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Will the real Bakunin please stand up?

Anarcho

July 24, 2008

The SWP are at it again. Obviously trying to recruit from the anti-globalisation movement, they yet again try to rubbish anarchism. Since libertarian ideas are perceived to be dominant in that movement, what better why to try and gain a foothold than attacking those ideas? Sadly for the SWP, they cannot do that accurately or honestly. Nor can they do so with showing the bankruptcy of their own ideology.

In **Socialist Worker** (12 May 2001) Kevin Ovenden produced an article claiming to be about Bakunin entitled "*Anarchist founder.*" The article is so flawed that the only charitable thing that can be said of it is that at least it gets the dates right.

Ovenden argues that Bakunin, in the process of taking part in workers' struggles against capitalism, "*developed his 'anarchist' ideas*" (why anarchist is placed in quotation marks is lost on me). He also argues that "*at various points since have been held up as an alternative to Marxism as a guide to overthrowing capitalism.*" Anarchism, of course, is an alternative to Marxism. However, we are anarchists, not Bakuninists, and so we reject the idea of blindly

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A reply to Leninists distortions about Bakunin. Includes a summary of his key anarchist ideas and anarchism's key difference with Leninism.

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worshipping a person. Bakunin was human and made mistakes. We use our critical judgement and embrace the positive aspects of his ideas and reject the negative.

This means that generalising from any famous anarchist or their life onto anarchism as a whole is prone to failure. However, this is a common approach for Marxists. Being unable to attack anarchism directly, they have to attack it indirectly, concentrating on the faults of individual anarchists. After all, to argue against anarchism means to argue against working class self-management of society and that would mean Marxists having to admit that the party, not the working class, is in charge. That, obviously, is **not** something they willingly admit to. Hence the compulsive need to attack and misrepresent individual anarchists rather than actually combat anarchist thought. This is usually done by misrepresenting their ideas, quoting them out of context and concentrating on the elements of their thoughts which were not totally libertarian and which latter anarchists have rejected. Ovenden's article is an example of this technique.

Ovenden admits that "*Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin had much in common*" yet repeats the usual Marxist myth that Bakunin "*thought that the factory workers tended to be 'corrupted' by capitalism*" and that he "*looked instead to peasants and poor city dwellers who were on the margins of the working class.*" Ovenden contrasts this with Marx, who "*saw how the growing industrial working class had the power to bring capitalism to a halt.*"

That this is a myth can quickly be seen from Bakunin's writings. Yes, Bakunin did argue that "*the upper layer*" of the proletariat did become "*semi-bourgeois.*" Marx and Lenin argued the same thing. Yet Bakunin did not consider all factory workers to be in this layer. He constantly argued that workers should organise internationally and "*form factory, artisan, and agrarian sections.*" His politics was based on workers organising into unions (as Marx himself noted, Bakunin urged workers to "*only organise themselves by trades-unions*"). As the industrial workers were a

small minority in the European working class, Bakunin considered it essential that they organise with artisans and peasants.

It is this union movement of city and rural toilers that has the power to end capitalism. “*Organise the city proletariat,*” argued Bakunin, “*in the name of revolutionary socialism ... unite it into one preparatory organisation together with the peasants. An uprising by the proletariat alone would not be enough ... Only a wide-sweeping revolution embracing both the city workers and peasants would be sufficiently strong to overthrow the State, backed as it is by all the resources of the possessing classes.*” The state was “*the natural protector of capitalists*” and so “*political transformation ... [and] economic transformation ... must be accomplished together and simultaneously.*”

Ovenden admits this by feebly noting that “*despite his views, Bakunin became drawn to workers’ struggles as they did indeed move centre stage.*” This is simply the acknowledgement that Bakunin placed workers’ struggle at the centre of his anarchist views (a fact quickly discovered if Bakunin’s works are actually read).

Our Trotskyist then moves on to history. He argues that “*the greatest workers’ struggle of the 19th century was the Paris Commune of 1871. It showed the differences between Marx and Bakunin sharply.*”

This is much truer than the author would like to admit. Like the Bolsheviks in February 1917, Marx initially opposed the idea of the workers rising in struggle. He wrote that “*any attempt to upset the new government in the present crisis, when the (Prussian) army is almost knocking at the doors of Paris, would be a desperate folly.*” Luckily for him (and his followers), the Parisian workers ignored his advice. The greatest workers’ struggle of the 19th century would not have happened if the Parisian workers had followed Marx.

