remains scathing — the representative system requires that only a tiny section of the population concern itself directly with legislation and governing.

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<sup>6</sup> God and the State, M. Bakunin.

<sup>7</sup> God and the State, M. Bakunin.

<sup>8</sup> God and the State, M. Bakunin.

<sup>9</sup> The Pyramid of Capitalist System, cartoon, 1911.

Bakunin's objections to representative democracy basically rest on the fact that it is an expression of the inequality of power which exists in society. Despite constitutions guaranteeing the rights of citizens and equality before the law, the reality is that the capitalist class is in permanent control. So long as the great mass of the population has to sell its labour power in order to survive, there cannot be democratic government. So long as people are economically exploited by capitalism and there are gross inequalities of wealth, there cannot be real democracy.

But as Bakunin made clear, if by some quirk a socialist government were elected, in real terms things would not improve much. When people gain power and place themselves 'above' society, he argued, their way of looking at the world changes. From their exalted position of high office the perspective on life becomes distorted and seems very different to those on the bottom. The history of socialist representation in parliament is primarily that of reneging on promises and becoming absorbed into the manners, morality and attitudes of the ruling class. Bakunin suggests that such backsliding from socialist ideas is not due to treachery, but because participation in parliament makes representatives see the world through a distorted mirror. A workers parliament, engaged in the tasks of governing would, said Bakunin in his 1870 work *On Representative Government and Universal Suffrage*, end up a chamber of "*determined aristocrats, bold or timid worshippers of the principle of authority who will also become exploiters and oppressors.*"

"Bourgeois socialism is a sort of hybrid, located between two irreconcilable worlds, the bourgeois world and the workers' world [...] It corrupts the proletariat doubly: first, by adulterating and distorting its principle and program; second, by impregnating it with impossible hopes accompanied by a ridiculous faith in the bourgeoisie's approaching conversion, thereby trying to draw it into bourgeois politics and to make it an instrument thereof."<sup>10</sup>

The point that Bakunin makes time and time again in his writings is that no one can govern for the people in their interests. Only personal and direct control over our lives will ensure that justice and freedom will prevail. To abdicate direct control is to deny freedom. To grant political sovereignty to others, whether under the mantle of democracy, republicanism, the people's state, or whatever, is to give others control and therefore domination over our lives. As Bakunin made clear, economic facts are much stronger than political rights. So long as there is economic exploitation there will be political domination by the rich over the poor.

It might be thought that the referendum, in which people directly make laws, would be an advance upon the idea of representative democracy. This is not the case according to Bakunin, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the people are not in a position to make decisions on the basis of full knowledge of all the issues involved. Also, laws may be a complex, abstract, and specialized nature and that in order to vote for them in a serious way, the people need to be fully educated and have available the time and facilities to reflect upon and discuss the implications involved. The reality of referenda is that they are used by full-time politicians to gain legitimacy for essentially bourgeois issues. It is no coincidence that Switzerland, which has used the referendum frequently, remains one of the most conservative countries in Europe. With referenda, the people are guided by politicians, who set the terms of the debate. Thus despite popular input, the people still remain under bourgeois control.

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<sup>10</sup> Mikhail Bakunin — From *Out of the Dustbin*, ed. Robert M. Cutler.

Finally, on the whole concept of the possibility of the democratic state: Bakunin thought that the democratic state is a contradiction in terms since the state is essentially about force, authority and domination and is necessarily based upon an inequality of wealth and power. Democracy, in the sense of self-rule for all, means that no one is ruled. If no one rules, there can be no state. If there is a state, there can be no self-rule.

## Marx

Bakunin's opposition to Marx involves several separate but related criticisms. Though he thought Marx was a sincere revolutionary, Bakunin believed that the application of the implementation of Marx's political forms of organisation would necessarily lead to the replacement of one repression (capitalist) by another (state socialist).

