

The Reaction in Germany

A Fragment of a Frenchman

Michail Bakunin

1842

Freedom, the realization of freedom: who can deny that this expression today stands at the head of the agenda of history? Friend and foe must admit it; indeed, no one dares openly and fearlessly to profess that he is an *enemy* of freedom. But the expression, the profession, does not make the reality, as the Gospel well knows. Unfortunately, there is still a multitude of people who in fact, in their innermost hearts, do not believe in freedom. And so, for freedom's sake, it is worth our while to concern ourselves with these people. They are of very different kinds.

First of all we encounter high-placed, aged and experienced people who in their youth were themselves dilettantes in political freedom — a distinguished and rich man takes a piquant pleasure in speaking about freedom and equality, and in doing makes him twice as interesting in business. These men now try to hide their physical and spiritual laxity under the seal of that much abused word, 'experience', now that their former interest has left them along with their capacity for youthful vitality.

There is no profit in speaking with these people: they were never serious about freedom and freedom for them a religion which offers the greatest pleasure and the highest bliss only by means of the most extreme conflicts, of the bitterest griefs, and of complete, unconditional self-denial. There is no profit in speaking with them, if only because they are old and are going to die soon *bon gré mal gré*.

There are also, unfortunately, many young people who share the same convictions or, rather, lack of any conviction. These belong either, and for the most part, to the aristocracy which in its essence has long been politically dead in Germany, or to the burgher, commercial and officer classes. There is nothing you can do with these either, and, indeed, even less than with the first category of prudent and aged people whose death is already so near. Those had at least a glimmer of life, but the latter are lifeless and dead men from the very beginning. Completely involved in their paltry, vain, or monetary interests, and completely occupied by their commonplace concerns, they have not even the slightest conception of life and of what goes on around them. Had they not heard something of history and of the development of the spirit in school, they would apparently believe that nothing in the world had ever been different from the way it is now. They are colorless, ghostly beings. They can do neither good nor ill. We have nothing to fear from them, for only that which is alive can be effective, and, since it is no longer fashionable to associate with ghosts, we too shall not waste our time with them.

But there is still a third category of adversaries of the principle of revolution: that is the *Reactionary party* which emerged all over Europe soon after the Restoration. In politics it is called *Conservatism*, in jurisprudence the *Historical School*, and in the science of speculation, *Positive Philosophy*. With these we want to speak. It would be poor taste in our part if we ignored their existence and acted as if we considered them insignificant. On the contrary, we shall honestly admit that they are now everywhere the ruling party. And more still: we want to concede that their present power is not due to a play of chance but has its deep ground in the development of the modern Spirit. Anyhow, I concede no true power to chance in history — history is free, but consequently necessary, development of the free Spirit, so that if I wanted to call the present supremacy of the Reactionary Party a chance event I would, in so doing, render the worst possible service to the democratic creed which uniquely and alone is founded on the unconditional freedom of Spirit. Such an evil, deceitful sedative would be much more dangerous for us: unfortunately we are as yet still far from understanding our position and, in the only too frequent misunderstanding of the true source of our power and of the nature of our enemy, we must either wholly lose our courage, depressed by the deary picture of daily drudgery or — and this is perhaps worse, since a vital human being cannot long tolerate despair, there comes upon us a groundless, boyish, and fruitless exuberance. Nothing can be more useful to the Democratic party than the recognition of its weakness and of the relative strength of its adversary at this stage. Through this recognition the Democratic party first steps out of the uncertainty of fantasy and into the reality which it must live, suffer, and, in the end, conquer. Through this recognition its enthusiasm becomes discreet and humble. Only if it first comes to an awareness of its holy, priestly office through this painful contact with reality; only if it recognizes through the endless difficulties which stand everywhere in its way and which flow not only from the obscurantism of its adversaries, and it often seems to imply, but also and rather from the fullness and totality of human nature which cannot be exhausted in abstract theoretical propositions — only if it first recognizes through these difficulties the inadequacy of its whole present existence and thus comes to understand that its enemy is at hand not only externally but also and much more internally, and that it must therefore begin by conquering its internal enemy; only if it first convinces itself that Democracy not only stands in opposition to the government and is not only a particular constitutional or politico-economic change, but a total transformation of that world condition and a herald of an original, new life which has not yet existed in history; especially only if it first comes to understand that Democracy is a religion, if it thus through this awareness itself becomes religious, that is, *permeated* by its principle not only in thought and reasoning, but true to it also in real life down to life's smallest manifestations, only then will the Democratic party really conquer the world.

