

The Bakuninists at Work

Punkerslut

April 9, 2007

Contents

| | |
|---|---|
| Introduction | 3 |
| The First Spanish Republic | 3 |
| Emancipation: The Marxist or Bakuninist Program? | 9 |

Introduction

When Karl Marx wrote this piece in 1873, it was only eight months after the formation of the First Spanish Republic. It would continue to exist until its official collapse in December of 1874. The contention of Marx was that the activity of the Anarchists during this period contributed to the fall of this government. Since the Spanish Republic existed for at least a year after Marx offered his opinions and predictions, there was still a bit of history left to be played out before one could absolutely place blame on one group or another for the weakening of the First Spanish Republic. Now that we are over a century away from these events, one can analyze the opinion of Marx and Engels on these power struggles and compare them to what we now understand from history. The allegation made here by Marx is quite a serious one. For too long, the Spanish people were under the yoke of an ambitious, Imperialist monarchy. The First Spanish Republic was the first hope of a Spanish government elected by the people. Even the Anarchist Mikhail Bakunin will grant, "It is true that the most imperfect republic is a thousand times better than the most enlightened monarchy, for at least in the republic there are moments when, though always exploited, the people are not oppressed, while in monarchies they are never anything else."¹ Both of the programs of Marx and Bakunin focused around the liberation of people from their oppressive conditions. An authoritarian monarchy was considered among the greatest evils by both of these philosophers. Marx chose to support the political action of the workers, while Bakunin organized the workers into a general strike. The accusation of Marx in this piece was that the actions of the Anarchists in the First Spanish Republic are responsible for the weakening of those opposing rule by monarchy.

The First Spanish Republic

That is what Bakunist "abstention from politics" leads to. At quiet times, when the proletariat knows beforehand that at best it can get only a few representatives to parliament and have no chance whatever of winning a parliamentary majority, the workers may sometimes be made to believe that it is a great revolutionary action to sit out the elections at home, and in general, not to attack the State in which they live and which oppresses them, but to attack the State as such which exists nowhere and which accordingly cannot defend itself. This is a splendid way of behaving in a revolutionary manner, especially for people who lose heart easily; and the extent to which the leaders of the Spanish Alliance belong to this category of people is shown in some detail in the aforementioned publication.

– Karl Marx [Part 1]

Abstention from politics is the natural base of Anarchist theory. If we are going to fully and completely participate in governments and states, on the grounds that we are sacrificing principle for the instrumental value of increasing our movement, then what will happen come the day when we have this enormous, powerful government, now defending its existence and strength on the argument of supposed "anti-autonomists" allegedly found everywhere. Authority cannot be destroyed by authority. Marx's suggestion is that the state can best be attacked "at the voting

¹ "Marxism, Freedom, and the State," Bakunin, chapter 3.

polls,” but there is little change that occurs from reinforcing the legitimizing institute of authoritarian corruption. The Anarchist position is not to attack the state where it does not exist, but to *attack the state*, something markedly different from the Marxian program. It is almost absurd to hear the argument of a Statist, “If you, as Anarchists, really want to abolish the government... then you’d come to the elections and vote.” Does it sound like an honest philosopher, seeking to establish theories for the prediction of future events based on collected data, or does it sound like a cloak-and-dagger politician, fleecing the herd before modest ambitions?

It would be an interesting world to live in, if the state only existed at the polls, as Marx asserts. If it were true, that all of government, that all of this oppression, these wars, these international conflicts – all of this exists on that small piece of paper that says, “Tweedledum or Tweedledee?” After all, according to the Marxian propositions, besides the voting booth, Marx limits where humanity can find its government: “the State as such which exists nowhere.” Such a profound contradiction, that at the same time that the Communist International seeks to establish offices of power in various countries, they are all under the interesting assumption, that the state *simply does not exist*. I am curious what Mr. Marx and his fellows spent decades trying to capture. Political power naturally does not exist; once a person votes, the government ceases to operate within their lives. It would be impossible to take an anti-state action where the government does not exist. I suppose, then, that Anarchists have only thrown bombs at voting tents and the like, seeing as this is the sole existence of the state?