Bakunin himself provided the first translation of both the Communist Manifesto and sections of Capital into Russian. The Italian anarchist Covelli, himself close to Bakunin's ideas, produced the first discussion on Capital in Italian, whilst yet another Italian anarchist, Carlo Cafiero, again on Bakunin's wavelength, produced an abridgement of Capital that was considered by Marx as the best yet written. It was then edited, introduced and annotated in French by Bakunin's closest associate James Guillaume.

As the Reponse de Quelques Internationaux (1872) noted, many of the Jura Internationalists (comrades to Bakunin) had read Capital:

“They have read it, and all the same they have not become Marxists; that must appear very singular to these naïve types. How many, on the contrary, in the General Council, are Marxists without ever having opened the book of Marx.”

Bakunin always had profound respect for Marx's economic work, in particular Capital, and even during the height of the campaign of hatred and slander waged against him by Marx and his followers, maintained this favourable view of Marx's economic analyses.

However Bakunin opposed what he considered to be the economic determinism in Marx's thought. Put in another way, Bakunin was against the idea that all the structures of a society – its laws, morality, science, religion, etc. – were “*but the necessary after effects of the development of economic facts*”.<sup>11</sup> Rather than these things being primarily determined by economic factors (i.e. the mode of production), Bakunin allowed much more for the active intervention of human beings in the realisation of their destiny. Bakunin was very much a materialist, and he criticised Proudhon for his idealism (which could fly in the face of the reality of a situation). However his materialism and his understanding of how society was structured and functioned was not a mechanistic concept and gave room for the actions of determined individuals and minorities.

“The action of the working class must be the synthesis of the understanding of the “mechanics of the universe” – the mechanics of society – and “the effectiveness of free will” – conscious revolutionary action. There lies the foundation of Bakunin's theory of revolutionary action.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Marxism, Freedom and the State, M. Bakunin.

<sup>12</sup> Putting The Record Straight on Bakunin, Alliance Syndicaliste Revolutionnaire et Anarcho- Syndicaliste : [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)

More fundamental was Bakunin's opposition to the Marxist idea of dictatorship of the proletariat which was, in effect, a transitional state on the way to stateless communism. Marx and Engels, in the Communist Manifesto of 1848, had written of the need for labour armies under state supervision, the backwardness of the rural workers, the need for centralised and directed economy, and for widespread nationalisation. Later, Marx also made clear that a workers' government could come into being through universal franchise. Bakunin questioned each of these propositions.

The state, whatever its basis, whether it be proletarian or bourgeois, inevitably contains several objectionable features. States are based upon coercion and domination. Bakunin proposed that this domination would very soon cease to be that of the proletariat over its enemies but would become a state over the proletariat. This would arise, Bakunin believed, because of the impossibility of a whole class, numbering millions of people, governing on its own behalf. Necessarily, the workers would have to wield power by proxy by entrusting the tasks of government to a small group of politicians.

Once the role of government was taken out of the hands of the masses, a new class of experts, scientists and professional politicians would arise. This new elite would be far more secure in its domination over the workers by means of the mystification and legitimacy granted by the claim to acting in accordance with scientific laws (a major claim by Marxists). Furthermore, given that the new state could masquerade as the true expression of the people's will, the institutionalising of political power gives rise to a new group of governors with the same self-seeking interests and the same cover-ups of its dubious dealings.

Bakunin proposed that another problem posed by the state system was that a centralised government would further strengthen the process of domination. The state as owner, organiser, director, financier, and distributor of labour and economy would necessarily have to act in an authoritarian manner in its operations. As can be seen in so-called socialist states such as Russia and Cuba, a command economy must act with decisions flowing from top to bottom; it cannot meet the complex and various needs of individuals and, in the final analysis, is a hopeless, inefficient giant. Marx believed that centralism, from whatever quarter, was a move toward the final, state led solution of revolution. According to Bakunin:

“The political and economic organization of social life must not, as at present, be directed from the summit to the base – the centre to the circumference – imposing unity through forced centralization. On the contrary, it must be reorganized to issue from the base to the summit – from the circumference to the centre – according to the principles of free association and federation.”<sup>13</sup>

This means that in practical terms that rather than being directed by a centralised state, an anarchist society would involve individuals and groups organising on a federative basis. Factory councils, community groups, and other groups would form horizontal networks through voluntary association to direct wider action that involved more than just their group.

