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Mikhail Bakunin

Bernard Lazare

1895

Someone who knew and loved Mikhail Bakunin has published a volume of works of he who is still called the “Father of Nihilism”¹. This volume contains only fragments, and those volumes that will follow it will also only contain works that were not completed. Nevertheless, we can attempt to explicate Bakunin’s metaphysics and point put his economic concepts. For such a work it would nonetheless be better to wait to possess the complete works, since it wouldn’t be right to commit the errors in judgment and fact already committed by those who have previously spoken of Bakunin.² So we will one day return to this subject. We will at that time attempt to precisely determine the influences that worked on Bakunin, notably those of Hegel and Proudhon, and we will be able to examine if this man – whose effect was so great on so many

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¹ Michel Bakounine: *Oeuvres (Fédéralisme, Socialisme et Antithéologisme, Dieu et L’Etat)* Tresse et Stock Editeurs, Paris.

² Notably by M. De Laveleye who bases a part of his study on a certain “Revolutionary Catechism” which is not by Bakunin. I am not speaking of the works of no value like that of M. Winterer or that more recently of M. Bourdeau: “Le Socialisme Allemand et le Nihilisme Russe,” which is mediocre and ill-informed.

of his contemporaries – presented a body of doctrine to those he inspired; in a word, a social system. In this volume, in his well-known pamphlets : “The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution” and “The Political Theology of Mazzini,” in the already published fragment of “God and the State,” (published in Geneva in 1882 by Carlo Cafiero and Elisee Reclus), Bakunin doesn’t stand before us as one of those imperious ideologues capable of subjugating spirits; he doesn’t seem capable of exercising intellectual domination. He isn’t a builder of systems, and I doubt whether what we have yet to learn about him will modify our opinion. He lacks logic, doesn’t know how to order his ideas or effectively develop them. His thinking is not clear: his aptitudes were not those of a metaphysician, as some have said, but rather those of a mystic, a mystic for whom God is the Abstract Unity of the Universe, the Undetermined Being, Absolute Nothingness. What is more, if we can find Marxists, Proudhonians, Saint-Simonians, we will not find Bakuninists. Nevertheless, Bakunin’s action was not useless, far from this, and it did not end with him. There are still men who, if they don’t profess the doctrines he was unable to elaborate, are none the less guided by his spirit. Even if he did not construct theories, he nevertheless had ideas, very clear, very violent, and especially very simple ideas capable of being quickly followed and easily understood. How did he express his ideas and what were they? We have seen that he did not put them in books; in any case, he was not able to finish a single of the works he planned to write. His work presents itself like a building site covered in half carved stones, with materiel that can some day be of use, but which are not ready to be used in the building. Was he at least a powerful, seductive, persuasive orator, capable of bringing crowds along behind him, of convincing disciples? No, he was a mediocre orator, whose words were tumultuous and confused, artless, lacking in elegance; but he was passionate. It is in this that we must seek a part of his influence. He was

who must always be on the road, no matter the hour or the day. His eventful and wandering life, his abandonment in Russia of his privileges so he could go “among the people,” his years in exile in Siberia, his perilous escape, the capital punishments he risked, the prison terms he suffered, all of this added to his prestige. He appeared to those who knew him as a strange and even mysterious being, and his power over people’s spirits was increased because of this. But that he was an incomparable agitator was not owed to his external appearance. He owed it to his ardor, his faith, and his passion, and these gifts – and even these defects – made him a leader of men.

We must return at greater length to all I have said. I wanted to draw a sketch of Mikhail Bakunin, and not paint a portrait. I attempted to show what he was and I don’t claim to have shown him exactly as he was. Later, when we will have the materials that today we lack, I will be able to speak otherwise of the work and the man.

passionate, as I said, but an active passionate being, and he had the authority over all those who approached him that attaches itself to men who know how to practically realize ideas conceived by others, who objectify them, who render them living, make of them beings of flesh and blood.

He has been presented as a ferocious and blood-thirsty demon; for all those who have spoken of him he is Bakunin the Exterminator and nothing else. Even if it can be explained, this conception of the man is nonetheless insufficient. To be sure, he always had – as Herzen reproached him – the “destructive passion,” but he took it for a “creative passion.”³ Certainly all his life he could repeat what Herzen said in his youth: “With all my heart and all my intelligence I called upon savage forces for vengeance, and the destruction of the old, criminal world.”⁴ But he never considered that this destruction was an end in itself and, if he was unable to clearly present to us the future form of society, he nonetheless fought for the coming of a social state whose condition was unlimited human freedom.

