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Marx and Bakunin

Anton Pannekoek

1949

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Anton Pannekoek's letter to Australian anarchist Kenneth Joseph Kenafick (26 May 1949) on the differences between Marxism and anarchism. The original version of the letter is in International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam) Archives (IISG, Pannekoek Archives, F. 108 PP.8).

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... I think that we are now in a mood, determined by the present conditions produced by social development, to look more objectively, without taking sides, at that contest between two great revolutionaries that dominated the rev. movement in the 19th century; to appreciate that we have both of them, and to understand their difference and opposition. Both they took part in the revolution of 1848, as militants; but then their ways parted; they were indeed products of entirely diverse social milieus. B. [Bakunin] came from Russia w[h]ere Czarist absolutism kept down all social and spiritual progress; Marx was formed by the rising Western industrial capitalism. For Bakunin therefore liberty was the great idea; he saw in ... State power the basis of the slavery and poverty of the masses. Marx saw in capitalist exploitation the cause of misery and slavery; political freedom he saw present in England, where, however the competing small business, unorganized, he considered organization as the chief demand, which could only be ascertained by a central dominating power, democratic state power, dominated by the working class. So their basic ideas stood against one another; M.[Marx] saw that Bakunin's political freedom was not sufficient (vide England); B. saw that Marx's organized state power

would bring worst slavery. Bakunin had studied and assimilated, as many Russians, Western science and knowledge, and, different from other Russians, applied them to take part in the struggle of the exploited masses in Western Europe, thinking that their grievances were the same as his. Marx revolutionized Western science and put in this way, by his Historical Materialism and his Economic theory of Capitalism, a new basis to all further class struggle.

Their clash in the 1st International has been treated from both sides, by socialists and anarchists, each defending their great forerunners, repeating mostly all the old arguments and accusations. You know the work of the Swiss author Brupbacher on Marx and Bakunin; when the well known German historian and socialist Franz Mehring then confirmed to his point of view and expressed his own critical attitude to many of Marx's assertions, he found much reproach among his socialist party-comrades; I think I remember that Rjasanoff, certainly one of the best experts in socialist history, criticized Mehring thereon.

It was not simply the clash of two opposite characters, here the fiery spirit who appealed to the rebellious feelings to fight for freedom, there the fundamental scientist trying to organize the awakening working class. It was the problem how to unite organization and freedom into one form and method of revolutionary action. It could not be solved at that time, because its solution demands a higher stage of proletarian consciousness than was present in the 19th century. Capitalist development has since changed these conditions. Organization has become a weapon of capitalism, and in its hands state power became, in Germany and in Russia, a crushing instrument of despotic suppression of all freedom. Now that socialists calling themselves followers of Marx, in unilateral distortion of his views, acts as agents of state-capitalism, now it is natural that the attention turns, in wide circles, to the writing of Bakunin. And so I think that a book explaining his views will find much interest among the workers.

We should not forget, however, that thereby the problem is not solved. This solution can only proceed from the action of the working class, when it has to fight against worsening conditions under a more powerful state dictatorship. I think it must be clear that council organization forms the synthesis of the views that in the preceding century seemed to stand in complete antagonism. Therein the goals of organization and freedom are combined into a harmonious unit. It first appeared spontaneously in the soviets of the Russian revolution, but was there soon suppressed and distorted by state capitalism. Then in Germany 1918–19 it sprang up as Arbeiterrate, and here and in Holland, in the splinter groups opposing the development of the CP, the idea of workers' councils found ever more a clear expression. By this new point of view I think we will be able to understand better the work of our great predecessors...