Bakunin's predictions have been borne out by reality. The Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, talked incessantly of proletarian dictatorship and soviet power, yet inevitably, with or without wanting to, created a vast bureaucratic police state. Many state socialists and party communists

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<sup>13</sup> Putting The Record Straight on Bakunin, Alliance Syndicaliste Revolutionnaire et Anarcho- Syndicaliste : [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)

claim this is down to the state being subject to non-ideal conditions, however the methods they suggest inevitably lead to these outcomes.

## Unions

Most of the left in Britain view the present structures of trade unions in a positive light. This is true for members of the Labour Party, both left and right, and many Marxist organisations. These bodies wish to capture or retain control of the unions, pretty much as they stand, in order to use them for their own purposes. As a result, there are frequently bitter conflicts and manoeuvrings for control within the unions.

Bakunin laid the foundations of the anarcho-syndicalist approach to union organization and recognised the general tendency of non-anarchist unions to decay into personal fiefdoms and bureaucracy over a century ago. Arguing in the context of union organisation of the period within the International Workingmen's Association, he gave examples of how unions can be stolen from the membership whose will they are supposed to be an expression of. He identified several interrelated features which lead to the usurpation of power by union leaders.

Firstly, he indicated a psychological factor which plays a key part. Honest, hard-working, intelligent and well-meaning militants win through hard work the respect and admiration of their fellow members and are elected to union office. They display self-sacrifice, initiative and ability. Unfortunately, once in positions of leadership, these people soon imagine themselves to be indispensable and their focus of attention centres more and more on the machinations within the various union committees.

The one time militant thus becomes removed from the everyday problems of the rank and file members and assumes the self-delusion which afflicts all leaders, namely a sense of superiority.

Given the existence of union bureaucracies and secret debating chambers in which leaders decide union actions and policies, ruling elite arises within the union structures, no matter how democratic those structures may formally be. With the growing authority of the union committees etc., the workers become indifferent to union affairs with the exception, Bakunin asserts, of issues which directly affect them e.g. dues payment, strikes, and so on. Unions have always had great problems in getting subscriptions from alienated memberships. A solution which has been found in the 'check off' system by which unions and employers collaborate to remove the required sum at source i.e. from the pay packet. Where workers do not directly control their union, as Bakunin thought they should, and delegate authority to committees and full-time agents, several things happen. Firstly, so long as union subscriptions are not too high, and back dues are not pressed too hard for, the substituting bodies can act with virtual impunity. This is good for the committees but brings almost to an end the democratic life of the union. Power gravitates increasingly to the committees and these bodies, like all governments, substitute their will for that of the membership. This in turn allows expression for personal intrigues, vanity, ambition and self-interest. Many intra-union battles, which are ostensibly fought on ideological grounds, are in fact merely struggles for control by ambitious self-seekers who have chosen the union for their career structure. This careerism occasionally surfaces in battles between rival leftists, for example where no political reasons for conflict exist. In the past the Communist Party offered a union career route within certain unions and such conflicts constantly arose, a route still used by members of the Labour Party and various socialist parties today.

Within the various union committees, which are arranged on a hierarchical basis (mirroring capitalism), one or two individuals come to dominate on the basis of superior intelligence or aggressiveness. Ultimately, the unions become dominated by bosses who hold great power in their organisations, despite the safeguards of democratic procedures and constitutions. Over the last few decades, many such union bosses have become national figures, especially in periods of Labour government. Bakunin was aware that such union degeneration was inevitable but only arises in the absence of rank and file control, lack of opposition to undemocratic trends and the accession to union power to those who allow themselves to be corrupted. Those individuals who genuinely wish to safeguard their personal integrity should, Bakunin argued, not stay in office too long and should encourage strong rank and file opposition. Union militants have a duty to remain faithful to their revolutionary ideals.

