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Michael Bakunin

Max Nettlau

June 1914

Most centenarians, even when born much later and still among us, are but dried-up relics of a remote past; whilst some few, though gone long since, remain full of life, and rather make us feel ourselves how little life and energy there is in most of us. These men, in advance of their age, prepared new ways for coming generations, who are often but too slow to follow them up. Prophets and dreamers, thinkers and rebels they are called, and of those who, in the strife for freedom and social happiness for all, united the best qualities of these four descriptions, Michael Bakunin is by far the best known. In recalling his memory, we will not forget the many less known thinkers and rebels, very many of whom from the “thirties” to the early “seventies” of last century had, by personal contact, their share in forming this or that part of his personality. None of them, however, had the great gift of uniting into one current of revolt all the many elements of revolutionary thought, and that burning desire to bring about collective revolutionary action which constitute Bakunin’s most fascinating characteristics. Courageous and heroic rebels always existed, but their aims were too often very Darrow they had not overcome political, religious, and social prejudices. Again, the most perfect

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“systems” were worked out theoretically; but these generous thinkers lacked the spirit to resort to action for their realization, and their methods were tame, meek, and mild. Fourier waited for years for a millionaire to turn up who would hand him the money to construct the first Phalanstery. The Saint-Simonians had their eyes on kings or sons of kings who might be persuaded to realise their aims “from above.” Marx was content to “prove” that the decay of Capitalism and the advent of the working classes to power will happen automatically.

Among the best known Socialists, Robert Owen and Proudhon, Blanqui and Bakunin, tried to realise their ideas by corresponding action. Blanqui’s splendid “No God, No Master,” is, however, counteracted by the authoritarian and narrow political and nationalist character of his practical action. Both Owen and Proudhon represent, as to the means of action, the method of *free experimentation*, which is, in my opinion, the only one which holds good aside of the method of *individual and collective revolt* advocated by Bakunin and many others. Circumstances—the weakness of small minorities in face of the brute force of traditional authority, and the indifference of the great mass of the population—have as yet no chance to either method to show its best, and, the ways of progress being manifold, neither of them may ever render the other quite superfluous. These experimental Socialists and Anarchists, then, are neither superior nor inferior, but simply different, dissimilar from Bakunin, the fiercest representative of the idea of real revolutionary action.

His economics are not original; he accepted willingly Marx’s dissection of the capitalist system; nor did he dwell in particular on the future methods of distribution, declaring only the necessity for each to receive the full produce of his labour. But to him exploitation and oppression were not merely economic and political grievances which fairer ways of distribution and apparent participation in political power (democracy) would abolish; he saw clearer than almost all

Socialists before him the close connection of all forms of *authority*, religious, political, social, and their embodiment, *the State*, with economic exploitation and submission. Hence, *Anarchism*—which need not be defined here—was to him the necessary basis, the essential factor of all real Socialism. In this he differs fundamentally from ever so many Socialists who glide over this immense problem by some verbal juggle between “Government” and “administration,” “the State” and “society,” or the like, because a real desire for freedom is not yet awakened in them. This desire and its consequence, the determination to revolt to realise freedom, exists in every being; I should say that it exists in some form and to some degree in the smallest particle that composes matter, but ages of priest- and State- craft have almost smothered it, and ages of alleged democracy, of triumphant Social Democracy even, are not likely to kindle it again.

Here Bakunin’s Socialism sets in with full strength mental, personal, and social freedom to him are inseparable—*Atheism*, *Anarchism*, *Socialism* an organic unit. His Atheism is not that of the ordinary Freethinker, who may be an authoritarian and an anti-Socialist; nor is his Socialism that of the ordinary Socialist, who may be, and very often is, an authoritarian and a Christian; nor would his Anarchism ever deviate into the eccentricities of Tolstoi and Tucker. But each of the three ideas penetrates the other two and constitutes with them a living realisation of freedom, just as all our intellectual, political, and social prejudices and evils descend from one common source—authority. Whoever reads “God and the State,” the best known of Bakunin’s many written expositions of these ideas, may discover that when the scales of religion fall from his eyes, at the same moment also the State will appear to him in its horrid hideousness, and anti-Statist Socialism will be the only way out. The thoroughness of Bakunin’s Socialist propaganda is, to my impression, unique.

