

Bakunin, Class and Post-Anarchism

Mark Leier

2009

The postanarchist belief that contemporary anarchism needs to break with classical and modern anarchism is not based merely on an argument that historical changes in, say, the state, capitalism, technology, demographics, or knowledge have prompted a need to adjust and revamp anarchist thought to bring it up to date. The differences between the movements are held to be more profound than simple periodization and chronology. Postanarchists hold that the insights of postmodernist and poststructuralist philosophers have so thoroughly undermined traditional knowledge and values that there is little to be learned from earlier anarchists and anarchist theory. Instead, postanarchists argue that anarchism must be founded on very dissimilar philosophical principles that correspond to radical changes in critical thought and critical theory, that is, those taken from postmodernism and poststructuralism.

These schools are complicated and often contradictory, but some basic threads may be drawn from them. One important argument is that material reality cannot be known. Instead of absolute knowledge of the world, we have partial knowledge and partisan interpretations of the world. Furthermore, all our experience of the world is shared with others through language, and language is a slippery thing. Therefore, postmodernism invites profound skepticism towards knowledge and a strong relativism that challenges the idea that impartial truth is possible. As Michel Foucault put it, “‘truth,’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements,” rather than a correspondence between the real world and our perceptions of it. Finally, postmodernism and poststructuralism call for what Jean-François Lyotard has labeled “incredulity towards the metanarrative,” meaning that we must reject abstract ideas that claim to be a comprehensive explanation of historical experience or knowledge.

In this reading, earlier anarchists were wrong to assert that there was a material reality that lay behind language and that science could render true knowledge of the world. They were mistaken in their assumption that there was a fundamental or essential human nature that society had violated and that anarchist societies would allow to flourish. Politically, classical and modern anarchists were mistaken in their assertion that there was any necessary, causal connection between economic position and ideology. The idea that certain groups, such as the working class, could be identified as leading elements in the anarchist movement or as constituencies that had a material interest in anarchism, was elitist and exclusive.

Postanarchists argue that history has no goal or end; it is contingent, without laws or trends of historical development. Instead, while postanarchists cover a wide range of ideas, broadly they tend to hold instead that knowledge and values are relative and that grand narratives of history and human development are tyrannical, not liberating. The corollary of this position is that classical anarchism is only of historical, even antiquarian, interest and has little to teach us. Indeed, since some postmodernists insist we can know nothing of history, they argue that there is no real knowledge to be gleaned from history.

There are, however, some reasons to be cautious in embracing postmodernism and poststructuralism as the necessary and sufficient philosophical basis for anarchism. The first is the acknowledgement that postmodernism and poststructuralism do not inevitably lead to anarchism. Just as a reading of the Bible may lead one to liberation theology or the theological fascism of Opus Dei, or *Das Kapital* may point one to libertarian socialism or Stalinism, so may postmodernism and poststructuralism logically take one to virtually any political position on the spectrum. Arguments for relativism and the end of the meta-narrative, the belief in the indeterminacy of truth, and the idea that facts do not exist in any meaningful way may be pressed into service for any political belief: and have. If all we have, as the postmodernist philosopher of history Keith Jenkins insists, are stories of which it is meaningless even to inquire if they are true, then there is no way to distinguish between any claims, that is, to distinguish between valid and invalid claims. Thus Richard J. Evans has suggested that postmodernism gives “a licence to anyone who wants to suppress, distort, or cover up the past,” and so it is by no means clear that there is any particular reason to ground anarchism in postmodernist thought and principles.

Second, anarchism and anarchists are no less susceptible to trends and fashions and fads than any other ideology and group. As a result, different generations have sought to attach anarchism to the prevailing critical philosophy, from Hegelianism to Christianity to evolutionary science to existentialism to Buddhism to postmodernism. If there is no single philosophical road to anarchism then anarchism may not need a philosophical base for its ethical and political arguments. That each of the philosophical bases for anarchism has also served as a basis for virtually every other political ideology suggests that they have no necessary connection to anarchism. Attaching anarchism to postmodernism may not be as useful or as necessary as it first appears, for postmodernism itself may be a reflection of contemporary trends, influences, and forces rather than the ultimate, universal philosophical position; it may be as transient as any other philosophical moment.