Consequently, we want to admit candidly that the present power of the Reactionary party is not contingent but necessary. It has its ground not in the inadequacy of the Democratic *principle* — this is indeed that of the equality of man realizing itself in freedom and thus also is the most intrinsic, universal, and all-embracing, in a word the unique essence of the Spirit self-operating in history. The present power of the Reactionary party is due, rather, to the inadequacy of the Democratic party which has not yet reached an affirmative consciousness of its principle and therefore exists *only* as the negation of the prevailing reality. As such, as mere negation, the whole fullness of life is necessarily external to it; it cannot yet develop this fullness out of its principle which it conceives almost wholly negatively. Consequently, it has up to now been only a party and not yet the living reality; it has been the future, not the present. This fact, that the democrats

constitute only a party — and, indeed, a weak party so far as its external existence is concerned — and that their being only a party presupposes the existence of another, opposed, strong party — this fact alone should already give them an explanation of their true, essential, inherent deficiency. With respect to its essence, its principle, the Democratic party is the universal, all-embracing one, but, with respect to its existence, it is only a particular one, the Negative, against which stands another particular one, the Positive. The whole significance and the irrepressible power of the Negative is the annihilation of the Positive; but along with the Positive it leads itself to destruction as this evil, particular existence which is inadequate to its essence. Democracy does not yet exist independently in its affirmative abundance, but only as the denial of the Positive, and therefore, in this evil state, it too must be destroyed along with the Positive, so that from its free ground it may spring forth again in a newborn state, as its own living fullness. And this self-change of the Democratic party will not be merely a *quantitative* change, i.e., a broadening of its present particular and hence evil existence: God save us, such a broadening would be the leveling of the whole world and the end result of all of history would be absolute nothingness — but a *qualitative* transformation, a new, vital, and life-creating revelation, a new heaven and a new earth, a young and magnificent world in which all present discords will resolve themselves into harmonious unity.

The inadequacy of the Democratic party can still less be mitigated by transcending the one-sidedness of its existence as a party through an eternal mediation with the Positive — this would be a vain endeavor, for the Positive and the Negative are once and for all incompatible. Insofar as it is isolated in its contradiction to the Positive and is taken for itself, the Negative appears at first to be empty and lifeless; and this apparent emptiness is also the principal reproach which the Positives make to the Democrats — a reproach which, however, rests only on a misunderstanding. In fact, as a thing in isolation, the Negative is not at all; as such it would be nothing. It exists only in contradiction to the Positive. Its whole being, its content and its vitality are simply the destruction of the Positive. ‘Revolutionary propaganda,’ says the Pentarchist, ‘is, in its deepest essence, the *negation* of the existing conditions of the state; for, with respect to its innermost nature, it has no other program than the destruction of whatever order prevails at the time.’ But is it possible that that whose whole life is only to destroy should externally be reconciled with that which, according to its innermost nature, it must destroy? Only half-men who seriously take sides neither with the Positive nor with the Negative can argue in such a fashion.

There are two major divisions within the Reactionary party today: to the one belong the pure *Consistent* reactionaries, and to the other the inconsistent, *Compromising* reactionaries. The first interpret the contradiction in its pure form; they feel indeed that the Positive and the Negative get along no more than fire and water; and, since they do not see in the Negative its affirmative aspect and so cannot believe in the Negative, they quite rightly conclude that the Positive must be maintained through a complete suppression of the Negative. That they do not perceive that the Positive is as such a Positive which they defend only insofar as the Negative opposes it, and that consequently, in the event of a complete victory over the Negative, it would no longer be the Positive but rather its contradictory, the completion of the Negative — that they do not perceive this must be forgiven them, since blindness is the main characteristic of all that is positive and insight belongs only to the Negative. We must be very grateful to these gentlemen, however, in our evil and unscrupulous times, when so many seek out of cowardice to conceal from themselves the strict consequences of their own principles in order thus to escape the danger of becoming disturbed in the artificial and weak system of their pretended convictions. These gentlemen are

sincere, honest; they want to be whole men. One cannot talk much with them, for they never want to enter into a sensible conversation. It is so difficult for them now, since the dissolving poison of the Negative has spread everywhere; it is so difficult, indeed almost impossible, for them to maintain themselves in pure Positivity that they withdraw from their own reason and must be afraid of themselves, of the slightest attempt to demonstrate, which would be to refute, their convictions. They feel this strongly and hence also speak crossly when they must speak. And yet they are honest and whole men, or, more correctly, they want to be honest and whole men. Just like us, they hate everything that is halfhearted for they know that only a whole man can be good and that halfheartedness is the putrid source of all evil.

These fanatical reactionaries accuse us of heresy. If it were possible they would perhaps even call out of the arsenal of history the subterranean power of the Inquisition in order to use it against us. They deny us all that is good, all that is human. They see in us nothing other than embodied Antichrists, against whom every means is permitted. Shall we repay them with the same coin? No; it would be unworthy of us and of the great cause whose agents we are. The great principle in whose service we have pledged ourselves gives us, among many other advantages, the fine privilege of being just and impartial without, by so being, harming our cause. Nothing partial can use truth itself as a weapon, for truth is the refutation of all one-sidedness; whereas all one-sidedness must be partial and fanatical in its utterance, and hate is its necessary expression, for it can maintain itself in no other way than by opposing, through a violent repulsion, all other one-sidedness, even if as legitimate as itself. One-sidedness by its very presence presupposes the presence of other one-sidednesses, and yet, as a consequence of its essential nature, it must exclude these in order to maintain itself. This conflict is the curse which hangs over one-sidedness, a curse innate to it, a curse which transforms into hatred in their very utterance all the good sentiments that are innate in every man as man.