In addition, the workers who took part in the Paris Commune were not Marx’s proletariat. Rather, factory workers were a small minority of the workforce at the time. The workers’ of Paris were predominantly artisans (Marxist Frank Jellinek noted that “*the*

Paris workers were still largely artisans”). This confirmed Bakunin’s ideas, who had argued for a union of all workers — proletarian, artisan and peasant — as the force to crush capitalism. Moreover, as Marx himself noted, these workers were influenced by anarchist ideas. Marx stated in 1866 that the French workers were “*corrupted*” by “*Proudhonist*” ideas, “*particularly those of Paris, who as workers in luxury trades are strongly attached, without knowing it [!], to the old rubbish.*” This can be seen from the ideas of the Commune, its federalism and mandated delegates, which Proudhon had been arguing for since the 1840s (Bakunin incorporated these ideas into his own politics in the 1860s).

Ignoring these facts, Ovenden continues:

“The working class and poor of Paris rose up that year and managed to hold on to the city from 18 March to 21 May. They established a new form of political power.

“Delegates were elected, but could be recalled immediately by the electorate. They were paid the average worker’s wage. The Commune broke the old capitalist state machine and began replacing many of its functions with new forms of organisation. For Marx, it became the model of how workers could form their own political power, a workers’ state, and use it to crush the capitalists. They could then move towards a society where class divisions were abolished and production was for need, not profit.”

Ironically, these events reflected Bakunin’s viewpoints almost exactly. Writing three years before the Commune, Bakunin argued that “*the federative alliance of all working men’s associations ... [will] constitute the Commune ... [the] Communal Council [will be] composed of ... delegates ... vested with plenary but accountable and removable mandates... all provinces, communes and associations ... by*

of expanding its membership only at the behest of the Bakuninists [sic!]" and "wherever the International was spreading, it was doing so under the mantle of Bakuninism." Indeed, Marx expelled Bakunin from the International precisely **because** too many people were listening to him!

Our author ends by arguing that "Bakunin is a symbol of revolutionary opposition to capitalism. But his ideas do not offer a way to overthrow it." In fact, the opposite is the case. Marx may be a symbol of "anti-capitalism" for many, but his ideas have failed time and time again. Bakunin, on the other hand, has had his ideas confirmed time and time again. He predicted numerous aspects of the Paris Commune. He predicted the soviets of the 1905 and 1917 Russian Revolutions. His ideas on workers' struggle predicted those of revolutionary syndicalism and the I.W.W. He also predicted the fate of Marxism. He predicted the end of social democracy in reformism. He predicted that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" would become the dictatorship **over** the proletariat by the followers of Marx. If we rate a theory by the correctness of its predictions then, clearly, Bakunin's ideas are stronger than Marx's.

All in all, the SWP's account of Bakunin is so flawed as to be either the product of deceit or of ignorance. If they do desire to be taken seriously in the anti-capitalist movement then they should learn the first principles of honest debate – do not misrepresent your opponent's ideas. Given their track run on anarchism, the SWP seem genetically programmed to be incapable of this. One thing is sure, by murdering the truth they murder the revolution – both literally and figuratively. Just as the Bolsheviks did in the Russian Revolution.

first reorganising on revolutionary lines ... [will] constitute the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces ... [and] organise a revolutionary force capable defeating reaction ... [and for] self-defence ... [The] revolution everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations ... organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation..."

The similarity of this vision with the events of the Paris Commune is clear. Bakunin criticised the Commune for organised themselves "in a Jacobin manner" (i.e. as a government) rather than as a federation of workers' councils.

Ovenden argues that "Marx's main criticism of the Commune was that it did not centralise its power and use it to the full. That allowed the French state to eventually crush the Commune, drowning it in blood. Bakunin, however, took a different view."

