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Bakunin vs. Marx

Sam Dolgoff

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As pointed out in my introduction to **Bakunin on Anarchy** (Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), the clash of personalities between Marx and Bakunin was not the essential element in their running controversy during the congresses of the International. The debates transcend petty personal squabbles' and embody two diametrically opposed tendencies in the theory and tactics of socialism, the authoritarian and libertarian schools respectively, the two main lines of thought that helped shape the character of the modern labour and socialist movements.

Unfortunately, Ulli Diemer's articles *Anarchism vs. Marxism* and *Bakunin vs. Marx* (Red Menace, Spring 1978) really do not deal with the main issues involved in the debates. A discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. I limit myself to correcting the more glaring factual errors and distortions. I also express my deep appreciation to the comrades of Red Menace for granting me space. (Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are Diemer's.)

The very fact that there is still, over a century later, a debate between Marxism and Anarchism on fundamental principles proves that Marx was not, and could not possibly have been the "central

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figure in the development of libertarianism. Neither Marx or Engels ever claimed that they were "central figure in the development of socialism". According to Engels, the "central figures", the founders of socialism, were the "utopians" Saint Simon, Fourier, and Robert Owen, who formulated the leading principles of socialism, as Marx himself acknowledged in a letter to his friend Wedemeyer. (See Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Marx even praised Proudhon's *What is Property* as the first "truly scientific analysis of capitalism," anticipating Marx's later findings. (See J. Hampton Jackson's *Marx, Proudhon, and European Socialism*.) Marx, who minimized the role of the individual in history, would certainly have rejected the notion that "...it is not possible to create...a libertarian world..." without him.

Whether Marx or Engels did or did not use the term "dialectical materialism" does not invalidate the fact that they WERE dialectical materialists and that there is a fundamental indissoluble connection between dialectics and Marxism. For Marx and Engels the dialectic method was not only a theory but a LAW OF NATURE. Anyone who questions this connection is not a Marxist. Engels emphasizes this in his preface to the second edition of *Anti-Duhring* — a work written with the full approval of Marx:

" ..Marx and I were pretty well the only people to rescue conscious dialectics from German idealist philosophy and APPLY IT TO THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF NATURE AND HISTORY ..." (emphasis mine)

Engels devotes three whole chapters to dialectics, even trying to demonstrate the validity of the dialectic method to chemistry and mathematics.

Only one who is almost totally ignorant of anarchist literature could assert that "with very few exceptions, anarchism failed to produce a rigorous analysis of capitalism, the state, bureaucracy, or authoritarianism..." A bibliography of such works could easily fill several volumes. For example, Max Nettlau's bibliography of anarchism compiled over half a century ago has been immeasurably

enriched by later works. While there is sufficient Marxist literature on capitalism, there is almost nothing on such crucial questions as the state, bureaucracy, federalism, self-management and other forms of social organization which even modern Marxists deplore. They are trying to drastically revise Marx's naive and erroneous views on these vital issues.

Bakunin did not "deliberately fabricate" the accusation that Marx believed in the "People's State". Bakunin criticised Marx for this in 1870 and 1872. He could not be expected to forcee that Marx would condemn the "People's State" THREE YEARS LATER in 1875 in his Critique of the Gotha Program. The Critique was published AFTER Bakunin's death about a year later. But this error does not invalidate Bakunin's prophetic indictment of the "Workers' State" which Marx and Co. DID champion.

The assertion that the Marx and Engels "...position is spelled out most extensively in Marx's Civil War in France is in flagrant contradiction to everything Marx and Engels wrote before and after the Paris Commune. To establish this extremely important point, I quoted Franz Mehring, Marx's disciple and authorized biographer in my Bakunin on Anarchy. I strongly suspect that Diemer ignored this quote because it decisively refutes his argument. Here it is:

"..The opinions of the Communist Manifesto could not be reconciled with the praise lavished by The Civil War in France for the vigorous fashion in which began to exterminate the parasitic State ...Both Marx and Engels were well aware of the contradiction, and in a preface to a new edition of The Communist Manifesto issued in June 1872 they revised their opinions... after the death of Marx, Engels in fighting the anarchists once again took his stand on the original basis of the Manifesto... if an insurrection was able to abolish the whole oppressive machinery of the State by a few simple decrees, was that not a confirmation of Bakunin's steadfastly maintained standpoint? (Karl Marx, pp. 452-3)..."

Diemer's assertion that Marx and Engels "consistently maintain that the state is INCOMPATIBLE with socialism..." (my emphasis)

is not correct. For them, the "workers state", the TRANSITION toward full realization of communism, IS COMPATIBLE with socialism. Diemer himself states correctly that. Marx and Engels believed the proletariat must "use the state" to achieve the liberation of the proletariat. "The state employs means which will be discarded after the liberation." As if means can be separated from ends: Diemer does not write that Marx and Engels proclaimed the necessity for the "workers' state" not only to crush the bourgeoisie, but also to institute socialism:

"...the proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to CENTRALIZE ALL INSTRUMENTS OF PRODUCTION IN THE HANDS OF THE STATE... centralization of credit... by the State. Centralization of communication ... and transport by the State. Establishment of industrial armies by the State..." (Communist Manifesto) (emphasis mine)