We are infinitely more fortunate in this respect. As a party we indeed stand in opposition to the Positives and fight them, and all evil passions are awakened also in us through this fight. Insofar as we ourselves belong to a party, we are also very often partial and unjust. But we are not only this Negative party set in opposition to the Positive: we have our living source in the all-embracing principle of unconditional freedom, in a principle which contains in itself all the good that is contained only in the Positive and which is exalted above the Positive just as over ourselves as a party. As a party we pursue only politics, but as a party we are justified only through our principle; otherwise we would have no better ground than the Positive. Hence, we must remain true, even contrary to our self-preservation, to our principle as the only ground of our power and of our life; i.e., we must eternally transcend ourselves as this one-sided, merely political existence in the religion of our all-embracing and all-sided principle. We must not only act politically, but in our politics also act religiously, religiously in the sense of freedom of which the one true expression is justice and love. Indeed, for us alone, who are called the enemies of the Christian religion, for us alone is it reserved, and even made the highest duty even in the most ardent of fights, really to exercise love, this highest commandment of Christ and this only way of true Christianity.

And so we want to be just also with respect to our enemies, we want to recognize that they *are striving really* to want the good, that indeed in their nature they are called to the good, to a vital life, and that they have deviated from their true destiny only owing to an incomprehensible misfortune. We are not speaking of those who have joined their party only in order to be able to give vent to their evil passions. There are, unfortunately, many Tartuffes in every party; we are

speaking only of the sincere defenders of Consistent Positivism. These strive after the good, but they cannot effectively will it; this is their great misfortune, they are divided in themselves. In the principle of freedom they see only a cold and prosaic abstraction — to which many prosaic and dry defenders of freedom have greatly contributed. They see only an abstraction which excludes all that is vital, all that is beautiful and holy. They do not perceive that this principle is by no means to be confused with its current evil and merely negative existence, and that it is only as a living self-affirmation which has transcended the Negative as well as the Positive that it can conquer and that it will realize itself. They believe — and this belief is unfortunately still shared by many adherents of the Negative party itself — that the Negative tries to diffuse itself as such, and they think, just as we do, that the diffusion would be the leveling of the whole spiritual world. At the same time, in the directness of their feeling, they have a wholly justified endeavor toward a vital full life, and, since they find in the Negative only its leveling, they turn back to the past, to the past as it was before the birth of the contradiction between the Negative and the Positive. They are right insofar as this past really was in itself a living whole and as such appears much more vital and much richer than the divided present. Their great mistake, however, consists in this, that they think that they can recreate it in its past vitality; they forget that the past totality can by now appear only in the amorphous and cracked reflection of the present inevitable contradiction which that totality entails, and that the totality, as positive, is only its own corpse, with its soul torn from it, i.e., the corpse as delivered up to the mechanical and chemical processes of thought. As adherents of blind Positivism they do not understand this, whereas with respect to their nature as vital men they feel this deficiency of life full well. And since they do not know that by the very fact that they are Positive they have the Negative within them, they throw onto the Negative the whole blame for this deficiency, and the whole weight of their urge for life and truth, by this impotence to satisfy itself, turns into hate. This is the necessary inner process in every Consistent Positivist, and therefore I say also that they are really to be pitied, since the source of their endeavor is yet almost always honest.

The *Compromising* Positivists hold an entirely different position. They distinguish themselves from the Consistent Positivists in the first place in that, more rotted than these by speculative disease of the time, they not only do not condemn the Negative unconditionally as an absolute evil but concede to it a relative, transitory justification; and, in the second place, in that they do not possess the same energetic purity, a purity for which the Consistent, ruthless Positivists at least strive and which we have designated as the characteristic of a full, complete, and honest nature. The standpoint of the Compromisers we may in contrast designate as that of *theoretical dishonesty*, I say theoretical because I would rather avoid any practical, personal accusation and because I do not believe that a personally evil will could really intervene obstructively in the development of Spirit; although it must be admitted that theoretical dishonesty by its very nature almost always reverts into a practical one.