A discussion of Bakunin’s work demonstrates that much postmodernist thought is not new at all. Bakunin may be seen as a premature anti-postmodernist, as he critiqued very similar positions more than one hundred years before they became codified and labeled as postmodernism.

In 1842, Bakunin wrote “The Reaction in Germany,” the source of his famous line, “The passion for destruction is a creative passion” [Volume One, Selection 10]. Elsewhere in the article, he denied the arguments of his contemporaries who, like postmodernists today, privileged language over material reality and experience as the primary focus of analysis. Bakunin acknowledged that of course one had to deconstruct language, but he insisted that “language was not reality.” It was reality that gave shape to language, not language that gave shape to reality. The Declaration of the Rights of Man, he observed, gave, in theory, political equality to all. But this language concealed the reality that the working class was “still condemned by its birth, by its ties with poverty and ignorance, as well, indeed, as with actual slavery.”

Implicit in this view is the assumption that we can know something about the real world, that there are facts that exist outside of our perceptions, beliefs, and language. While some expressions of truth may be false and others clearly pressed into service for partisan positions, and though our knowledge will always be imperfect, still Bakunin insisted we can know some things. Today, postmodernists such as Keith Jenkins would argue that we can know nothing about the past, and the postmodern historians, Ellen Somekawa and Elizabeth Smith, have argued that empirical evidence “cannot demonstrate the superiority of one interpretation or story-type over another.”

The more usual postmodernist argument is that while we may know some facts, for the most part these facts do not, in themselves, explain the world. This is an argument Bakunin had a great deal of sympathy for, as he was not a crude empiricist who thought that facts alone would reveal the truth. In the first place, he, along with postmodernists, understood that our interpretations were often informed not just by fact but by circumstance. “All of us,” Bakunin wrote, “are formed under the influence of the society in which we are born. But each nation, each state has its popular beliefs, its particular limitations, depending in part on its individual character, its historical development, and its relationship to the history of humanity.” We are formed by society and can obtain only a partial, subjective knowledge, and facts themselves are not so self-evident and meaningful as empiricists insist.

Furthermore, Bakunin noted that while facts can be known, in themselves they do not constitute a way of understanding the world. Pursued as the quest for facts, history is, Bakunin wrote, “reduced to the dead work of memory, the duty of which is contained only in the preservation of contingent, singular facts.” What Bakunin called “only the empty play of contingency” “does not accomplish anything and is nothing more than fantastic flashes, not based on anything and proving nothing.” In this, he seems to align himself with postmodernists such as Jenkins, who insist that there is no meaning to history, as it is largely unknowable, contingent, and accidental. “If history is” however, Bakunin wrote, “in effect, nothing more than a senseless succession of accidents, it cannot be of interest to humanity, it cannot be an object of our knowledge, and it cannot be useful to us.”

Bakunin rejected the suggestion that we can know nothing of the past. There are facts, he argued, and these can be known, if only partially and incompletely. History does have meaning, but not from the accumulation of so-called objective facts. Real knowledge, he argued, lies not in the collection of “dry facts,” but “in finding the internal, necessary link within facts.” This requires interpretation and theory. The key to understanding the past is not to reject the claims of the empiricists on the one hand and whom he called the theorists, whom we might call the postmodernists, on the other. It is necessary to understand that the two sides had essentially misstated the argument, driven apart by what he characterized as “abstraction and extremism.” While people might line up on one side or the other, and while the debate might tilt first towards one side and then the other, both sides need each other, for “there is no theorist who is not an empiricist, just as there is no empiricist who is not a theorist.” Just as empiricists such as von Ranke do offer interpretations, so too do postmodernist historians use footnotes. Thus Bakunin argued that we can have real knowledge of the world and the past through empirical study combined with theoretical analysis.

