

About Freedom

Mikhail Bakunin

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The idea of freedom by the liberals

The doctrinaire liberals, reasoning from the premises of individual freedom, pose as the adversaries of the State. They maintain that the government, i.e., the body of functionaries organized and designated to perform the functions of the State is a necessary evil, and that the progress of civilization consists in always and continuously diminishing the attributes and the rights of the States. Such is the theory, but in practice these same doctrinaire liberals, when the existence or the stability of the State is seriously threatened, are just as fanatical defenders of the State as are the monarchists and the Jacobins.

Their adherence to the State, which flatly contradicts their liberal maxims, can be explained in two ways: in practice, their class interests make the immense majority of doctrinaire liberals members of the bourgeoisie. This very numerous and respectable class demand, only for themselves, the exclusive rights and privileges of complete license. The socio-economic base of its political existence rests upon no other principle than the unrestricted license expressed in the famous phrases *laissez faire* and *laissez passer*. But they want this anarchy only for themselves, not for the masses who must remain under the severe discipline of the State because they are "too ignorant to enjoy this anarchy without abusing it." As a matter of fact, if the masses, tired of working for others, should rebel, the whole bourgeois edifice would collapse. Always and everywhere, when the masses are restless, even the most enthusiastic liberals immediately reverse themselves and become the most fanatical champions of the omnipotence of the State.

In addition to this practical reason, there is still another of a theoretical nature which also leads even the most sincere liberals back to the cult of the State. They consider themselves liberals because their theory on the origin of society is based on the principle of individual freedom, and it is precisely because of this that they must inevitably recognize the absolute right of sovereignty of the State.

According to them, individual freedom is not a creation, a historic product of society. They maintain, on the contrary, that individual freedom is anterior to all society and that all men are endowed by God with an immortal soul. The human being is accordingly a complete being, absolutely independent, apart from and outside society. As a free agent, anterior to and apart from society, he necessarily forms his society by a voluntary act, a sort of contract, be it instinctive or conscious, tacit or formal. In short, according to this theory, individuals are not the product of society but, on the contrary, are led to create society by some necessity such as work or war.

It follows from this theory that society, strictly speaking, does not exist. The natural human society, the beginning of all civilization, the only milieu in which the personality and the liberty of man is formed and developed does not exist for them. On the one hand, this theory recognizes only self-sufficient individuals living in isolation, and on the other hand, only a society arbitrarily created by them and based on a formal or tacit contract, i.e., on the State. (They know very well that no state in history has ever been created by contract, and that all states were established by conquest and violence.)

The mass of individuals of whom the State consists are seen as in line with this theory, which is singularly full of contradictions. Each of them is, considered on the one hand, an immortal soul endowed with free will. All are untrammelled beings altogether sufficient unto themselves and in need of no other person, not even God, for, being immortal, they are themselves gods. On the other hand, they are brutal, weak, imperfect, limited, and altogether subject to the forces of nature which encompass them and sooner or later carry them off to their graves.

...

Under the aspect of their earthly existence, the mass of men present so sorry and degrading a spectacle, so poor in spirit, in will and initiative, that one must be endowed with a truly great capacity for self-delusion, to detect in them an immortal soul, or even the faintest trace of free will. They appear to be absolutely determined: determined by exterior nature, by the stars, and by all the material conditions of their lives; determined by laws and by the whole world of ideas or prejudices elaborated in past centuries, all of which they find ready to take over their lives at birth. The immense majority of individuals, not only among the ignorant masses but also among the civilized and privileged classes, think and want only what everybody else around them thinks and wants. They doubtlessly believe that they think for themselves, but they are only slavishly repeating by rote, with slight modifications, the thoughts and aims of the other conformists which they imperceptibly absorb. This servility, this routine, this perennial absence of the will to revolt and this lack of initiative and independence of thought are the principle causes for the slow, desolate historical development of humanity.

The idea of freedom by the anarchists

For us, materialists and realists ... [the human being] was born a ferocious beast and a slave, and has gradually humanized and emancipated himself only in society.... He can achieve this emancipation only through the collective effort of all the members, past and present, of society, which is the source, the natural beginning of his human existence.

...

The human being completely realizes his individual freedom as well as his personality only through the individuals who surround him, and thanks only to the labor and the collective power of society. Without society he would surely remain the most stupid and the most miserable among all the other ferocious beasts... Society, far from decreasing his freedom, on the contrary creates the individual freedom of all human beings. Society is the root, the tree, and liberty is its fruit. Hence, in every epoch, the human being must seek his freedom not at the beginning but at the end of history. It can be said that the real and complete emancipation of every individual is the true, the great, the supreme aim of history.

...

