

To the Compagnons of the International Workingmen's Association of Locle and La Chaux de fond

Article 1

Mikhail Bakunin

1869

Friends and brothers,

Before leaving your mountains, I felt the need to express to you one more time, in writing, my profound gratitude for the fraternal reception that you have given me. Isn't it a marvelous thing that a man, a Russian, a former noble, who until now was perfectly unknown to you and who has for the first time set foot in your country, hardly arrived, finds himself surrounded by several hundred brothers! This miracle can only be accomplished today by the *International Workingmen's Association*, and for one simple reason: it alone represents today the historic life, and the creative power of the political and social future. Those who are united by a living thought, by a common will and great common passion, are really brothers, even when they do not know each other.

There was a time when the bourgeoisie, endowed with the same power of life and constituting exclusively the historic class, offered the same spectacle of fraternity and union as much in acts and in thought. That was the finest time for that class, always respectable, no doubt, but from now on powerless, stupid and sterile, the era of its most energetic development. It was so before the great revolution of 1793; it was still, though to a much lesser degree, before the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. Then the bourgeoisie had a world to conquer, a place to take in society, and organized by the combat, intelligent, audacious, feeling itself strong with the right of everyone, it was endowed with an irresistible power: alone it made three revolutions against the monarchy, the nobility and the clergy united.

In that era the bourgeoisie had also created an international, universal, formidable association, *Freemasonry*.

We would be badly mistaken if we judged the Freemasonry of the past century, or even that of the beginning of the present century, according to what it is today. Institution par excellence bourgeois, in its development, by its growing power at first and then by its decadence, Freemasonry represented in some ways the intellectual and moral development, power and decadence of the bourgeoisie. Today, descended to the role of an old, prattling schemer, it is null, useless,

sometimes destructive and always ridiculous, while before 1830 and especially before 1793, having gathered within it, with very few exceptions, all the elite minds, the most ardent hearts, the proudest wills, the boldest characters, it had constituted an active organization, powerful and really beneficial. It was the energetic incarnation and practice of the humanitarian idea of the 18th century. All those great principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, reason and humane justice, elaborated at first theoretically by the philosophy of that century, had become in the heart of Freemasonry practical dogmas and the bases of a new morality and politics,—the soul of a gigantic enterprise of demolition and reconstruction. Freemasonry had been nothing less in that era than the universal conspiracy of the revolutionary bourgeoisie against feudal, monarchical and divine tyranny.—That was the International of the Bourgeoisie.

We know that almost all the major actors of the first Revolution were Freemasons, and when that Revolution broke out, it found, through Freemasonry, friends and dedicated, powerful cooperators in all other countries, which certainly helped its triumph a great deal. But it is equally obvious that the triumph of the Revolution killed Freemasonry, for the Revolution having largely fulfilled the wishes of the Bourgeoisie and having made them take the place of the noble aristocracy, the Bourgeoisie, having been so long an exploited and oppressed class, became quite naturally in its turn the privileged, exploitative, oppressive, conservative and reactionary class, the friend and the firmest supporter of the State. After the coup of the first Napoleon, Freemasonry had become, on a large part of the European continent, an imperial institution.

The Restoration revived it somewhat. Seeing themselves threatened by the return of the old regime, constrained to yield the place that it had won by the first revolution to the Church and the united nobility, the bourgeoisie necessarily became revolutionary again. But what a difference between this reheated revolutionism and the fiery, powerful revolutionism that had inspired it at the end of the last century! Then the bourgeoisie had been in good faith, it had believed seriously and naively in human rights, it had been driven, inspired by the genius of demolition and reconstruction, it had found itself in full possession of its intelligence, and in the full development of its strength; it did not suppose that an abyss separated it from the people; she believed, it felt, it was really the representative of the people. The Thermidorian reaction and the conspiracy of Babeuf have forever deprived it of that illusion.—The gulf that separated the working people from the exploiting, dominant and enjoying bourgeoisie was opened, and nothing less than the body of the whole bourgeoisie, all the privileged existence of the bourgeois, could fill it.

So was it no longer the bourgeoisie as a whole, but only a part of the bourgeoisie that began to conspire, after the Restoration, against the clerical regime, the nobility and against the legitimate kings.

In my next letter, I will elaborate, if you will permit me, my ideas on this last phase of constitutional liberalism and bourgeois carbonarism.

M. Bakunin.

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