It only takes a second or two to realize that Marx’s arguments, and their conclusions, are ridiculous and contradictory, not only in this piece, but to the countless multitudes of works this political theorist has composed. The Anarchists sought to abolish the state where it *does* directly effect their lives. This entailed a program of direct action against any social entity that sought to establish either political, social, or economic injustice. In order to accomplish this, Anarchists do what is necessary to put the means of production into the hands of the workers. The greatest action that can be taken against a corrupt, but established, state, is to organize the people into autonomous, mutual cooperatives; when the benefits of civilization can continue to be realized without the appendage of social injustice, then it is the people who lose faith in their government and finally end in tearing it down. That has been the program of the Anarchists, in Spain and elsewhere. By these actions, are we involved in an area of social life where the state does not exist, where we cannot take anti-state actions, where our ability to oppose the government is non-existent? Marx’s assertion, however, is that the state can only be attacked by a vote – what an absurd contention.

But the Bakuninist members of the International, who were obliged to reject even the most revolutionary measures if they emanated from the “State”, preferred to support the most preposterous swindlers among the Intransigents rather than a minister.

– Karl Marx [Part 2]

The comment made here by the authors Marx and Engels is in reference to Spain’s ruling state, that of Prime Minister Francisco Pi y Margall. Of particular interest to me, there was the phrase used “even the most revolutionary measures,” inferring that the First Spanish Republic was breaking every tradition on behalf of human happiness. A revolution cannot be measured in other terms. Pi y Margall’s platform included some Socialist reforms: “a stricter separation of church and state, the reorganization of the army, reduction of the working day to nine hours, regulation of

child labor, enhancements to the relationship between business and labor, new laws regarding the autonomy of the regions of Spain, and a program of universal education.”² Perhaps to Marx, *regulating child labor* can be considered “the most revolutionary measure.” The abolishment of child labor, in the United States, came about through the publicity attempts of the muckrakers, such as Lewis Heine. Even though Marx would regard such reformers as *Conservative Socialists*,³ they are responsible for abolishing child labor in the United States and creating the public consensus against it. It is now the staple of these bourgeois politicians of the 21st century to abolish domestic child labor, while Marx’s “most revolutionary” party would only seek to regulate it.

Before any of these platforms could see realization, Pi y Margall resigned from office under pressure from the Spanish Constituent Cortes, a committee with the intentions of writing the Federal Constitution. On June 11, 1873, Estanislao Figueras abdicated his position as prime minister to Pi Y Margall. The tenure of his office lasted until July 18, less than a month. In further defense of the “most revolutionary measures” of Margall, Marx writes that this prime minister “was replaced by pure republicans like Castelar, undisguised bourgeois, whose primary aim was to crush the working-class movement.” [Part 3] The prime minister taking power directly after Pi y Margall was Nicolás Salmerón y Alfonso, who ruled the First Spanish Republic from July 18, 1873 to September 6, 1873. He resigned in protest of the military’s policy of executing rebels, only to be re-elected several days later. With the aid of militia and partisans, Emilio Castelar y Ripoll seized control of the Cortes in Madrid, disarming opposing factions. Salmeron appealed to many of the reactionary generals, like Pavia, Sanchez, Bregna, and Moriones; a victory would have been guaranteed, but much of his government was showing indecision with its loyalties. Castelar assumed the role of dictator in September of 1873, suspending the Cortes. His primary concern was militarism; after suppressing cantonal uprisings in Spain, he struggled to retain control of the revolting colonies.⁴ Castelar resigned on January 2, 1874, when the first, new sitting of the Cortes refused to listen to his ideas. In Madrid, General Pavia pulled a coup d’etat, seizing control of the Cortes. Francisco Serrano y Domínguez is sent for and becomes the new Prime Minister. When General Martinez Campos entered Valencia in the name of King Alfonso XII of Spain, Serrano resigned from his position, officially giving power to the Bourbon Families again. Absolute authority would rule Spain for the following decades.