The materialistic, realistic, and collectivist conception of freedom, as opposed to the idealistic, is this: the human being becomes conscious of himself and his humanity only in society and only by the collective action of the whole society. He frees himself from the yoke of external nature only by collective and social labor, which alone can transform the earth into an abode favorable to the development of humanity. Without such material emancipation the intellectual and moral emancipation of the individual is impossible. He can emancipate himself from the yoke of his own nature, i.e. subordinate his instincts and the movements of his body to the conscious direction of his mind, the development of which is fostered only by education and training. But education and training are preeminently and exclusively social ... hence the isolated individual cannot possibly become conscious of his freedom.

To be free ... means to be acknowledged and treated as such by all his fellowmen. The liberty of every individual is only the reflection of his own humanity, or his human right through the conscience of all free men, his brothers and his equals.

I can feel free only in the presence of and in relationship with other men. In the presence of an inferior species of animal I am neither free nor a man, because this animal is incapable of conceiving and consequently recognizing my humanity. I am not myself free or human until or unless I recognize the freedom and humanity of all my fellowmen.

Only in respecting their human character do I respect my own. A cannibal who devours his prisoner ... is not a man but a beast. A slave owner is not a man but a master. By denying the humanity of his slaves he also abrogates his own humanity, as the history of all ancient societies proves. The Greeks and the Romans did not feel like free men. They did not consider themselves as such by human right. They believed in privileges for Greeks and Romans and only for their own countries, while they remained unconquered and conquered other countries. Because they believed themselves under the special protection of their national gods, they did not feel that they had the right to revolt ... and themselves fell into slavery.

...

I am truly free only when all human beings, men and women, are equally free. The freedom of other men, far from negating or limiting my freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary premise and confirmation. It is the slavery of other men that sets up a barrier to my freedom, or what amounts to the same thing, it is their bestiality which is the negation of my humanity. For my dignity as a man, my human right which consists of refusing to obey any other man, and to determine my own acts in conformity with my convictions is reflected by the equally free conscience of all and confirmed by the consent of all humanity. My personal freedom, confirmed by the liberty of all, extends to infinity.

The materialistic conception of freedom is therefore a very positive, very complex thing, and above all, eminently social, because it can be realized only in society and by the strictest equality and solidarity among all men. One can distinguish some main elements in the attainment of freedom. The first is eminently social. It is the fullest development of all the faculties and powers of every human being, by education, by scientific training, and by material prosperity; things which can only be provided for every individual by the collective, material, intellectual, manual, and sedentary labor of society in general.

The second element of freedom is negative. It is the revolt of the individual against all divine, collective, and individual authority.

The revolt against a God-master, the tyrannical State and a stifling Society

The first revolt is against the supreme tyranny of theology, of the phantom of God. As long as we have a master in heaven, we will be slaves on earth. Our reason and our will will be equally annulled. As long as we believe that we must unconditionally obey – and vis – a – vis God, no other obedience is possible – we must of necessity passively submit, without the least reservation, to the holy authority of his consecrated and unconsecrated agents, messiahs, prophets, divinely inspired law-makers, emperors, kings, and all their functionaries and ministers, representatives and consecrated servitors of the two greatest institutions which impose themselves upon us, and which are established by God himself to rule over men; namely, the Church and the State. All temporal or human authority stems directly from spiritual and/or divine authority. But authority is the negation of freedom. God, or rather the fiction of God, is the consecration and the

intellectual and moral source of all slavery on earth, and the freedom of mankind will never be complete until the disastrous and insidious fiction of a heavenly master is annihilated.

This is naturally followed by the revolt against the tyranny of men, individual as well as social, represented and legalized by the State. At this point, we must make a very precise distinction between the official and consequently dictatorial prerogatives of society organized as a state, and of the natural influence and action of the members of a non-official, non-artificial society.

The revolt against this natural society is far more difficult for the individual than it is against the officially organized society of the State. Social tyranny, often overwhelming and baneful, does not assume the violent imperative character of the legalized and formalized despotism which marks the authority of the State. It is not imposed in the form of laws to which every individual, on pain of judicial punishment, is forced to submit. The action of social tyranny is gentler, more insidious, more imperceptible, but no less powerful and pervasive than is the authority of the State. It dominates men by customs, by mores, by the mass of prejudices, by the habits of daily life, all of which combine to form what is called public opinion.

It overwhelms the individual from birth, it permeates every facet of life, so that each individual is, often unknowingly, in a sort of conspiracy against himself. It follows from this that to revolt against this influence that society naturally exercises over him, he must at least to some extent revolt against himself. For, together with all his natural tendencies and material, intellectual, and moral aspirations, he is himself nothing but the product of society, and it is in this that the immense power exercised by society over the individual lies.