The Compromising Positivists are cleverer and have more insight than the Consistent ones. They are the clever men, the theorists *par excellence*, and to that extent they are also the chief representatives of the present time. We can apply to them what was said in a French journal at the beginning of the July Revolution about the *Juste-milieu*: The Left says, 2 times 2 are 4; the Right, 2 times 2 are 6; and the *Juste-milieu* says, 2 times 2 are 5. But they would take this amiss. Hence we want to try to investigate their unclear and difficult essence in all earnestness and with the deepest respect for their wisdom. It is much more difficult to deal with them than with the Consistent ones: the latter have the practical energy of their convictions; they know and they

speaking in clear words and saying what they mean to say; they hate, just as we do, all uncertainty, all confusion, for as practically energetic beings they can breathe only in a pure and clear air. With the Compromisers, however, it is a curious matter. They are wily; oh, they are clever and wise! They never permit the practical impulse toward truth to destroy the meticulously patchworked edifice of their theory. They are too experienced, too clever, to grant a gracious hearing to the beseeching voice of simple, practical conscience. From the height of their position they look down on it with condescension and, if we say only the simple is true and real because only such a thing can work creatively, they maintain in reply that only the composite is true, for it has cost the greatest pains to piece such a thing together and because it is the only characteristic by which one can distinguish them, the clever people, from the stupid and uneducated mob. Consequently it is very difficult to deal with them, because all is known to them; because, as worldly-wise people, they consider it an unforgivable weakness to let themselves be astonished by anything; because they have by their thinking penetrated every corner of the natural and spiritual universe, and because, after this long and laborious speculative journey, they have reached the conviction that it is not worth the bother to enter into real, vital contact with the real world. It is difficult to come to an understanding with these people, since, just like the German constitutions, they take back with the right hand what they offer with the left. They never answer 'yes' or 'no'; they say: 'To a certain extent you are right, but, yet ...' and, if they have nothing left to say, they say: 'Yes, it is a curious thing.'

And yet we want to try to contend with them. The party of the Compromisers, despite its inner lack of principle and its inability to effect anything on its own, is today a powerful, indeed the most powerful party — numerically, of course, not with respect to its content. It is one of the most important signs of the times, and so we dare not ignore it and bypass it.

The whole wisdom of the Compromisers consists in this, that they maintain that two opposing trends are as such one-sided and therefore untrue; but, they argue, if the two members of the contradiction are untrue when taken abstractly in themselves, then the truth must lie in their middle, and so one must inter-correlate them to arrive at the truth. This reasoning at first appears irrefutable: indeed, we have ourselves admitted that the Negative, insofar as it is opposed to the Positive and is self-oriented in this opposition, is one-sided. Then does it not necessarily follow from this that the Negative is essentially fulfilled and completed by the Positive? And are not the Compromisers right in wanting to reconcile the Positive and the Negative? Yes, if this reconciliation is possible; but is it really possible? Is not the annihilation of the Positive the only meaning of the Negative? If the Compromisers ground their position on the nature of contradiction, namely on the fact that two opposing one-sidednesses are as such mutually dependent, then they must accept and recognize each nature to its full extent; they must do this for the sake of consistency, in order themselves to remain true to their own position. For the side of the contradiction which is favorable to them is inseparable from its unfavorable side; but this unfavorable side consists in this, that it is not positive but *negative*, destructive, to give priority to one member over the other. The gentlemen are to be referred to Hegel's logic, where the category of contradiction is so beautifully treated.

Contradiction and its immanent development constitute a keynote of the whole Hegelian system, and since this category is the chief category of the governing spirit of our times, Hegel is unconditionally the greatest philosopher of the present time, the highest summit of our modern, one-sided, *theoretical* cultural formation. Indeed, just like this summit, just by the fact that he has comprehended and thus resolved this category, just by this fact is he also the beginning of a nec-

essary self-resolution of modern cultural formation: as this summit he has already gone above theory — granted that at the same time he is still within theory — and has postulated a new, practical world which will bring itself to completion by no means through a formal application and diffusion of theories already worked out, but only through an original act of the practical autonomous Spirit. Contradiction is the essence not only of every specific, particular theory, but also of theory in general, and so the dialectical phase of its comprehension is simultaneously the phase of the fulfilment of theory; but its fulfilment is its self-resolution into an original and new, practical world, into the real presence of freedom. But this is not yet the place to develop this further, and we want to turn again to the discussion of the logical theory of contradiction.

Contradiction itself, as the embracing of its two one-sided members, is total, absolute, true. One cannot reproach it with one-sidedness or with the superficiality and poverty which are necessarily bound up with one-sidedness, since it is not only the Negative, but also the Positive, and since, as this all-embracing thing, it is total, absolute, all-inclusive fullness. This entitles the Compromisers to forbid that one of the two one-sided members be taken in the abstract, and to require that they be comprehended as a totality in their necessary union, in their inseparability. Only the contradiction is true, they say, and either of its opposed members, taken by itself, is one-sided and thus untrue; hence we have to grasp the contradiction in its totality in order to have truth. But this is just where the difficulty begins. Contradiction is indeed truth, but it does not exist as such, it is not there as this totality; it is only a self-subsisting, hidden totality, and its existence is just the conflicting cleavage of its two members, the Positive and the Negative. Contradiction as the total truth is the inseparable unity of the simplicity and cleavage of itself in one; this is its implicit, hidden, but thus also at first incomprehensible nature, and just because this unity is a hidden one, contradiction exists also one-sidedly as the mere cleavage of its members. It is present only as Positive and Negative, and these mutually exclude each other to such an extent that this mutual exclusion constitutes their whole nature. But then how are we to comprehend the totality of contradiction? Here there appear to remain two ways out: either we must arbitrarily abstract from the cleavage and flee to the simple totality of the contradiction, which totality is prior to the cleavage — but this is impossible, because the incomprehensible is simply incomprehensible, and because contradiction in itself exists immediately only as cleavage, without this it is not at all; or we must in a maternal way try to reconcile the opposed members. And in this consists the whole effort of the Compromiser School. Let us see whether they really succeed.