The picture of the ruling body for the First Spanish Republic is quite bleak. Through a series of abdications, transfers, and resignations, all at the pressures of various political elements, Spain had returned to its Monarchical origin. In 1873, the greatest threat to the autonomy and democracy of the Spanish people was the restoration of its previous political system. The new state, however, failed to enforce the will of the people. Its operation was strictly a matter of power struggles between different, opposing forces, few of which had an adequate program to deal with the serious economic and political turmoil of 19th century Spain. The greatest block to the emancipation of the Spanish working class was the failure of this new government to express the will of the people, the most common flaw of the state. According to the Marxian program, it should have been enough to *capture state power*; even though this happened multiple times on behalf of the people, it wasn’t enough to liberate them. It was the new government that simply handed their own land and people over as slaves to a minority of privileged elite. The struggle

² Wikipedia, “Francisco Pi y Margall.”

³ Communist Manifesto, Part 3.

⁴ Wikipedia, “Emilio Castelar y Ripoll.”

against an oppressive state and capitalism did not fail in Spain because the Anarchists somehow failed to support the "republican government," but it failed because too few were allowed a voice in their government. This provisional government had been given the simple task of drawing up a Republican Constitution; after a year of in-fighting, it surrendered completely and unconditionally to the throne. The Spanish government was unconnected to the will of the people, allowing this tragedy to happen.

The workers of Barcelona – Spain's largest industrial city, which has seen more barricade fighting than any other city in the world – were asked to oppose the armed government force not with arms in their hands, but with a general strike, that is, a measure directly involving only individual bourgeois, but not their collective representative – the State power...

What the activities of the false International did achieve, however, was that Barcelona took no part in the cantonal uprising. Barcelona was the only town whose participation could have provided firm support for the working-class element, which was everywhere strongly represented in the; movement, and thus held out the prospect of the workers ultimately controlling the entire movement. Furthermore, with the participation of Barcelona, victory would have been as good as won. But Barcelona did not raise a finger; the workers of Barcelona, who had seen through the Intransigents and been cheated by the Alliance, remained inactive, thus allowing the Madrid government to secure the final victory.

– Karl Marx [Part 2]

At first, Marx declares that the First Spanish Republic has issued the "most revolutionary measures" concerning the social, economic, and political condition of the Spanish people. Only one page away, and Karl Marx radically changes his position: "...Barcelona did not raise a finger; the workers of Barcelona, who had seen through the Intransigents and been cheated by the Alliance, remained inactive, thus allowing the Madrid government to secure the final victory." Should the Anarchists support the Madrid government and its so-called revolution of the proletariat? Or on the contrast, when this government is ridden with police brutality and military rule, should they have raised the call for violent revolution with the cantonal uprisings? Marx shouldn't have any disappointment for this group of Bakuninists. The Anarchists of Barcelona did not side either with the First Spanish Republic when they opened fire on public crowds, nor did they side with the Cantonalist uprisings, where in-fighting between republicans lead to many violent atrocities. In both cases, as admitted by Marx, they sought to voice an influence in the operations of these provisional governments. It wasn't long until they realized that the cantonalists and the Spanish Republicans held no ideals compatible with the Anarchists'. The Bakuninists did not use armed revolution during the period of the First Spanish Republic; instead, they appealed to the workers to use social unrest and disobedience as a means of achieving the interests of the people.

When the Cantonalist uprisings were holding out at Valencia, should the workers of Barcelona have come to their aid? The Marxian program dictates so. After it became apparent that the Cantonalist held no sympathy for the social revolution, they did more than just expel the Bakuninists. "...the Intransigents in Seville, during the battle with the government troops, fired also on their Bakuninist allies." [Part 3] The cantonal uprisings sought to establish every Spanish county as its own sovereign state. Anarchists can only support a social reorganization if the change means

less power in authority and more autonomy in the people. This is the reason why they held sympathies for the cantonalist uprisings. As Marx quoted Bakunin...