Personal integrity, however, is an insufficient safeguard – other institutional and organisational factors must also be brought into play. These include regular reporting to the proposals made by the officials and how they voted, in other words frequent and direct accountability. Secondly, such union delegates must draw their mandates from the membership being subject to rank and file instructions. Thirdly, Bakunin suggests the instant recall of unsatisfactory delegates. Finally, and most importantly, he urged the calling of mass meetings by ordinary members and other expressions of grassroots activity to circumvent those leaders who acted in undemocratic ways. Mass meetings inspire passive members to action, creating a camaraderie which would tend to repudiate the so-called leaders.

Bakunin based his analysis on unions of the period. As such, his critique of the unions was perceptive and acute; in particular his usual perceptions of the alienating nature of power as with the increasing bureaucratization of union officials. Bakunin's thought on the question of workers organizations and how they should be structured laid the foundations for the birth of anarcho-syndicalism in Spain, France and elsewhere.

However, in the two centuries after his birth, the integration of the unions into the capitalist system has advanced at a rapid pace. Union leaderships often directly sabotage workers struggles. Rank and file organisation within the trade union and attempts to 'democratise' the trade unions are no answer to the question of how workers should organise. Successful struggles now are increasingly of the wildcat kind, outside the control of the union leaderships, and often organised outside the unions. Where unions have declared strikes themselves, they have either been forced to do so because of the anger and discontent of the membership or are taking symbolic actions with little chance of victory that will quell the militancy of those in the workplace.

Anarcho-syndicalist unions have often been engaged in sharp fights with the employers and the State. Nevertheless, there is always a dynamic of being forced to mediate in struggles that has led to serious divisions within the syndicalist movement inside specific countries and on a worldwide level. Bakunin was acutely aware of the dangerous nature of officialdom and how ordinary workers, by taking official positions, could become alienated from their fellows. He was less aware of the mediating role of the unions themselves in the fight to secure better pay and conditions, and the tendency to become controllers of the workforce, of labour, themselves.

## Revolutionary Organisation

Above all else, Bakunin believed in the necessity of collective action to achieve anarchy. After his death there was a strong tendency within the anarchist movement towards the abandonment of organisation in favour of small group and individual activity. This development, which culminated in individual acts of terror in the late nineteenth century France, isolated anarchism from the wider working classes.

Bakunin, being consistent with other aspects of his thought, saw organisation not in terms of a centralised and disciplined army (though he thought self-discipline was vital), but as the result of decentralised federalism in which revolutionaries could channel their energies through mutual agreement within a collective. It is necessary, Bakunin argued, to have a coordinated revolutionary movement for a number of reasons. If anarchists acted alone, without direction, they would inevitably end up moving in different directions and would, as a result, tend to neutralise each other. Organisation is not necessary for its own sake, but is necessary to maximise strength of the revolutionary classes, in the face of the great resources commanded by the capitalist state. Bakunin placed a strong emphasis on internationalism, arguing the importance of not only the federation of workers' associations within a single country but also across national borders. This underpinned his work in the International Workingmen's Association (also known as the First International). In contrast to the Slavic nationalism of his earlier years, Bakunin later publicly spoke against nationalism. In a speech in 1867 he called for a rejection of "*the false principle of nationality*."<sup>14</sup>

However, from Bakunin's standpoint, it was the spontaneous revolt against authority by the people which is of the greatest importance. The nature of purely spontaneous uprisings is that they are uneven and vary in intensity from time to time and place to place. The anarchist revolutionary organization must not attempt to take over and lead the uprising but has the responsibility of clarifying goals, putting forward revolutionary propaganda, and working out ideas in correspondence with the revolutionary instincts of the masses. To go beyond this would undermine the whole self-liberatory purpose of the revolution. A revolutionary elite overthrowing the government has no place in Bakunin's thought.