In fact, Bakunin had long argued that a revolution needed to spread and co-ordinate its defence. As he put it, "the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces ... [would] organise a revolutionary force capable of defeating reaction ... it is the very fact of the expansion and organisation of the revolution for the purpose of self-defence among the insurgent areas that will bring about the triumph of the revolution." Isolation, for Bakunin and Marx, signified the defeat of any revolution. They differed on the issue of whether this co-ordination and self-defence would be from the bottom-up (federalist) or from the top-down (centralist). To state otherwise is simply a lie.

Ovenden states that Bakunin "argued that the problem facing the mass of people was not really capitalism, but authority – any exercise of power over other people"

This, of course, is simply nonsense. This is for three reasons.

Firstly, Bakunin argued that the problem facing the mass of people (the working class) was two-fold – economic exploitation (capitalism) and political oppression (government). The "program of so-

cial revolution” was “*the total and definitive liberation of the proletariat from economic exploitation and state oppression*” and so “*the abolition of all classes*” and “*the state.*” Clearly, he argued that capitalism **was** a problem facing the mass of people. To state otherwise is nonsense. However, he did not see it as the only problem nor did he dismiss the issue of oppression. Unlike Lenin, he did not think that changing the person giving the orders ended inequality in power or oppression.

Secondly, Bakunin clearly did not oppose “all” authority or power. He clearly differentiated between types of authority/power in his writings. As he put it, “*does it follow that I reject all authority? Perish the thought.*” Bakunin always acknowledged the difference between being **an** authority — an expert — and being **in** authority, for example. He also respected the authority “*of the collective and public spirit of a society founded on equality and solidarity and the mutual respect of all its members*” as this was “*natural and rational.*” He also talked about “*the development and organisation*” of the “*social (and, by consequence, anti-political) power of the working masses*” and “*the revolutionary organisation of the natural power of the masses.*”

Clearly, then, Bakunin opposed hierarchical authority/power and not authority/power as such. He was in favour of the power of people to control their own fates and the power required to free themselves from the domination of others. This meant an opposition to authoritarian/hierarchical structures and a support for self- management (to use today’s terminology).

Thirdly, the reason why the capitalist can exploit workers is simply because they have power over them. That power, in turn, is defended by political power, the state. The worker sells their liberty to the capitalist and the circumstances that permit that specific social relationship are guaranteed by the state. Thus authority is the means by which capitalism exists, directly because it allows the exploitation of the worker and indirectly as the state exists to defend this authority and the property which is its base.

bership.” To combat this bureaucracy, “*the construction workers... sections could only defend their rights and their autonomy in only one way: the workers called general membership meetings. Nothing arouses the antipathy of the committees more than these popular assemblies... In these great meetings of the sections, the items on the agenda was amply discussed and the most progressive opinion prevailed.*”

Hardly what would be expected from someone who shunned “*open argument.*” Nor are the many articles written by Bakunin explaining his ideas or his polemics against non-anarchists mentioned. Nor is his attending meetings of his local section of the International, nor his attending its 1868 Basle congress to argue for his ideas worthy of a mention. But why let facts get in the way of a good rant?

Our authority asserts that Bakunin “*spent his life rushing from one place to another trying to artificially spark uprisings. He died in 1876, bitter at the mass of people for not listening to him.*”

Participating in two uprisings (Lyons, 1870, Bologna, 1874) when he was an anarchist (i.e. between 1866 and 1876), hardly constitutes “*rushing from one place to another.*” Bakunin also argued that a revolution must be popular in nature and could not be artificially sparked. As he put it, “*revolutions are not improvised. They are not made arbitrarily either by individuals or even the most powerful associations. They occur independently occur independently of all volition and conspiracy and are always brought about by force of circumstances. They can sometimes be foreseen and their approach can sometimes be sensed. but their outbreak can never be hastened.*” Just as Marx failed to predict the Paris Commune, so Bakunin failed to sense that Lyons and Bologna were not ripe for revolt. However, as we will indicate, Bakunin got more right than he got wrong.