”On the second Sunday in August a Congress was to be held in Valencia, which, among other things, was to determine the attitude the Spanish International Federation was to adopt towards the important political events taking place in Spain since February 11, the day the Republic was proclaimed. But this nonsensical cantonal uprising, which was such an abject failure and in which members of the International eagerly took part in almost all the insurgent provinces, has not only brought the work of the Federal Council to a standstill by dispersing most of its members, but has almost completely disorganised the local federations and, what is worse, exposed their members to the full measure of hatred and persecution that an ignominiously started and defeated popular insurrection always entails...” [Part 4]

The Anarchist tendency will align itself with all Libertarian efforts when it comes to limiting the reigns of authority. This is what drew the Bakuninists to the Cantonal uprising, but it quickly became clear that allying with this new military effort would only further debilitate the political development of Spain. Rousing the workers to violence wouldn't have accomplished the desired ends. Far from Marx's criticism, the Cantonalist uprising had very little chance of reclaiming all of Spain. The only city that was reclaimed by the Cantonalists was Murcia; it wasn't long until they were fully defeated. To have plunged another city into the arising Civil War, before the city itself demonstrated a strong consciousness in cantonalism or armed insurrection, would have been a planned disaster.

On July 26, Martinez Campos began the attack on Valencia. The revolt there had been raised by the workers. When the split in the Spanish International occurred, the real International had the majority in Valencia, and the new Spanish Federal Council was transferred there. Soon after the proclamation of the Republic, when revolutionary battles lay ahead, the Bakuninist workers of Valencia, mistrusting the Barcelona leaders who cloaked their appeasement policy with ultra-revolutionary phrases, offered the members of the real International their co-operation in all local movements. When the cantonal movement started, both groups, making use of the Intransigents, immediately attacked and ejected the troops. Who formed the Valencian junta remains unknown, but from the reports of the English newspaper correspondents it appears that workers definitely predominated in the junta, just as they did among the Valencian Volunteers. The same correspondents spoke of the Valencian insurgents with a respect which they were far from showing towards the other rebels, who were mostly Intransigents; they praised their discipline and the order which prevailed in the city, and predicted a long resistance and a hard struggle. They were not mistaken. Valencia, an open city, withstood the attacks of Campos' division from July 26 to August 8, that is longer than the whole of Andalusia.

–Karl Marx [Part 3]

To describe the events which led to the fall of Valencia: ”At the end of the year, when Marshal Serrano left Madrid to take command of the northern army in the Carlist War, Brigadier Martinez

Campos, who had long been working more or less openly for the king, carried off some battalions of the central army to Sagunto, rallied to his own flag the troops sent against him, and entered Valencia in the king's name. Thereupon the president of the council resigned, and the power was transferred to the king's plenipotentiary and adviser, Canovas del Castillo." The Spanish Republic, which had issued "the most revolutionary measures," transferred power to King Alfonso XII; the members of the Republican government were unmoved as the monarchy regained its political power without resistance. The Cantonalist uprising in Valencia sought to win their war by outliving the siege. Having added a half-hearted Barcelona to the struggle would have been catastrophic.

As soon as they were faced with a serious revolutionary situation, the Bakuninists had to throw the whole of their old programme overboard. First they sacrificed their doctrine of absolute abstention from political, and especially electoral, activities. Then anarchy, the abolition of the State, shared the same fate. Instead of abolishing the State they tried, on the contrary, to set up a number of new, small states. They then dropped the principle that the workers must not take part in any revolution that did not have as its aim the immediate and complete emancipation of the proletariat, and they themselves took part in a movement that was notoriously bourgeois. Finally they went against the dogma they had only just proclaimed – that the establishment of a revolutionary government is but another fraud another betrayal of the working class – for they sat quite comfortably in the juntas of the various towns, and moreover almost everywhere as an impotent minority outvoted and politically exploited by the bourgeoisie.