Bakunin then, saw revolutionary organization in terms of offering assistance to the revolution, not as a substitute. It is in this context, and alongside the violent repression by the state at the time, that we should interpret Bakunin's call for a "*secret organisation*"<sup>15</sup> of that vanguard. The vanguard, it should be said, has nothing in common with that of the Leninist model which seeks actual, direct leadership over the working class. Bakunin was strongly opposed to such approaches and stated:

"no member... is permitted, even in the midst of full revolution, to take public office of any kind, nor is the (revolutionary) organization permitted to do so... it will at all times be on the alert, making it impossible for authorities, governments and states to be established"<sup>16</sup>

The vanguard was, however, to influence the revolutionary movement on an informal basis, relying on the talents of its members to achieve results. Bakunin thought that it was the insti-

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<sup>14</sup> Statism and Anarchy, M. Bakunin.

<sup>15</sup> Bakunin, 1869, quoted in *The Basic Bakunin*, p.150.

<sup>16</sup> Letter to Nechaev, M. Bakunin, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1870.

tutionalisation of authority, not natural inequalities that posed a threat to the revolution. The vanguard would act as a catalyst to the working classes' own revolutionary activity and was expected to fully immerse itself in the movement. Bakunin's vanguard then, was concerned with education and propaganda, and unlike the Leninist vanguard party, was not to be a body separate from the class, but an active agent within it.

In response to claims of the First International fomenting revolution, Bakunin responded:

“This, very simply, is to mistake the effect for the cause: the International has not created the war between the exploiter and the exploited; rather, the requirements of that war have created the International.”<sup>17</sup>

The other major task proposed by Bakunin for the revolutionary organization was that it would act as the watchdog for the working class. Then, as now, authoritarian groupings posed as leaders of the revolution and supplied their own members as governments in waiting. The anarchist vanguard has to expose such movements in order that the revolution should not replace one representative state by an allegedly revolutionary one. A so-called workers' government, or dictatorship of the proletariat, would try to oppose working class self-organisation, thus:

“They appeal for order, for trust in, for submission to those who, in the course and the name of the revolution, seized and legalised their own dictatorial powers; this is how such political revolutionaries reconstitute the state. We on the other hand, must awaken and foment all the dynamic passions of the people.”<sup>18</sup>

## **Anarchy**

Throughout Bakunin's criticisms of capitalism and state socialism he constantly argues for freedom. It is not surprising, then, to find that in his sketches of future anarchist society the principle of freedom takes precedence. He outlined a number of revolutionary structures as essential to promote the maximum possible individual and collective freedom. The societies envisioned in Bakunin's programs are not utopian, in the sense of being detailed fictional communities that are free of troubles, but rather suggest the basic minimum skeletal structures which would guarantee freedom. The character of future anarchist societies will vary, said Bakunin depending on a whole range of historical, cultural, economic and geographical factors.

The basic problem was to lay down the minimum necessary conditions which would bring about a society based upon justice and social welfare for all and would also generate freedom. The negative destructive features of the programs are all concerned with the abolition of those institutions which lead to domination and exploitation. The state, including the established church, the judiciary, state banks and bureaucracy, the armed forces and the police are all to be swept away. Also, all ranks, privileges, classes and the monarchy are to be abolished. The positive, constructive features of the new society all interlink to promote freedom and justice. For a society to be free, Bakunin argued, it is not sufficient to simply impose equality. Freedom can only be achieved and maintained through the full participation in society of a highly educated and healthy population, free from social and economic worries. Such an enlightened population can

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<sup>17</sup> Bakunin, 1869, quoted in *The Basic Bakunin*, p.150.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Albert Richard, 1870, quoted by Dolgoff.



then be truly free and able to act rationally on the basis of a popularly controlled science and a thorough knowledge of the issues involved.