From these remarks it may be gathered that I dissent from certain recent efforts to revindicate Bakunin almost exclusively as a Syndicalist. He was, at the time of the International, greatly interested in seeing the scattered masses of the workers combining into trade societies or sections of the International. Solidarity in the economic struggle was to be the only basis of working-class organisation. He expressed the opinion that these organisations would spontaneously evolve into federated Socialist bodies, the natural basis of future society. This automatic evolution has been rightly contested by our Swiss comrade Bertoni But did Bakunin really mean it when he sketched it out in his writings of elementary public propaganda We must not forget that Bakunin—and here we touch one of his shortcomings—seeing the backward dispositions of the great masses in his time, did not think it possible to propagate the whole of his ideas directly among the people. By insisting on purely economic organisation, he wished to protect the masses against the greedy politician who, under the cloak of Socialism, farms and exploits their electoral “power” in our age of progress!

He also wished to prevent their falling under the leadership of sectarian Socialism of any kind. He did not wish them, however, to fall into the hands and under the thumbs of Labour leaders, whom he knew, to satiety, in Geneva, and whom he stigmatised in his *Egalité* articles of 1869. His idea was that among the organised masses interested in economic warfare thoroughgoing revolutionists, Anarchists, should exercise an invisible yet carefully concerted activity, co-ordinating the workers’ “forces and making them strike a common blow, nationally and internationally, at the right moment. The secret character of this inner circle, *Fraternité* and *Alliance*, was to be a safeguard against ambition and leadership. This method may have been derived from the secret societies of past times; Bakunin improved it as best he could in the direction of freedom, but could not, of course, remove the evils resulting from every infringement of

Ferrer”’s name; but, in my opinion at least, a complacent admiration of Syndicalism has too often replaced every thought of Anarchist action. I say again: it is preposterous to think that Bakunin would have been a Syndicalist and nothing else—but *what he would have tried to make of Syndicalism*, how he would have tried to group these and many other materials of revolt and to lead them to action, this my imagination cannot sketch out, but I feel that things would have gone otherwise, and the capitalists would sleep less quietly. I am no admirer of personalities, and have many faults to find with Bakunin also on other grounds, but this I feel, that where he was rebellion grew round him, whilst to-day, with such splendid material, rebellion is nowhere. South Africa, Colorado, are ever so hopeful events, but think what a Bakunin would have made of them—and then we can measure the value of this man in the struggle for freedom.

information on Bakunin was accessible to the Anarchists of the "eighties," Bakunin's influence in those years remained small. I ought to have mentioned that certain opinions of Bakunin's gained much ground in the Russian revolutionary movement of the "seventies" and later, but cannot dwell further on this.

In 1882, Reclus and Cafiero published the choicest extract from the many manuscripts left by Bakunin: "Dieu et Etat!" (God and the State), a pamphlet which B. R. Tucker fortunately translated into English (1883 or 1884). This or its English reprint circulated in England when no other English Anarchist pamphlet existed, and its radical Anarchist freethought or thoroughly freethinking Anarchism certainly left lasting marks on the early Anarchist propagandists, and will continue to do so. Of course, the same applies to translations in many countries.

About 1896, a considerable part of Bakunin's correspondence was published, preceded and followed by many extracts from his unpublished manuscripts, a part of which is now before us in the six volumes of the Paris edition of his works. It became possible, with the help of these and many other sources, to examine his life in detail, and in particular to give, proofs in hand, the story of the great struggle in the International, and to scatter the calumnies and lies heaped up by the Marxist writers and the bourgeois authors who followed them.

All this brought about a revival in the interest for Bakunin; but is there not a deeper cause for such a revival? When Bakunin was gone, his friends felt perhaps rather relieved, for the strain he put on their activity was sometimes too great for them. We in our times, or some of us, at least, are perhaps in the opposite situation: there is no strain at all put on us, and we might wish for somebody to rouse us. Thus we look back at any rate with pathetic sympathy on the heroic age of Anarchism, from Bakunin's times to the early "nineties" in France. Many things have happened since then also—I need but recall

freedom, however small and well-intentioned it may be in the beginning. This problem offers wide possibilities, from dictatorship and "democratic" leadership to Bakunin's invisible, preconcerted initiative, to free and open initiative, and to entire spontaneity and individual freedom. To imitate Bakunin in our days in this respect would not mean progress, but repeating a mistake of the past.