The positive appears at first to be the restful, the immobile. It is Positive indeed only because it rests in itself without disturbance and because it contains nothing that it could negate;¹ only because it contains no movement, since every movement is a negation. The Positive is just the sort of thing in which immobility as such reposes, the sort of thing which is reflected in itself as the absolutely immobile. But reflection on immobility is inseparable from reflection on mobility; or rather they are one and the same reflection, and so the Positive, absolute rest, is positive only in contrast to the Negative, absolute unrest. The Positive is internally related to the Negative as its own vital determination. Thus the Positive has a double place in relation to the Negative: on the one hand it rests in itself and in this apathetic self-sufficiency contains nothing of the Negative; on the other, however, and just because of this rest, as something in itself opposed to the Negative, it actively excludes the Negative; but this activity of exclusion is a motion and so the

¹ '... *in sich nichts hat, was es negieren konnte*' — does Bakunin perhaps mean 'that it could negate it?' — TRANS.

Positive, just because of its positivity, is in itself no longer the Positive, but the Negative; in that it excludes the Negative from itself, it excludes itself from itself and drives itself to destruction.

Consequently, the Positive and the Negative do not, as the Compromisers think, have equal justification. Contradiction is not an equilibrium but a preponderance of the Negative, which is its encroaching dialectical phase. The Negative, as determining the life of the Positive itself, alone includes within itself the totality of the contradiction, and so it alone also has absolute justification. What, someone will perhaps ask me; have you not yourself admitted to us that the Negative, taken in itself abstractly, is just as one-sided as the Positive, and that the diffusion of its evil existence would be a leveling of the whole world? Yes, but I was speaking only of the present existence of the Negative, of the Negative insofar as, excluded from the Positive, it is peacefully self-oriented and so is positive; as such it is also negated by the Positive, and the Consistent Positivists, in denying the existence of the Negative, its peaceful self-orientation, are performing both a logical and a holy service — although they do not know what they do. They believe that they are negating the Negative while, on the contrary, they are negating the Negative only insofar as it is making itself Positive; they awaken the Negative from its Philistine repose, to which it is not fitted, and they lead it back to its great calling, to the restless and ruthless annihilation of every positively existing thing.

We shall grant that the Positive and the Negative, if the latter is peacefully and egoistically self-oriented and so untrue to itself, have equal justification. But the Negative should not be egoistic; it should lovingly surrender to the Positive in order to consume it and, in this religious, faithful, and vital act of denial, to reveal its inexhaustible and pregnant nature. The Positive is negated by the Negative and the Negative in turn is negated by the Positive: what, then, is common to both and overlaps both? Denial, destruction, passionate consumption of the Positive, even if this latter seeks slyly to hide itself in the guise of the Negative. The Negative is justified only as this ruthless negation, but as such it is absolutely justified, for as such it is the action of the practical Spirit invisibly present in the contradiction itself, the Spirit which, through this storm of destruction, powerfully urges sinful, compromising souls to repentance and announces its imminent coming, its imminent revelation in a really democratic and universally human religion of freedom.

This self-resolution of the Positive is the only possible reconciliation of the Positive with the Negative, for it is the immanent, total motion and energy of the contradiction itself, and thus any other means of reconciling them is arbitrary, and everyone who intends another reconciliation merely proves in so doing that he is not permeated with the Spirit of the times and thus is either stupid or unprincipled; for a man is really intelligent and moral only if he surrenders himself wholeheartedly to this Spirit and is permeated by it. Contradiction is total and true — the Compromisers themselves grant this — but as total it is wholly vital and the energy of its all-embracing vitality consists, as we have already seen, just in this incessant self-combustion of the Positive in the pure fire of the Negative.