This renunciation of the principles they had always been preaching was made moreover in the most cowardly and deceitful manner and was prompted by a guilty conscience, so that neither the Bakuninists themselves nor the masses they led had any programme or knew what they wanted when they joined the movement. What was the natural consequence of this? It was that the Bakuninists either prevented any action from being taken, as in Barcelona, or drifted into sporadic, desultory and senseless uprisings, as in Alcoy and Sanlúcar de Barrameda; or that the leadership of the uprising was taken over by the intransigent bourgeois, as was the case in most of the revolts. Thus, when it came to doing things, the ultra-revolutionary rantings of the Bakuninists either turned into appeasement or into uprisings that were doomed to failure, or, led to their joining a bourgeois party which exploited the workers politically in the most disgraceful manner and treated them to kicks into the bargain.

–Karl Marx [Part 4]

There are quite a few things to respond to here. Marx states that the cantonal uprising was directed by the Bakuninists, when this uprising occurred in southern Spain and the Anarchists were active during Barcelona's General Strike. Everything up to that statement, as has been verified by various independent encyclopedias, including everything that Marx has stated thus far, leads one to believe that the Cantonalist armed insurrection in the south was led by different people and attitudes than those of the Anarcho-Syndicalists who declared a General Strike. Marx cites them as directing the uprising and finally, being the cause of its failure, and when that's not enough, he will blame them for not being active enough in their campaigns. The Bakuninists had

good reason to vocalize the opinion of autonomy in these newly formed governmental bodies. The First Spanish Republic was formed out of the public mistrust for the monarchy, and the Cantonalists sought sovereign cantons in Spain, giving each county the right to act as though it were its own nation state. Both of these movements were remarkably young, and both would die as such. To state that there would be no reason or purpose to cooperate with these other movements, if there would be promising results, is simply overly fanatical. Like all of the people's movements, Anarchism can progress better in a republic than it can in a dictatorship or aristocracy.

At the founding of the International Workingmen's Association (aka: the First International), Marx worked with an enormous variety. Followers of Mazzini, who held a strong, religious patriotism, as well as Blanquists and Mutualists. Only ten years after its founding, Marx would write of his previous comrades, "From Blanqui's assumption, that any revolution may be made by the outbreak of a small revolutionary minority, follows of itself the necessity of a dictatorship after the success of the venture. This is, of course, a dictatorship, not of the entire revolutionary class, the proletariat, but of the small minority that has made the revolution, and who are themselves previously organized under the dictatorship of one or several individuals."⁵ The Mutualists were admirers of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, an Anarchist; Marx's opinion of that group is already clearly demonstrated. The followers of Mazzini had no interest in a class war, nor did they recognize that there are economic antagonisms between the classes. Despite this, they were shaking hands with Karl Marx at the founding of the First International. Marx's alliance with these to-be political enemies lasted nearly a decade. When Anarchists cooperated with Republicans and Federalists in Spain, it was too achieve common and mutual ends. Those relationships were severed when it became clear that they were not beneficial to the liberation of the people.

Emancipation: The Marxist or Bakuninist Program?

As we know, at the time the split in the International occurred the odds were in favour of the members of the secret Alliance in Spain; the great majority of Spanish workers followed their lead. When the Republic was proclaimed in February 1873, the Spanish members of the Alliance found themselves in a quandary. Spain is such a backward country industrially that there can be no question there of immediate complete emancipation of the working class. Spain will first have to pass through various preliminary stages of development and remove quite a number of obstacles from its path. The Republic offered a chance of going through these stages in the shortest possible time and quickly surmounting the obstacles. But this chance could be taken only if the Spanish working class played an active political role.