In criticising this secret preconcerted direction of movements, considered worse than useless in our time, we ought not to overlook that the then existing reason for making such arrangements has also nearly gone. To Bakunin, who participated in the movements of 1848–49, in the Polish insurrection in the early "sixties," in secret Italian movements, and who, like so many, foresaw the fall of the French Empire and a revolution in Paris, which might have happened under better auspices than the Commune of 1871—to him, then, an international Socialist "S8 or "48, a real social revolution, was a tangible thing which might really happen before his eyes, and which he did his best to really bring about by secretly influencing and co-ordinating local mass movements. We in our sober days have so often been told that all this is impossible, that revolutions are hopeless and obsolete, that, with few exceptions, no effort is ever made, and the necessity of replacing semi-authoritarian proceedings like that of Bakunin by the free play of individual initiative or other improved methods, never seems to arise.

Bakunin's best plans failed from various reasons, one of which was the smallness of the means which the movements, then in their infancy, offered to him in every respect. Since all these possibilities are a matter of the past, let me dwell for a moment on the thought of what Bakunin would have done had he lived during the First of May movements of the early "nineties" or during the Continental general strike efforts of the ten years next following. With the tenth part of the materials these movements contained, which exploded some here, some there. Like

fireworks, in splendid isolation, Bakunin would have attacked international Capitalism and the State everywhere in a way never yet heard of. And movements which really create new methods of successful struggle against a strong Government, like the Suffragette and the Ulster movements, would never have let him stand aside in cool disdain, because their narrow purpose was *Dot* his own. I fancy he would never have rested day and night until he had raised the social revolutionary movement to the level of similar or greater efficiency. To think of this makes one feel alive; to see the dreary reality of our wise age lulls one to sleep again. I am the last one to overlook the many Anarchists who sacrificed themselves by deeds of valour—the last also to urge others to do what I am not doing myself: I merely state the fact that with Bakunin a great part of faith in the revolution died, that the hope and confidence which emanated from his large personality were never restored, and that the infinite possibilities of the last twenty-five years found many excellent comrades who did their best, but none upon whose shoulders the mantle of Bakunin has fallen.

What, then, was and is Bakunin's influence?

It is wonderful to think how he arose in the International at the right moment to prevent the influence of Marx, always predominant in the Northern countries, from becoming general. Without him, dull, political, electioneering Marxism would have fallen like mildew also on the South of Europe. We need but think how Cafiero, later on the boldest Italian Anarchist, first returned to Naples as the trusted friend and admirer of Marx; how Lafargue, Marx's son-in-law, was the chosen apostle of Marxism for Spain, etc. To oppose the deep-laid schemes of Marx, a man of Bakunin's experience and initiative was really needed; by him alone the young movements of Italy and Spain, those of the South of France and of French-speaking Switzerland, and a part of the Russian movement, were welded together, learnt to practise international solidarity, and to prepare international action. This alone created a lasting

basis for the coming Anarchist movement, whilst everywhere else the other Socialist movements, described as Utopian and unscientific, had to give way to Marxism, proclaimed as the only scientific doctrine! Persecutions after revolutionary attempts often reduced these free territories of Anarchism to a minimum; but when Italy, Spain, and France were silenced, some corner in Switzerland where Bakunin's seed had fallen always remained, and in this way, thanks to the solid work of Bakunin and his comrades, mainly from 1868 to 1874, Anarchy, was always able to face her enemies and to revive.

The immediate influence of Bakunin was reduced after he had retired from the movement in 1874, when certain friends left him; bad health—he died in June, 1876—prevented him continuing his work with fresh elements gathered round him. Soon after his death a period of theoretical elaboration began, when the methods of distribution were examined and *Communist* Anarchism in its present form was shaped. In those years also, after the failure of many collective revolts, the struggle became more bitter, and individual action, propaganda by deed was resorted to, a proceeding which made preconcerted secret arrangements in Bakunin's manner useless. In this way, both his economic ideas, *Collectivist* Anarchism, and his favourite method of action alluded to, became so to speak obsolete, and were neglected.

Add to this that from about 1879 and 1880 Anarchism could be openly propagated on a large scale in France (mainly in Paris and in the Lyons region). This great extension of the propaganda gave so much new work, a new spirit entered the groups, soon arts and science were permeated with Anarchism—Elisée Reclus's wonderful influence was at work. In Bakunin's stormy days there was no time for this, through no fault of his. In short, Anarchism in France and in many other countries was in its vigorous *youth*, a period when the tendency to look ahead is greatest, and the past is neglected like a cradle of infancy. For this reason, and because very little