What do the Compromisers do now? They grant us this whole thing; they acknowledge the totality of contradiction just as we do, except that they rob it, or rather want to rob it, of its motion, of its vitality, of its whole soul, for the vitality of contradiction is a practical power incompatible with their impotent half-souls, but by this fact superior to their every attempt to stifle it. The Positive, as we have said and demonstrated, has no justification if taken in itself; it is justified only insofar as it negates the rest, the self-orientation of the Negative; insofar as it unconditionally and determinately excludes the Negative and thus maintains it in its activity — thus far it becomes actively negative. This activity of negation to which the Positivists are raised

through the unsurmountable power of contradiction invisibly present in every living being and which constitutes their only justification and the only characteristic of their vitality — it is just this activity of negation which the Compromisers want to prohibit them. As a consequence of a singular incomprehensible misfortune, or rather from the whole comprehensible misfortune of their practical lack of principle, their practical impotence, they acknowledge in the Positive just that which is dead within themselves, rotten, and worthy only of destruction — and they reject that which constitutes their whole vitality: the vital fight with the Negative, the vital presence in them of contradiction.

They say to the Positives: Gentlemen, you are right in approving the rotted and withered remains of conventionality; one lives so prettily and comfortably in these ruins, in this irrational rococo world whose air is as healthful for our consumptive souls as the air of a cow barn is for consumptive bodies. So far as we are concerned, we would have settled ourselves in your world with the greatest pleasure, a world where not reason and the reasonable determination of the human will, but long existence and immobility are the measure of the true and the holy, and where consequently China, with its mandarins and its bamboo sticks, must obtain as absolute truth. But what can we do, Gentlemen? The times are bad; our common enemies, the Negatives, have won much ground. We hate them as much as and perhaps even more than you do yourselves, since, in their lack of restraint, they permit themselves to scorn us; but they have become powerful and one must willy-nilly be mindful of them in order not to be wholly destroyed by them. So don't be so fanatical, Gentlemen; grant them a little space in your society. What matters it to you if they succeed in your² historical museum to some ruins which, though very venerable, yet are wholly fallen into decay? Believe us, entirely pleased by the honor which you thus render them, they will conduct themselves very quietly and discreetly in your honorable society, for, in the end, they are but young people who, 'embittered by poverty and a lack of carefree conditions,' shout and make so much noise only because they hope thus to obtain a certain importance and a comfortable place in society.

Then they turn to the Negatives and say to them: your endeavor is honorable, Gentlemen. We understand your youthful enthusiasm for pure principles and we have the greatest sympathy for you, but, believe us, pure principles in their purity are not applicable to life; life requires a certain dose of eclecticism, the world cannot be conquered as you wish to do it, you must yield something in order to be able to mold it; otherwise you will wholly damage your position in it. And, as one tells of the Polish Jews, that in the last Polish war they wanted at the same time to serve both warring parties, the Poles as well as the Russians, and were hanged by both, so these poor souls vex themselves with the impossible business of external reconciliation, and for thanks are despised by both parties. It is too bad that present times are too weak and too listless to apply the Law of Solon to them!

People will reply: these are mere phrases. The Compromisers are mostly honest and scientifically educated people. There are a great many universally esteemed and highly placed persons among them, and you have presented them as unintelligent and unprincipled men! But what can I do about it, since it is so true? I do not want to attack anyone personally; the inner man is for me an inviolable sanctuary, something incommensurable, on which I shall never permit myself a judgment; this inner core can have infinite worth for the individual himself, but for the world it is real only insofar as it expresses itself and it is only that which does express itself. Every man

² Reading 'Ihrem' for 'ihrem' — TRANS.

is really only what he is in the real world, and you surely don't expect me to say that black is white.

Yes, people will retort, their endeavor seems to be black to you, or rather grey; but in fact the Compromisers want and aim only at progress and they further it far more than you do yourself, for they go to work prudently and not excessively as do the Democrats who want to blast the whole world to pieces. But we have seen what such people imagine the progress intended by the Compromisers to be; we have seen that the Compromisers want nothing else but the stifling of the only vital principle of our present time, otherwise so poor: the stifling of the creative and pregnant principle of resolving motion. They perceive just as we do that our time is a time of contradiction. They grant us that this is an evil, internally torn condition, but, instead of letting it turn over into a new, affirmative, and organic reality through the completion of the contradiction, they want, by means of an endless gradation, to preserve it eternally in its present shabby and consumptive state. Is that progress? They say to the Positives: 'Hang on to the old, but permit the Negatives at the same time to resolve it gradually.' And to the Negatives: 'Destroy the old, but not all at once and completely, so that you will always have something to do. I.e., each of you remain in your one-sidedness, but we, the elect, will prove the pleasure of totality for ourselves.' Wretched totality with which only wretched souls can be satisfied! They rob contradiction of its moving, practical soul and rejoice that they can command it arbitrarily. The great present-day contradiction is not for them the practical power to which every vital man must ruthlessly surrender himself in order to remain vital, but only a theoretical toy. They are not permeated by the practical Spirit of the times, and hence they are also immoral men. Yes, they who so glory in their morality are immoral men, for morality is impossible outside the religion of free humanity which alone brings heavenly joy. One must repeat to them what the author of the Apocalypse said to the Compromisers of his own day:

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot. I would thou wert cold or hot.