As for people “*not listening to him,*” the reverse was the case! The labour movement in Switzerland, Italy and Spain were predominately libertarian at the time of his death. The Marxist Paul Thomas acknowledged that “*the International was to prove capable*

to “wage active propaganda.” He thought that “it is absolutely impossible to ignore political and philosophical questions. An exclusive pre-occupation with economic questions would be fatal for the proletariat” and so such questions “must necessarily be discussed.”

As for the question of “instinct”, he argued that “instinct is not an adequate weapon to safeguard the proletariat ... in so far as it has not yet been transformed into conscious, clearly defined thought, easily lets itself be misled.” The means of making “the thought of the working masses” reach “the level of their instinct” is “workers’ solidarity in their struggle against the bosses.” In other words, “emancipation through practical action,” “the collective struggle of the workers against the bosses,” would educate the worker, combined with propaganda from people who were already socialists/anarchists. Bakunin did not think people should “just rely on instinct,” rather he considered “the goal, then, is to make the worker fully aware of what he wants, to unjam within him a stream of thought corresponding to his instinct.”

Did Bakunin reject “open argument in mass democratic organisations”? Of course not. Indeed, quite the reverse. As regards his organisation, Bakunin argued that “everything was done in broad daylight, openly, for everyone to see ... The Alliance had regular weekly open meetings and everyone was urged to participate in the discussions... The old procedure where members sat and passively listened to speakers talking down to them from their pedestal was discarded.” He stressed that “it was established that all meetings be conducted by informal round-table conversational discussions in which everybody felt free to participate: not to be talked at, but to exchange views.”

This can also be seen from Bakunin’s discussion of union bureaucracy and how anarchists should combat it. Taking the Geneva section of the International, Bakunin notes that the construction workers’ section “simply left all decision-making to their committees ... In this manner power gravitated to the committees, and by a species of fiction characteristic of all governments the committees substituted their own will and their own ideas for that of the mem-

In other words, capitalism is a sub-set of a wider social problem, namely hierarchical authority and so capitalism needs to be fought while fighting other forms of oppression and authority. As the Russian Revolution shows, changing the boss does not end exploitation and oppression.

Ovenden acknowledges this when he states that “at first glance there does not seem to be much of a difference.” He even argues that “all socialists reject the ‘authority’ of the boss, the police, the head teacher and so on.” Needless to say, he fails to mention that socialists like Lenin and Trotsky appointed managers with dictatorial powers to run Russian industry. They also created a secret police force that was used to break strikes, arrest workers and suppress working class freedom and democracy. Indeed, the Bolsheviks went so far as to reject the authority of the soviets in whose name they claimed to rule. They disbanded soviets that were elected with non-Bolshevik majorities and repressed those, like the Kronstadt sailors, who called for free soviets. In other words, all non-anarchist socialists have no problem with authority when they, or their party leaders, are the boss or the police.

He continues that arguing that “Bakunin, and anarchists, said any form of authority breeds exploitation and oppression.” As proven above, Bakunin made no such claim. He clearly argued that hierarchical authority did so, not authority as such. Ovenden asserts that “denouncing all ‘authoritarianism’ could sound superficially radical. But fighting the capitalists requires organised power – the picket line in a strike, majority decisions at mass meetings, occupations, militant mass demonstrations which unite against the enemy, and so on.” Yet, as he acknowledges, “Bakunin, like every serious anarchist, in practice recognised this.” Bakunin also recognised it in theory as well, arguing for “the development and organisation” of the “social power of the working classes,” that strikes represented “collective strength” and by organising “the practical militant solidarity of the workers” you would “constitute an immense irresistible force.”

In other words, Bakunin, and anarchists, was well aware of the need for the oppressed to organise and have the power to resist exploitation and oppression as well as the power to run their own lives and so society. We reject the idea of giving a minority (a government) the power to make our decisions for us. Rather, power should rest in the hands of all, not concentrated in the hands of a few. In an anarchist organisation, to quote Bakunin, *“hierarchical order and advancement do not exist”* and there would be *“voluntary and thoughtful discipline”* for *“collective work or action.”* Discipline *“is simply the voluntary and thoughtful co-ordination of all individual efforts towards a common goal.”* In other words, *“power is diffused in the collective and becomes the sincere expression of the liberty of everyone.”*

Only a sophist would confuse hierarchical power with the power of people managing their own affairs, yet this is what Ovenden is doing. Simply put, to organise yourself to manage your own affairs, resisting those (such as governments or bosses) who oppress and exploit you and overthrowing their authority (*“the enemy”*) is hardly *“power over other people.”* Rather, it is power over yourself and the **destruction** of power over others. It is an act of liberty, not authority.