Bakunin advocated complete freedom of movement, opinion, and morality where people would not be accountable to anyone for their beliefs and acts in so much as they did not inhibit those same freedoms in another. Freedom, he believed, must be defended by freedom:

“[For to] advocate the restriction of freedom on the pretext that it is being defended is a dangerous delusion.”<sup>19</sup>

A truly free and enlightened society, Bakunin said, would adequately preserve liberty not through bureaucratic laws created and upheld by a minority, but would uphold the libertarian ideal through the collective consensus of each individual community while still respecting the contrary opinions that exist within these communities.

This is not to say that Bakunin did not think that a society has the right to protect itself. He firmly believed that freedom was to be found within society, not through its destruction. Those people who acted in ways that lessen freedom for others have no place; these include all parasites that live off the labour of others. Work, the contribution of one's labour for the creation of wealth, forms the basis of political rights in the proposed anarchist society. Those who live by exploiting others do not deserve political rights. Others, who steal, violate voluntary agreements within and by society, inflict bodily harm, and the such, can expect to be punished by the laws which have been created by that society. The condemned criminal, on the other hand, can escape punishment by society by removing himself/herself from society and the benefits it confers. Society can also expel the criminal if it so wishes. Basically Bakunin set great store on the power of enlightened public opinion to minimise antisocial activity.

Bakunin proposed the equalisation of wealth, though natural inequalities which are reflected in different levels of skill, energy and thrift, should he argued be tolerated. The purpose of equality is to allow individuals to find full expression of their humanity within society. Bakunin was strongly opposed to the idea of hired labour which if introduced into an anarchist society, would lead to the reintroduction of inequality and wage slavery. He proposed instead collective effort because it would, he thought, tend to be more efficient. However, so long as individuals did not employ others, he had no objection to them working alone.

Through the creation of associations of labour which could coordinate worker's activities, Bakunin proposed the setting up of an industrial assembly in order to harmonise production with the demand for products. Such an assembly would be necessary in the absence of the market. Supplied with statistical information from the various voluntary organisations, which would be federated, production could be specialised on an international basis so that those countries with in built economic advantages would produce most efficiently for the general good. Then, according to Bakunin, waste, economic crisis and stagnation “*will no longer plague mankind; the emancipation of human labour will regenerate the world.*”<sup>20</sup>

Turning to the question of the political organisation of society, Bakunin stressed that society should be built in such a way as to achieve order through the realisation of freedom on the basis of the federation of voluntary organisations. In all such political bodies power is to flow “*from the base to the summit – from the circumference to the centre.*”<sup>21</sup> In other words, such organisations

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<sup>19</sup> Revolutionary Catechism, M. Bakunin, 1866.

<sup>20</sup> Revolutionary Catechism, M. Bakunin, 1866.

<sup>21</sup> Revolutionary Catechism, M. Bakunin, 1866.

should be the expressions of individual and group opinions, not directing centres which control people. On the basis of federalism, Bakunin proposed a multi-tier system of responsibility for decision making which would be binding on all participants, so long as they supported the system. Those individuals, groups or political institutions which made up the total structure would have the right to secede. Each participating unit would have an absolute right to self-determination, to associate with the larger bodies, or not. Starting at the local level, Bakunin suggested as the basic political unit, the completely autonomous commune. The commune would elect all of its functionaries, law makers, judges, and administrators of communal property.

The commune would decide its own affairs but, if voluntarily federated to the next tier of administration, the provincial assembly, its constitution must conform to the provincial assembly. Similarly, the constitution of the province must be accepted by the participating communes. The provincial assembly would define the rights and obligations existing between communes and pass laws affecting the province as a whole.

Further levels of political organisation would be the national body, and, ultimately, the international assembly. As regards international organisation, Bakunin proposed that there should be no permanent armed forces, preferring instead, the creation of local citizens' defence militias.

Thus, from root to branch, Bakunin's outline for anarchy is based upon the free federation of participants in order to maximise individual and collective well-being.

Bakunin's conception of individual freedom was not to do with selfishness or isolationism, as some use the term. Instead, his idea of individual liberty was deeply socially embedded and he acknowledged that we are social beings whose individual liberty is bound up with collective liberty.

