

The Anarchist Library
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The Basic Bakunin, writings 1869–1871

Translated and edited by Robert M Cutler,
Prometheus Books, New York, £6.95

Des McCarron

1996

History is written by the victors. The victory of Stalinism in the USSR was certainly one of the reasons why the works of Marx were classified, published, translated and sold into the millions. The opposite is true for Mikhail Bakunin’s political ideas.

Bakunin led an adventurous life travelling throughout Europe. When it was once remarked to him that his manuscripts were in disarray he replied “my life itself is a fragment.” (see introduction).

This has meant that many of his major works remain untranslated and published. There are many well paid academics who call themselves Marxists but only a handful, like Noam Chomsky, with the courage to call themselves anarchists. So the work of translating and printing Bakunin’s ideas remains the work of a handful of dedicated and unpaid activists. This book is a useful addition to that ongoing effort.

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It is a collection of writings spanning what Cutler describes as “a phase of his activity which is central to his anarchism, which is generally agreed to be one of his most significant projects and which marks the height of his influence in his life.”

They were originally written as articles for the Swiss newspapers ‘L’Egalite’ and ‘Le Progress’ in 1869. As articles they are well written and readable, not boring economic or political tracts.

Cutler divides the writings into five parts. Parts 2, 3 and 4 would be of greatest interest to present day anarchists or activists with an interest in anarchism. These deal with the differences between bourgeois and revolutionary socialism (his terms!), and the programme and tactics which revolutionaries need to succeed.

Much of his time was spent trying to differentiate his ideas from those of Marx. Bakunin’s position in this battle of ideas is clearly outlined in chapters like that on the policy of the International Workingmen’s (sic) Association. Bakunin emphasised the point that ideas are not handed down ready made by intellectuals hot out of the library. Ideas are learned through living and through struggling. As he says of “the worker”. (p.103)

“On the other hand, through practice and collective experience, which is naturally always more broadening and instructive than any isolated experience, the progressive expansion and development of the economic struggle will bring him more and more to recognise his true enemies: the privileged classes, including the clergy, the bourgeoisie and the nobility; and the state.”

Socialism was not bought in from “without” but was carried instinctively by the great majority.(p.140) “People have always longed for their emancipation from every yoke that has enslaved them.”

This instinct was not enough though, organisation was necessary. Bakunin pointed to the International Working Men’s Association of which he was then a member as an example of how to organise. He shows how it was acting as a leadership of ideas. (p.140) “The International’s influence has never been anything but one of opinion”.

This he compares to the state which never calls on workers for anything other than their “submission”.

Besides these basic anarchist arguments there are other articles on a range of issues like nationalism, social democracy, education, land and inheritance, and the general strike.

Overall this book is readable, inspirational and still relevant. Unlike the adoration of Marx by some Marxists, we don’t claim Bakunin as a deity with all the answers. But he did point us in the right direction. As a basic introduction to anarchist ideas you could do worse than start here.