Ovenden moves on and gives an account of the failed uprising at Lyons Bakunin participated in:

“He travelled to the French city of Lyons the year before the Paris Commune to put himself at the head of a short lived uprising. He announced that the state was ‘abolished’ and with it all ‘authoritarianism’. He then called for capital punishment for anyone who ‘interfered in any way whatsoever’ with the new society he and his 20 supporters had declared!”

Significantly, E.H. Carr does not mention this call for capital punishment in his (hostile) biography of Bakunin. Carr does, however,

“The revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is for me not a thing that one can freely accept or reject: It is an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities — the class struggle, the heterogeneity of the revolutionary class, the necessity for a selected vanguard in order to assure the victory. The dictatorship of a party belongs to the barbarian prehistory as does the state itself, but we can not jump over this chapter, which can open (not at one stroke) genuine human history... The revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution ... Abstractly speaking, it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the ‘dictatorship’ of the whole toiling people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions. The reason for the revolution comes from the circumstance that capitalism does not permit the material and the moral development of the masses.”

Our Trotskyist distorts history some more:

“He attacked Marx for ‘teaching the workers theories’. Bakunin believed people should just rely on instinct instead. He thought revolutionaries would gain influence by voicing ‘the instincts of the people’ rather than by open argument in mass democratic organisations.”

Of course nothing is further from the truth. Indeed, it would be interesting to see where in Bakunin’s writings he attacked Marx on this issue. He considered it common sense that socialist organisations like the International Workers’ Association would *“propagandise its principles.”* One of the objectives of his organisation was

termediary of this opinion (restated by ... propaganda), on their will and their deeds." Thus it is based on discussion and getting people to agree to your ideas and is **not** imposed upon them. As Bakunin noted, governments "impose themselves violently on the masses, who are forced to obey them and to execute their decrees" while anarchist "influence will never be anything but one of opinion."

Thirdly, the similarities between Bakunin's ideas and Lenin's on this issue are clear. Ironically for our Trotskyist, Lenin's scheme for "democratic centralism" meant that the membership followed the orders of the central committee (and once the party was in power, the whole of society would follow these orders). If Bakunin is to be attacked, then so must Lenin. It is also significant that, unlike Lenin, Bakunin explicitly argued that *"this organisation rules out any idea of dictatorship and custodial control"* and *"these groups would not seek anything for themselves, neither privilege nor honour nor power."* Rather, *"the revolution everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations ... organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation."*

Lastly, in terms of anything being *"hopelessly contradictory, less than revolutionary and highly authoritarian"* then it is the ideas of Trotskyism. They are contradictory as they confuse workers power with that of the party (as Lenin put it *"the very presentation of the question — 'dictatorship of the Party or dictatorship of the class, dictatorship (Party) of the leaders or dictatorship (Party) of the masses?' — is evidence of the most incredible and hopeless confusion of mind ... [because] classes are usually ... led by political parties"*). It is less than revolutionary as it reproduces all the hierarchical aspects of bourgeois society in the so-called "vanguard" party (and, like bourgeois society, tries to hide it by representative democracy). It is highly authoritarian as it bases itself on a highly centralised system of government in which a few party leaders tell the rest of society what to do.

In the words of Trotsky:

call this event an "unorganised popular riot" and that the uprising involved a "crowd some thousands strong." It took place in a city that had recently proclaimed itself a republic as part of a "spontaneous popular rising." In other words, Lyons was already in political upheaval when Bakunin arrived and, as Carr puts it, *"the masses ... were riper for revolution than their leaders."* Thus Ovenden's account leaves much to be desired!

