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# Bakunin's lumpenproletariat

Nicholas Thoburn

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In these three manifestations of lumpenproletarian practice (in relation to history – as comic repetition of past identities, production – as a self-separation from social productive activity, and politics – as a vacillating spontaneity) we see a category which is marked by its externality to capitalist social relations and its inability to engage with the potential becoming of history. The political importance of this account comes to the fore in the unfolding of the First International – the emerging split between Marxism and anarchism – in Marx's dispute with Michael Bakunin, the man Engels dubbed as 'the lumpen prince' (cited in Bovenkerk 1984: 25)<sup>1</sup>

Though the conventional presentation of the split between Marx and Bakunin centres on a statism/anti-statism conflict over the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', a far more important distinction (for all else emerges from it) resides in their differ-

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<sup>1</sup> The rationale behind the exclusion of Bakunin's *Alliance of Social Democracy* from the International is explained in some 120 pages (Marx and Engels 1988), but begins by stating that the danger of a broad banner workers' movement, as the International's explicit concern, was always in letting in *déclassé* (lumpen) elements.

ences on the question of the revolutionary agent.<sup>2</sup> Whereas Marx sees the emergence of the revolutionary proletariat as immanent capitalist social relations, Bakunin considers workers' integration in capital as *destructive* of more primary revolutionary forces. For Bakunin, the revolutionary archetype is found in a peasant milieu (which is presented as having long-standing insurrectionary traditions, as well as a communist archetype in its *current* social form – the peasant commune), and among educated unemployed youth, assorted 'marginals' from all classes, brigands, robbers, the impoverished masses, and those on the margins of society who have escaped, been excluded from, or not yet subsumed in the discipline of emerging industrial work – in short, all those whom Marx sought to include in the category of the lumpenproletariat (cf. Pyziur 1968: ch. 5). Thus, as the people capable of uniting 'private peasant revolts into one general all-people's revolt', Bakunin focuses on

free Cossacks, our innumerable saintly and not so saintly tramps (*brodiagi*), pilgrims, members of 'beguny' sects, thieves, and brigands – this whole wide and numerous underground world which from time immemorial has protested against the state and statism.

(Bakunin n.d.: 19)

Such people, Bakunin (n.d.: 20) argues in a fashion not so different from Marx's account of lumpen 'spontaneity', are red with a transhistorical instinctual rage, a '*native* movement' of

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<sup>2</sup> The argument that Bakunin perceives in Marx the seeds of statism – that he, in a sense, predicts the Soviet Union – is not uninteresting, but it can be made only by ignoring the centrality of *Bakunist* notions of organization and 'invisible dictatorship' to Leninist politics (cf. Blissett and Home n.d.).

a 'turbulent ocean', and it is this revolutionary fervour, immanent to their identities, not class composition within capitalism, which elects them for their political role:

Marx speaks disdainfully, but quite unjustly of this Lumpenproletariat . For in them, and only in them, and not in the bourgeois strata of workers, are there crystallised the entire intelligence and power of the coming Social Revolution.

A popular insurrection, by its very nature, is instinctive, chaotic, and destructive, and always entails great personal sacrifice and an enormous loss of public and private property. The masses are always ready to sacrifice themselves; and this is what turns them into a brutal and savage horde, capable of performing heroic and apparently impossible exploits, and since they possess little or nothing, they are not demoralised by the responsibilities of property ownership ... they develop a passion for destruction. This negative passion, it is true, is far from being sufficient to attain the heights of the revolutionary cause; but without it, revolution would be impossible. Revolution requires extensive and widespread destruction, a fecund and renovating destruction.

(Bakunin 1973: 334)

Though Bakunin's category of the lumpenproletariat may have a broader catchment than Marx's,<sup>3</sup> it is clear that they

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<sup>3</sup> Bakunin seems to practise what Marx and Engels (1988: 520) refer to as a 'law of anarchist assimilation', whereby a whole series of groups (from religious sects to students and brigands) are brought under the banner of a spontaneist 'anti-authoritarian' movement. Marx's critique is not just that the collective 'community' of these formations is often little more than a product of Bakunin's imagination, but that it is also a cynical deployment of

both largely agree on its components as an identity removed from capitalist social relations. While for Marx the lumpenproletariat is a tendency – *vis-à-vis* history, production and political action – towards identity, for Bakunin the lumpenproletariat embodies in its present identity a kind of actually existing anarchism.<sup>4</sup> The centrality of present identity to Bakunin’s formulation is such that, when he does venture into theory, he places a premium on abstract humanist concepts like freedom and equality.<sup>5</sup> Bakunist anarchism – for all its emphasis on the marginalized, down-trodden and rebellious – is thus subject to the same critique Marx raised against Utopian Socialism, as that which posits a transcendent idea of a perfect social form and deploys historically decontextualized ‘eternal truths’ of ‘Human Nature’ and ‘Man in General’, rather than engage with the expansive ‘fluid state’ of material life in specific socio-historical relations (Marx and Engels 1973: 69, 67; Marx 1976: 103).<sup>6</sup>

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a populist rhetoric that disguises a tapestry of secret societies and ‘invisible dictatorship’ (cf. Marx and Engels 1988).

<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that Bakunin was not an advocate of revolutionary change, but simply that his change was to be the expression of the identity of his political agent.

<sup>5</sup> In *Revolutionary Catechism*, for example, Bakunin writes: ‘Replacing the cult of God by *respect and love of humanity*, we proclaim *human reason* as the only criterion of truth; *human conscience* as the basis of justice; *individual and collective freedom* as the only source of order in society’ (1973: 76).

<sup>6</sup> Debord (1983) presents one of the most concise and incisive Marxist critiques of utopian socialism and anarchism in these terms (albeit a critique which could apply to the humanist and Hegelian tendencies in the Situationist International itself (cf. Ansell Pearson 1997: 155–60; Debray 1995)). Having argued that Marx’s ‘science’ is an understanding of forces and struggle rather than transcendent law (Debord 1983: §81), Debord writes:

The utopian currents of socialism, although themselves historically grounded in the critique of the existing social organization, can rightly be called utopian to the extent that they reject history – namely the real struggle taking place, as well as the passage of time beyond the immutable perfection of their picture of a happy society. (Debord 1983: §83)

Debord then continues to consider anarchism:

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The anarchists *have an ideal to realize...* It is the *ideology of pure liberty* which equalizes everything and dismisses the very idea of historical evil... Anarchism has merely to repeat and to replay the same simple, total conclusion in every single struggle, because the first conclusion was from the beginning identified with the entire outcome of the movement... [I]t leaves the historical terrain by assuming that the adequate forms for th[e] passage to practice have already been found and will never change. (Debord 1983: §92)