But because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will begin to vomit thee out of my mouth.

Because thou sayest: I am rich, and made wealthy, and have need of nothing: and knowest not, that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.³

But, people will say to me, are you not, with your irreconcilable extremes, relapsing into the abstract position long ago refuted by Schelling and Hegel? Did not Hegel, whom you value so highly, himself make the quite correct observation that just as little can be seen in pure light as in pure darkness, and that only the concrete unity of the two makes vision possible at all? And does not Hegel's greatest service consist in his having demonstrated how every vital existence is vital only because it has negation not outside itself but within itself as an immanent condition necessary to its vitality; and how, if it were only positive and had its negation outside itself, it would be motionless and lifeless? I know that very well, Gentlemen! I grant you that a vital organism, for instance, is vital only in that it carries the germ of death within it. But if you want to quote Hegel to me, then you must quote him in full. Then you will observe that the Negative is the condition necessary for the life of this particular organism only so long as it is present in it merely as a dialectical phase asserted in that phase's totality; that there comes a point, however, when

³ Rev. 3:15-17 — TRANS.

the gradual effect of the Negative is suddenly interrupted in such a manner that the Negative is transformed into an independent principle, and this moment is the death of this particular organism, a dialectical phase which in Hegelian philosophy is characterized as the transition of nature into a qualitatively new world, into the free world of Spirit.

The same is repeated in history. The principle of theoretical freedom, for instance, already made itself felt in the deceased Catholic world from the start of that world's existence; this principle was the source of all heresies in which Catholicism was so rich. But without this principle Catholicism would have been motionless, and so it was at the same time the principle of its vitality, though only so long as the principle was maintained in its totality as pure dialectical phase. Protestantism also arose gradually: it had its beginning in the beginning of Catholicism itself; but once this gradualness was interrupted, the principle of theoretical freedom raised itself to a self-sustaining, independent principle. Then the contradiction was revealed in its purity for the first time, and you well know, Gentlemen, you who call yourselves Protestants, what Luther answered to the Compromisers of his day as they offered their services to him.

You see, my view of the nature of contradiction is susceptible not only of logical, but also of historical corroboration. But I know that no proof will avail since, in your lifelessness, you undertake no occupation so willingly as the mastery of history. It is not for nothing that you have come to be called dry arrangers.

'We are not yet defeated,' the Compromisers will probably reply to me. 'All that you say about contradiction may be true, but there is just one thing we cannot grant you, namely, that things are now, in our time, so bad as you maintain. Of course, there are contradictions in the present day, but they are not so dangerous as you assert. Look, there is tranquility everywhere, everywhere movement has subsided. No one thinks of war, and the majority of nations and of men now strain every nerve to preserve peace, for they well know that the material interests which today appear to have become the main concern of politics and of universal culture cannot be promoted without peace. How many important inducements to war and to the dissolution of the present order of things have there not been since the July Revolution! In the course of these twelve years there have been such entanglements that no one could possibly have expected them to be peacefully unraveled; moments when a universal war seemed almost inevitable and when the most fearful storms threatened us; and yet all difficulties were gradually resolved, all remained quiet, and peace seems to have established itself on earth for ever.'

Peace, you say. Yes, what is now called peace. I maintain in reply, however, that contradictions have never been so sharply presented as now, that the eternal contradiction, which is the same at all times except that it increases in intensity and develops itself ever more in the course of history, that this contradiction of freedom and unfreedom has advanced and soared to its last and highest summit in our time, otherwise a time so similar to the period of dissolution of the heathen world. Have you not read the mysterious and awesome words, *Liberté, Égalité* and *Fraternité* on the foreground of the Temple of Freedom erected by the Revolution? And do you not know and feel that these words intimate the complete annihilation of the present political and social world? Have you heard nothing of the storms of the revolution, and do you not know that Napoleon, this so-called tamer of Democracy, diffused its leveling principles over all of Europe, like a worthy son of the Revolution? Have you not also perhaps heard something of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, or do you really know nothing of a philosophy which established the same leveling revolutionary principle in the intellectual world -- namely, the principle of the autonomy of

Spirit? And do you not comprehend that this principle stands in the highest contradiction to all current positive religions, to all present-day churches?

'Yes,' you will answer, 'but these contradictions belong to past history; the Revolution was most recently subdued in France itself by the wise reign of Louis-Philippe, and modern philosophy by one of its greatest originators, by Schelling himself. Contradiction is now everywhere dissolved, in all spheres of life.' And do you really believe in this dissolution, in this subjugation of the Spirit of revolution? Are you then blind and deaf and have you no eyes or ears for what goes on around you? No, Gentlemen, the Spirit of revolution is not subdued, it has only gone back into itself again, after having convulsed the whole world in its foundations by its first appearance; it has only sunk into itself in order soon to reveal itself again as an affirmative, creative principle, and right now it is burrowing -- if I may avail myself of this expression of Hegel's -- like a mole under the earth. And that it is not working for nothing you can see from the many ruins with which our religious, political, and social flooring is covered. You speak of resolution, of reconciliation! Just look around you and tell me what has remained alive of the old Catholic and Protestant world. You speak of the subjugation of the Negative principle! Have you read nothing of *Strauss*, *Feuerbach* and *Bruno Bauer*, and do you not know that their works are in everyone's hands? Do you not see that the whole of German literature, books, brochures, newspapers, indeed, the works of the Positivists themselves, are unwittingly and unwillingly permeated by this negative Spirit? And you call this reconciliation and peace!