–Karl Marx [Part 1]

The working-class Spanish that did play an active political role in Spain ended up handing their government over to the monarchists. Their new Republic invited King Alfonso XII to return the monarchy to Spain and the revolution was crushed. It was not a matter of instituting a new government or a new provisional order. The workers needed to develop their organization so as to effectively respond to threats to the community, either by the capitalist class or by

⁵ "The Program of the Blanquist Fugitives from the Paris Commune," First published: in *Der Volksstaat*, No.73, 26 June 1874.

authoritarian states. It was social and economic activity that was going to liberate the workers from their tyrants. The so-called "obstacles" that blocked the path to freedom could not be overcome by granting more power to the state. At best, the First Spanish Republic was nothing more than a military junta, established on these grounds "for its survival," and the only conclusion of this amassed power was the return to the Bourbon Monarchy. The people do not need heavy industrialization, or the ingrained slavery culture that comes with capitalism, in order to achieve a social situation where they are free from economic, social, and political inequity.

Great importance was also attached to the general STRIKE at the Geneva Congress of the Alliance held on September 1, 1873, although it was universally admitted that this required a well-formed organisation of the working class and plentiful funds. And there's the rub. On the one hand the governments, especially if encouraged by political abstention, will never allow the organisation or the funds of the workers to reach such a level; on the other hand, political events and oppressive acts by the ruling classes will lead to the liberation of the workers long before the proletariat is able to set up such an ideal organisation and this colossal reserve fund. But if it had them, there would be no need to use the roundabout way of a general STRIKE to achieve its goal.

–Karl Marx [Part 2]

First, we are to demand the expansion of the state, and next, we are asked to fear it. If we can throw revolutionary syndicalism and unionism out the window on the string that "the governments will not allow it," why would any peoples' movement promise actual social change? If Marx admits that the governments will not allow *the people themselves* to organize, then perhaps our battle should not be waged only against the possessors of capital, but also against the masters of the state. Socialism alone can validate the war on political economy, but it does not provide the basic structure of social organization – just an ideal to organize upon. Anarchism is the greatest champion of practically implementing what Bakunin has regarded as *Stateless Socialism*.

Albors, who had originally promised the workers to remain neutral, issued a proclamation in which he "insulted and slandered the workers and sided with the manufacturers thus destroying the rights and the freedom of the strikers and challenging them to fight". How the pious wishes of a mayor can destroy the rights and the freedom of the strikers is not made clear.

–Karl Marx [Part 2]

Marx wrote this piece in 1871 and after three decades of studying political philosophy, he has no idea how a government might make its wishes known.

The committee was turned away and as it was leaving the town hall, the police opened fire on the peaceful and unarmed people standing in the square. This is how the fight started, according to the report of the Alliance.

–Karl Marx [Part 2]

At this point, I was perhaps expecting some honesty. Marx could have redeemed himself with something along the lines of, "For the entirety of my life, how force and coercion were used by the government in order to control the population was completely unknown to me. This mayor, denying the strikers have any rights, and then ordering his police to open fire on them, is the greatest exception to all of the rules of political power that we have ever seen. At no point in history has a mayor, or an elected or appointed authority, has sought to oppress public organizations, so this shall be the first." The whole of Marx's theory comes crashing down with the realization of this new fact – governments can use force! Only words ago, Marx's philosophical outlet on the state was government by one hypothetical scenario, "How the pious wishes of a mayor can destroy the rights and the freedom of the strikers is not made clear." On the contrary, I'm apt to believe that Marx would have wrote anything, if it would have discredited the Bakuninists, which at that time was demonstrating a very strong following apart from the Marxists.

Perhaps the problem with the republic was that it did not grant more authority, fewer checks, and fewer civil rights, it did not create a *stronger government*, as Marx had desired? If history was changed and an authoritarian regime had been adopted, this alone would not have been enough to prevent the ruling body from cooperating with the nation's previously-established, monarchist state. It wouldn't have stopped the natural corruptibility of power and the behavior patterns of the ruling elites. The Marxian program for First Spanish Republic would have done nothing to prevent it from collapsing the way it did.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Punkerslut
The Bakuninists at Work
April 9, 2007

Retrieved on 22nd April 2021 from
<http://www.anarchistrevolt.com/critiques/marx/bakuninist.html>

theanarchistlibrary.org