From the angle of absolute morality, i.e., of human respect, this power of society can be beneficent and it can also be injurious. It is beneficial when it tends to the development of science, of material prosperity, of freedom, equality, and solidarity. It is baneful when it tends in the opposite direction. A man born into a society of brutes tends to remain a brute; born into a society ruled by priests, he becomes an idiot, a sanctimonious hypocrite; born into a band of thieves, he will probably become a thief; and if he is unfortunately born into a society of demigods who rule this earth, nobles, princes, he will become a contemptible enslaver of society, a tyrant. In all these cases, revolt against the society in which he was born is indispensable for the humanization of the individual.

But, I repeat, the revolt of the individual against society is much more difficult than revolt against the State. The State is a transitory, historic institution, like its brother institution, the Church, the regulator of the privileges of a minority and the real enslavers of the immense majority.

Revolt against the State is much less difficult because there is something in the very nature of the State that provokes revolt. The State is authority, force. It is the ostentation and infatuation with force. It does not insinuate itself. It does not seek to convert; and if at times it meliorates its tyranny, it does so with bad grace. For its nature is not to persuade, but to impose itself by force. Whatever pains it takes to mask itself, it is by nature the legal violator of the will of men, the permanent negator of their freedom. Even when the State commands the good it brings forth evil; for every command slaps liberty in the face; because when the good is decreed, it becomes evil from the standpoint of human morality and liberty. Freedom, morality, and the human dignity of the individual consists precisely in this; that he does good not because he is forced to do so, but because he freely conceives it, wants it, and loves it.

The authority of society is imposed not arbitrarily or officially, but naturally. And it is because of this fact that its effect on the individual is incomparably much more powerful than that of

the State. It creates and molds all individuals in its midst. It passes on to them, slowly, from the day of birth to death, all its material, intellectual, and moral characteristics. Society, so to speak, individualizes itself in every individual.

The real individual is from the moment of his gestation in his mother's womb already predetermined and particularized by a confluence of geographic, climatic, ethnographic, hygienic, and economic influences. which constitute the nature of his family, his class, his nation, his race. He is shaped in accordance with his aptitudes by the combination of all these exterior and physical influences. What is more, thanks to the relatively superior organization of the human brain, every individual inherits at birth, in different degrees, not ideas and innate sentiments, as the idealists claim, but only the capacity to feel, to will, to think, and to speak. There are rudimentary faculties without any content. Whence comes their content? From society ... impressions, facts, and events coalesced into patterns of thought, right or wrong, are transmitted from one individual to another. These are modified, expanded, mutually complimented and integrated by all the individual members and groups of society into a unique system, which finally constitutes the common consciousness, the collective thought of a society. All this, transmitted by tradition from one generation to another, developed and enlarged by the intellectual labors of centuries, constitutes the intellectual and moral patrimony of a nation, a class, and a society.

...

Every new generation upon reaching the age of mature thought finds in itself and in society the established ideas and conceptions which serve it as the point of departure, giving it, as it were, the raw material for its own intellectual and moral labor... These are the conceptions of nature, of man, of justice, of the duties and rights of individuals and classes, of social conventions, of the family, of property, and of the State, and many other factors affecting the relations between men. All these ideas are imprinted upon the mind of the individual, and conditioned by the education and training he receives even before he becomes fully aware of himself as an entity. Much later, he rediscovers them, consecrated and explained, elaborated by theory, which expresses the universal conscience or the collective prejudices of the religious, political, and economic institutions of the society to which he belongs. He is himself so imbued with these prejudices that he is, involuntarily, by virtue of all his intellectual and moral habits, the upholder of these iniquities, even if he were not personally interested in defending them.

It is certainly not surprising that the ideas passed on by the collective mind of society should have so great a hold upon the masses of people, What is surprising, on the contrary, is that there are among these masses individuals who have the ideas, the will, and the courage to go against the stream of conformity. For the pressure of society on the individual is so great that there is no character so strong, nor an intelligence so powerful as to be entirely immune to this despotic and irresistible influence.

...

Nothing demonstrates the social nature of man better than this influence. It can be said that the collective conscience of any society whatever, embodied in the great public institutions, in all the details of private life, serves as the base of all its theories. It constitutes a sort of intellectual and moral atmosphere: harmful though it may be, yet absolutely necessary to the existence of all its members, whom it dominates while sustaining them, and reinforcing the banality, the routine, which binds together the great majority of the masses.

The greatest number of men, and not only the masses of people but the privileged and enlightened classes even more, feel ill at ease unless they faithfully conform and follow tradition and

routine. in all the acts of their lives. They reason that “Our father thought and acted in this way, so we must think and do the same. Everybody else thinks and acts this way. Why should we think and act otherwise?”

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The idea of freedom put forward by Bakunin is much more interesting and exhaustive than that expressed by liberals. This contributes to make anarchy a more satisfactory, theoretical and practical, approach for all human beings.

Source: Mikhail Bakunin, *L'empire Knouto-Germanique et la Révolution Sociale en France*, 1870–1871.

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