Carr also quotes Bakunin's proclamation as stating that the *"Committees for the Saving of France ... will exercise full powers under the immediate supervision of the people"* and the *"French people resumes full possession of its destinies."* Rather than 20 people imposing their will, Bakunin clearly saw them as delegates of the people, accountable to them and executing their wishes. This was the idea he had expressed in writings before (and after) the failed uprising in Lyons. If the revolt had succeeded, the Lyons workers would have organised themselves just as they did in Paris after the start of the Paris Commune.

Our Trotskyist notes that *"the death penalty is, of course, a highly authoritarian act"* and yet does not mention that it was re-introduced by the Bolsheviks in 1918 and used against their political opponents on the left (including anarchists). In summary, the death penalty was used extensively for anyone whom the Bolshevik leadership considered as interfering with the new state they were constructing.

Ovenden argues that *"Marx saw how workers could establish a collective democratic power. He called for socialists to be organised openly inside the working class."*

The Paris Commune, as Marx himself argued, was *"formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town."* In other words, Marx saw **"collective democratic power"** in the usual, bourgeois, sense of representative government. Bakunin, in contrast, argued that *"the future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the*

communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal." In other words, by a federation of workers' councils. Marxists only started paying lip-service to this vision in 1917!

Marx and his followers called for socialist governments. This means that workers would give their collective power to others by the usual (bourgeois) democratic means of voting for socialists in elections. Rather than manage society directly, Marx argued that they elect others to run it for them. In other words, the socialist leaders would hold power, not the workers. As Bakunin put it, *"by popular government they mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people. So-called popular representatives and rulers of the state elected by the entire nation on the basis of universal suffrage — the last word of the Marxists, as well as the democratic school — is a lie behind which the despotism of a ruling minority is concealed, a lie all the more dangerous in that it represents itself as the expression of a sham popular will."*

Ovenden argues that *"a revolutionary party had to fight over every political question and seek to win over the mass of workers"* and argues that *"Bakunin's alternative was hopelessly contradictory, less than revolutionary and highly authoritarian."* This was because *"he rejected democracy as the authoritarian rule of the majority over the minority. So his own political organisation was undemocratic. He thought that 100 members of his secret International Brotherhood, with half a dozen people issuing orders, could act as 'invisible pilots' directing mass struggles."*

Significantly, our Trotskyist makes no attempt to explain Bakunin's ideas on this issue. Nor does he mention that no modern anarchist subscribes to the organisational structures Bakunin suggested, making his account only of historic interest and of no use in evaluating modern anarchism.

Firstly, Bakunin argued that his organisation would be based on the idea that *"all members are equal; they know all their comrades and discuss and decide with them all the most important and essential*

questions bearing on the programme of the society and the progress of the cause. The decision of the general meeting is absolute law... The society chooses an Executive Committee from among their number consisting of three or five members who should organise the branches of the society and manage its activities ... on the basis of the programme and general plan of action adopted by the decision of the society as a whole." Hardly undemocratic.

Similarly, Bakunin argued that *"each member ... and each regional group have to obey it [the Executive Committee] unconditionally, except in such cases where the orders of the Committee contradict either the general programme of the principle rules, or the general revolutionary plan of action, which are known to everybody as all ... have participated equally in the discussion of them... In such a case members of the group must halt the execution of the Committee's orders and call the Committee to judgement before the general meeting ... If the general meeting is discontented with the Committee, it can always substitute another one for it..."* Again, hardly a case of a few issuing orders and the rest blindly obeying.

While few, if any, anarchists would subscribe to Bakunin's vision today, it is clear that Ovenden's summary of Bakunin's ideas is deeply flawed.

Secondly, Bakunin did not think that his organisation would impose themselves onto popular struggles. Rather, it would *"direct"* such struggles through the *"natural influence"* of its members. As Bakunin put it, its influence is *"not contrary to the free development and self-determination of the people, or its organisation from below according to its own customs and instincts because it acts on the people only by the natural personal influence of its members who are not invested with any power."*

This *"natural influence"* is *"nothing but the entirely natural organisation — neither official nor clothed in any authority or political force whatsoever — of the effect of a rather numerous group of individuals who are inspired by the same thought and headed toward the same goal, first of all on the opinion of the masses and only then, by the in-*