Bakunin’s philosophical resolution of this debate, I expect, will satisfy no one, largely because the fun lies in the debate itself, not in the resolving of it. In particular, postanarchists may reject Bakunin’s claim that we can understand and make sense of the past as a teleological causal argument based on the belief that there is a purpose to history. This is, the argument continues,

a metaphysical notion of laws of historical motion that allows us to discern—or to invent and impose—a scheme of an unfolding historical development. Bakunin himself argued against teleological explanations, refusing to countenance the “subjugation of living individuals to general abstractions,” whether these were God’s will, the Whiggish development of institutions, the triumph of capitalism, or the cruder forms of historical materialism offered up not by Marx but by some Marxists. All such faith in metaphysics, he thundered, is “fatal to my reason, my liberty...it would immediately transform me into a stupid slave, an instrument of the will and interests of others” [Volume One, Selection 24].

But, there is a vast difference between teleology and our understanding of a system that has a persistent tendency to achieve and maintain a certain state or direction. There is a vast difference between the belief that history is progressing in a particular, inevitable direction and understanding that the present was caused by people, forces, and tendencies that we can know something about. While Bakunin rejected teleology, he also rejected the idea that history was just contingency and accident. And for him, one of the crucial facts of history was economic exploitation. The quest for abstract political freedom and political equality taken up by philosophers and liberals in his day did little to improve the lives of “the people, the poor class, which without doubt constitutes the greatest part of humanity.” Exploitation, not philosophy, provided the key to understanding the world and to political action; it was the underlying fact that interpretation had to acknowledge.

In “The Reaction in Germany,” he argued that “labour is the sole producer of wealth.” Moreover, work is the “fundamental basis of dignity and human rights, for it is only by means of its own free, intelligent work that humanity becomes a creator...and creates the world of civilization.” But work in feudalist and capitalist societies meant something very different for most people, for whom labour was reduced to a “purely mechanical task, no different from that of a beast of burden.” Most labour, he observed, was designed “more to deaden than develop their natural intelligence.” Meanwhile, to live off the labour of others, Bakunin concluded, was to be “a parasite, an exploiter, and a thief.” In Bakunin’s words, “to be a slave is to be forced to work for another; to be a master is to live off the work of another.”

Of particular importance is Bakunin’s insistence that the division of humanity into classes is systemic. The division between those who own capital and land and the “working classes without capital and land” is reproduced and self-sustaining over time; it is not accidental or contingent. Furthermore, this struggle between “citizens and wage earners, that is to say, those who are compelled to work, not by law but by reality—that is the antagonism of the modern world.”

This insistence on class is important for several reasons. First, it moves politics from abstract discussions over “justice” and anchors it in experience. Second, it demonstrates that “the people” is not a unified notion, for material interests— class—divide people. Whatever other issues may unite people, class remains a critical fault line. Finally, the argument about class suggests that while focusing on local issues, on identity questions, or on reforms is important, none touches on the primary issue, exploitation, that affects the vast majority of humanity. Talking about class, therefore, is more than a matter of determining a metaphysical “historical agent”; it is about seeing politics as rooted in exploitation, which is itself rooted in class structure.

Bakunin focuses our attention on the historical structures of capital and the state and presents a systemic critique of them that is still useful today because their fundamental nature has not much changed since his time. And that is perhaps the chief objection to postanarchism: its ten-

dency, by no means universal, but certainly influential, to play down class struggle in favour of politics aimed primarily at the state and individual emancipation.

We see this especially in those postanarchists who look not to Bakunin but to Max Stirner and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, seeing in their individualism and rejection of class a politics more in line with postmodernist thought. However, as Rita Felski puts it in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, “class is essentially, rather than contingently, a hierarchical concept.”