He placed no hope in peaceful solutions: parliamentarianism was as odious to him as authority, and he fought them with an unheard of violence when he believed he saw them incarnated in Marx. He expected everything from revolutions, and it is interesting to see how much he was in agreement on this subject with Marx’s original opinions, with the Marx who the Marxists hadn’t yet turned away from his unabridged opinions. In any case, being a revolutionary he marched with all the men of his time who were in the opposition. Yet he differed from them in that he never preached a political revolution, nor did he expect much from a revolution carried out by one nationality, even that from which Marx expected everything: France. He dreamed of a general revolution that would cover the entire

³ A. Herzen; *De L’Autre Rive (Lettres a un ancien ami; deuxieme letter)*

⁴ Ibid.

world with ruins and debris, from which would spring young and triumphant liberty.

This destroyer, who could be found anywhere revolt dominated, in Bohemia, Dresden, Berlin, Lyon, was an extraordinary organizer. If he knew how to destroy the constructions put up by his enemies, he also knew how to found: he was the creator of the “Alliance of Socialist Democrats,” of the “International Brothers,” and of the “*Federation Jurassienne*.” And if he thus contributed to the ruin of the International, he inspired the Spanish anarchist collectivists and the Italian socialists. This Slav took along with him all the Latins. Why? Because he preached individual freedom and federalism.

We must here arrive at an understanding of Bakuninist federalism. We are today seeing a rebirth of federalism, and some of those who profess it invoke the names of Proudhon and Bakunin. I will not at this point speak of Proudhon, and another time I will seek to show how he would have received these strange disciples. As for Bakunin, the federalism he called for had nothing to do with that of the young *félîtres*. This federalism that wants to resolve each centralized country into a thousand small countries more narrow than the great one, that wants to have patriots more exclusivist, more chauvinistic, more sectarian than those we already know, does not at all resemble the economic and universal federalism of Bakunin, which wanted to suppress all countries for the profit of humanity. Bakunin wanted the suppression of the state, of the state entity standing above those who suffer under it. He wanted a power organized from bottom to top by the “free federation of individuals, districts, provinces, and nations within humanity.” But above all what he wanted that from these unions – where each would freely enter without being excluded for ethnographic or patriotic reasons – was that everyone have the right to freely leave.

It was, in fact, in order to conquer human freedom that Bakunin wanted the universal revolution. He thought that the

individual could only be free the day he would have destroyed all the idols of the old world, the day he would have broken all ties, burned all codes, undermined all the tyrannies he suffers under consciously or unconsciously. This is why he was such an enemy of politicians, of parliamentary revolutionaries, of those who rebel only to change masters, and it was for them he wrote: “Any political revolution that doesn’t have as immediate and direct goal economic equality is from the point of view of the people’s interests and rights, nothing but masked and hypocritical reaction.”

Thinking in this way, Bakunin represented an entire side of the revolution of the 19th Century and personified one of its currents. While political ideas predominated among the French Marxists and socialists, while they got from Karl Marx the declaration that the conquest of public authority is the first duty of the working class, Bakunin, by his struggles in the International against authoritarianism, against Marx and especially against political Marxism, rallied all those who thought that the revolution must be, above all, economic. Strangely, he was one of the inspirations for those Spanish anarchist collectivists who were and are – like, incidentally, their German brothers – more purely Marxist than the Marx of his final days.

But in order to show Bakunin’s actions it isn’t his dogmatic works that should be published, rather it is his correspondence, correspondence of a considerable extent, of a ceaseless activity that fomented enthusiasm throughout Europe. It is also all his work in the associations he founded, in the “Alliance of Socialist Democrats,” and especially in the congresses of the *Federation Jurassienne* we can see Bakunin as he truly was.

This hirsute giant, with his enormous head, made even larger by his enormous mane and unkempt beard, customarily went to sleep fully dressed and with his shoes on: and this symbolized his life. He had no roof, no fatherland; like an apostle he was always ready to leave for wherever he could work at bringing on the future. He was the propagandist par excellence, he