You well know that humanity, owing to its high calling, can be satisfied and pacified only by the adoption of a universally practical principle, by a principle which intensely concentrates within itself the thousand different manifestations of spiritual life. But where is this principle, Gentlemen? You must surely now and then experience vital, human moments during the course of your existence, otherwise so dismal; moments when you cast aside the petty concerns of your daily life and yearn for the true, for the noble, for the holy. Answer me honestly, now, your hand on your heart, have you ever anywhere found something vital? Have you ever discovered under the ruins which surround us this world you long for, where you could wholly surrender yourselves and be once more born anew in this great communion with all humanity? Is this world perchance Protestantism? But Protestantism is abandoned to the most ghastly anarchy: into how many different sects is it not rendered? 'Without great, universal enthusiasm there are only sects and no public idiom,' says Schelling; but the current Protestant world is as far from being permeated with a general enthusiasm as heaven is from earth; it is rather the most prosaic world one can imagine. Well, then, is it perchance Catholicism? But where is Catholicism's ancient splendor? Has Catholicism, which formerly ruled over the whole world, now not become an obedient tool of an alien, immoral policy? Or do you perhaps find your peace of mind in the contemporary state? Yes, that would really be a fine peace of mind! The state is currently in the throes of the deepest internal conflict, for without religion, without a powerful universal conviction, the state is impossible. Just look at France and England if you want to convince yourselves of this; I shall not say anything about Germany!

Finally, study yourselves, Gentlemen, and tell me honestly, are you pleased with yourselves, and can you be pleased with yourselves? Are you not, without exception, dismal and shabby appearances of our dismal and shabby times? Are you not full of conflicts? Are you whole men? Do you really believe in anything? Do you really know what you want and can you want anything at all? Has modern speculation, the epidemic of our time, left a single sound part in you, and are

you not permeated by this disease and paralysed and broken by it? In fact, Gentlemen, you must confess that our times are dismal times and that we are all its still more dismal children!

On the other hand, however, visible appearances are stirring around us, indicating that the Spirit, this old mole, has brought its underground work to completion and that it will soon come again to pass judgment. Everywhere, especially in France and England, social and religious societies are being formed, wholly alien to the present political world, societies which derive their life from new sources quite unknown to us and develop and diffuse themselves in silence. The people, the poor class, which without doubt constitutes the greatest part of humanity; the class whose rights have already been recognized in theory; which, however, up to now is still condemned by its birth, by its ties with poverty and ignorance, as well, indeed, as with actual slavery -- this class, which constitutes the true people, is everywhere assuming a threatening attitude and is beginning to count the ranks of its enemy, weak as compared to it, and to demand the actualization of the rights already conceded to it by everyone. All peoples and all men are filled with a kind of premonition, and everyone whose vital organs are not paralysed faces with shuddering expectation the approaching future which will speak out the redeeming word. Even in Russia, in this endless and snow-covered kingdom which we know so little and which perhaps a great future awaits, even in Russia dark clouds are gathering, heralding storm. Oh, the air is sultry and filled with lightning.

And therefore we call to our deluded brothers: Repent, repent, the Kingdom of the Lord is at hand!

To the Positivists we say: open the eyes of your mind; let the dead bury the dead, and convince yourselves at last that the Spirit, ever young, ever newborn, is not to be sought in fallen ruins! And we exhort the Compromisers to open their hearts to truth, to free themselves of their wretched and blind wisdom, of their intellectual arrogance, and of the servile fear which dries up their souls and paralyses their movements.

Let us therefore trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternally creative source of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Michail Bakunin
The Reaction in Germany
A Fragment of a Frenchman
1842

Retrieved on 18/07/2015 from libcom.org. Proofread online source RevoltLib.com, retrieved on July 15, 2020.

‘Die Reaktion in Deutschland. Ein Fragment von einem Franzosen’ first appeared in Arnold Ruge (ed.), *Deutsche Jahrbücher für Wissenschaft and Kunst*, nos. 247–51 (Leipzig, October 17th-21st, 1842) under the pseudonym “Jules Elysard”. *Die Reaktion* was written in response to Ruge’s call set forth in the Preface to the first edition of *Deutsche Jahrbücher* for all Hegelians to enter into political struggle.

theanarchistlibrary.org