## **Bakunin's Relevance Today**

Throughout most of this pamphlet Bakunin has been allowed to speak for himself. In this final section it might be valuable to make an assessment of Bakunin's ideas and actions. With the dominance of Marxism in the world labour and revolutionary movements in the twentieth century, it became the norm to dismiss Bakunin as muddle-headed or irrelevant. However, during his lifetime he was a major figure who gained much serious support. Marx was so pressured by Bakunin and his supporters that he had to destroy the First International by dispatching it to New York. In order that it should not succumb to anarchism, Marx killed it off through a bureaucratic manoeuvre. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the turning of China and Cuba towards the market and the ever increasingly obvious corruption of its bureaucratic elite, Bakunin's ideas and revolutionary anarchism have new possibilities. If authoritarian, state socialism has proved to be intrinsically flawed, then libertarian communist ideas once again offer a credible alternative.

The enduring qualities of Bakunin and his successors are many, but serious commitment to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the state must rank high. Bakunin was much more of a doer than a writer, he threw himself into actual insurrections, much to the trepidation of European heads of state. This militant tradition was continued by Malatesta, Makhno, Durruti, and many other anonymous militants. Those so-called anarchists who adopt a gradualist approach are an insult to anarchism. Either we are revolutionaries or we degenerate into giving ineffective lip-service that only preserves the status quo.

Bakunin forecast the dangers of state socialism. His predictions of a militarised, enslaved society dominated by a Marxist ruling class came to pass in a way that even Bakunin could not have fully envisaged. Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin outstripped even the Tsars in their arrogance and brutality. After decades of reformist socialism which have frequently formed governments, Bakunin's evaluations have been proved correct. In Britain we have the ultimate insult to working people in the form of 'Socialist Lords'. For services to capitalism, Labour MP's are ultimately granted promotion to the aristocracy.

Bakunin fought for a society based upon justice, equality and freedom. Unlike political leaders of the left he had great faith in the spontaneous, creative and revolutionary potential of working people. His beliefs and actions reflect this approach.

Revolutionaries can learn much of value from his federalism, his militancy and his contempt for the state, which in the twenty first century has assumed gigantic and dangerous proportions. Bakunin has much to teach us, but we too must develop our ideas in the face of new challenges and opportunities. We must retain the revolutionary core of his thought yet move forward.

With this in mind, the Anarchist Federation is constantly looking to develop a revolutionary anarchist praxis founded on Bakunin's ideas, but going much further to suit the demands of present-day capitalism.

We welcome the challenge!

## Further Reading

Bakunin on Anarchy, ed. Sam Dolgoff.

The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, ed. G.P. Maximoff.

The Basic Bakunin — Writings 1869–1871, ed. Robert M. Cutler.

Mikhail Bakunin — From Out of the Dustbin, ed. Robert M. Cutler.

The Social and Political Thought of Michael Bakunin,  
Richard B. Saltman.

Michael Bakunin: The Philosophical Basis of His Anarchism, Paul McLaughlin. Available at: [lib-com.org](http://lib-com.org)

Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom, Brian Morris.

Bakunin: The Creative Passion, Mark Leier.

*Editors Note: The collections by Dolgoff and Maximoff are a bit of a mixed bag, with the now out of print Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings by Arthur Lehning offering a better selection of his work. Saltman's, McLaughlin's and Morris's work go a long way towards rehabilitating the life and thought of Bakunin after so many works savaging him as a confused and clownish figure. Leier's biography is an easy read and is a good antidote to the hatchet job of a biography written by E.H. Carr.*

## Bakunin's works currently available:

- God and the State
- Marxism, Freedom and the State (ed. K.J. Kenafick)
- The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State

- Statism and Anarchy (ed. Marshall Shatz and heavy going)
- The Collected Works of Bakunin in English (forthcoming; ed. Shawn P. Wilbur)

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Anarchist Federation  
Basic Bakunin  
Fourth Edition, 2014  
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