It is not, perhaps, surprising that intellectuals tend to de-emphasize class exploitation; by their very social position, they are somewhat removed from class antagonisms. They have a little property, some control over their work, and all the tools needed to have considerable say and considerable sway in battles that may be fought within the realm of politics. That is why Bakunin was critical of intellectuals. Education was one of the ways the system reproduced itself and confirmed a few people as a class with access to all the good things of life and the majority as a class that toiled to provide for them.

This runs counter to much of what we hear today: education is supposed to break down class walls, not reinforce them. We are still told that education, upgrading, retraining are the key to surviving changes in the economy, that education equals wealth. But poverty is systemic and it is based on exploitation, not ignorance. Thus, today, no less than in Bakunin’s time, often “a very bright worker must stand silent while a stupid scholar gets the better of him, not because the latter has any sense but because of the education denied the worker.”

Education, Bakunin argued, is itself a form of capital, and if all other divisions in society were eliminated save education, humanity would again soon be divided into “a large number of slaves and a small number of rulers, the former working for the latter” [Volume One, Selection 64]. That is why, he suggested, the privileged called only for “*some* education of the people,” but restrict “total education” for themselves. The net result is to “divide the world into a small, excessively affluent, learned, ruling minority, and a vast majority of wretched, ignorant, slavish proletarians.” In addition, he pointed out, much so-called education was designed to enable the rich to better oppress workers. The “science of government, the science of administration, and the science of finance,” he wrote, are the “science of fleecing the people without making them complain too much and, when they begin to complain, the science of imposing silence, forbearance, and obedience on them by scientifically organized violence; the science of tricking and dividing the masses of people, of keeping them eternally and advantageously ignorant.”

Bakunin’s solution fits today: “Improve working conditions, return to labour what justice demands it be given, and in this way give the people security, affluence and leisure. Then have no doubt, they will educate themselves. They will toss aside all your catechisms and create a more generous, sane, and elevated civilization than yours.” This is a call to recognize the fundamental importance of class, and it is a call that is too often unheeded.

This is not to say that battles outside those of class are unimportant. It is not, for example, sufficient to dismiss fights for gender and sexual equality, racial equality, and the like as mere “identity politics.” Yet by the same token, it is surely a mistake to minimize class exploitation. After all, while our contemporary world may be “post” a great many things, it is assuredly not post-capitalist. Even in the so-called “industrialized world,” real wages have shrunk, the working day has gotten longer, the security, affluence, and leisure of workers has worsened. Whether you call them slaves or serfs or workers or a labour force, or, as the CEO of Starbucks does, “partners,” makes little difference so long as people are forced to work by “hunger as well as the political

and social institutions” while their labour makes possible “the complete or relative idleness of others.”

My suggestion here is not that postanarchism is without merit or that we should ask ourselves, “what would Bakunin do?” when confronted with philosophical, political, and ethical choices. I am claiming, however, that the fundamental social relationships that were developing in his lifetime were real, reflected material interests, and have not much changed. Therefore much of his critique of philosophy, capital and the state is still applicable and useful today. His most important contribution was to understand that political freedom and economic equality are not opposed to each other; they are essential for each other. He summed it up nicely in 1867: “Liberty without socialism is privilege and injustice; socialism without liberty is slavery and brutality.”

Postanarchist thought uses very sophisticated, elegant, though not new, philosophical arguments to suggest that postmodernist philosophy is the basis for justifying anarchism. To the degree that this downplays class exploitation, postanarchism may resemble liberalism more than anarchism. The problem with liberalism is that its vision of political freedom leaves the chains of class intact, whatever improvements may be made for other groups in society. The irony is that just as activists have put anarchism on the agenda in new and exciting ways, philosophers threaten to make it irrelevant. Since this is not a postmodern or new problem, Bakunin’s attempts to think through these problems may still be of some use as anarchism moves into the twenty-first century.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Mark Leier
Bakunin, Class and Post-Anarchism
2009

Robert Graham, "Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas", Volume Three
Mark Leier is the author of *Mikhail Bakunin: The Creative Passion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006) and numerous other works on labour history, including *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1990).

theanarchistlibrary.org