There is therefore no foundation for the assertion that for Marx and Engels, socialism is not compatible with the state, and still less that they were "in intransigent opposition to the state..." It is significant that they proclaimed the same views thirty years later in 1878. "... the means of production are... transformed into state property..." (Anti-Duhring, Part 3, Chapter 2 - Theoretical). Solidly basing himself on their writings, Bakunin, in this prophetic quote, defined the authoritarian character of Marxian "socialism":

"...labour employed by the state such is the fundamental principle of authoritarian communism, of state socialism ... after a period of transition ... the state will then become the only banker, capitalist, organizer, and distributor of all its products. Such is the ideal, the fundamental principle of modern communism..." (quoted in Bakunin on Anarchy, P. 217)

Since Diemer grudgingly concedes that "...use of the state in the transition period is dangerous and the concern of Bakunin about the possible degeneration of the revolution is valid..." further comment is unnecessary.

totalitarian regimes, which relate themselves to Marx, but also in the capitalist countries, which are being dominated by the growing power of the state..." (Le Contrat Sociale, Paris, January-February 1964)

Collinet lists the basic points in question: How can liberty and free development be assured in an increasingly industrialized society? How can capitalist exploitation and oppression be eliminated? Must power be centralized, or should it be diffused among multiple federated units? Should the International be the model of a new society of simply an instrument of the State or of political parties? At the Congress of Lausanne in 1967, the Belgian delegate, Caesar de Paepe, raised just such a question regarding "...the efforts now being made by the International for the emancipation of the workers. Could this not", he inquired, "result in the creation of a new class of ex-workers who wield state power, and would not the situation of the workers be much more miserable than it is now?"

A well researched, thoughtful, objective discussion of these always fundamental questions involved in the controversy between Marx and Bakunin - especially now when 19th century socialist ideas are being re-examined, - is sorely needed. Regrettably, Diemer's articles add nothing to the clarification of these perennial problems and only obscure the issues.

Diemer's remarks about Bakunin's attitude toward the problem of authority does not remotely resemble his views. It was precisely in regard to the theory and practice of revolution and the nature of authority which ranks Bakunin as one of the greatest revolutionists in the history of the socialist movement. Bakunin did NOT reject "... all forms of authority..." for example:

...do I reject all authority? Perish the thought. In the matter of boots I consult the bootmaker, concerning houses, canals or railroads, I consult the engineer... for science as well as industry, I recognize the necessity for the division and association of labor. I bow before the authority of specialists because it is imposed upon me by my own reason. I give and receive such is human life. Each directs and is directed in turn. Therefore there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and above all, voluntary authority and subordination..." (God and the State)

" ... a certain amount of discipline, not automatic, but voluntary... discipline which harmonizes perfectly with the freedom of individuals, is, and ever will be, necessary when a great number of individuals, freely united, under-take any kind of work or collective action. Under such circumstances discipline is simply the voluntary and thoughtful coordination of all individual efforts toward a common goal..." (Knouto Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution)

In the days of the old International many socialists of both camps, Bakunin included, then believed the collapse of capitalism and the social revolution to be imminent. Although this was an illusion, the debate they conducted on fundamental principles has remained pertinent and in many forms, still goes on. To many others at the time - as a French political scientist, Michel Collinet, has pointed out - the issues discussed by the authoritarian Marxists and the libertarian Bakuninists seemed to be merely abstract speculation about what might happen in the future;

but the problems which then seemed so far-fetched, he says "...are today crucial; they are being decisively posed not only in

On page eleven, Diemer takes exception to Bakunin's remark that Marx "as a German and a Jew, is from head to toe an authoritarian." On the next page he flatly contradicts himself. "Both Bakunin and Marx displayed considerable arrogance and AUTHORITARIANISM" (my emphasis) With respect to Marx there is ample evidence to substantiate this accusation. I challenge Diemer to PROVE that Bakunin was either arrogant or authoritarian.

The greatest historian of anarchism, Max Nettlau, the foremost living authority on Bakunin and his times, Arthur Lehning, and Bakunin's contemporary, the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist Anselmo Lorenzo - all of them at one time or another, deplored Bakunin's anti-semitic streak and his anti-German prejudice. But Diemer, intent on white-washing his hero, Marx, and discrediting Bakunin, deliberately hides the fact that Marx was also anti-semitic and prejudiced against Slavic peoples. (on anti-semitism see Marx's On The Jewish Question). Max Nomad (Political Heretics, pp. 85-86) tells how Marx insulted Lasalle:

...calling him the "Jewish Nigger" and Baran Itzik". Marx wrote about the Croats, Czechs, Pandurs and "similar scum" and demanded the complete "annihilation" of those "reactionary races". Marx even justified the subjection of eight million Slavs to four million Hungarians on the ground that the Hungarians had more "vitality and energy"..."

Economic determinism constitutes the essence of Marxism. It is clearly defined in this celebrated passage from Marx's Critique of Political Economy:

" ... the economic structure of society always forms the real basis from which in the last analysis, is to be explained, the whole superstructure of legal political institutions, (the state) as well as the religious, philosophical, and other conceptions of each historical period..." (In another place, Max Eastman's introduction to the Marx anthology Capital, he quotes Engels)"...with the same certainty with which, from a given mathematical proposition, a new one is deduced, with that same certainty, can we deduce the social

revolution from the existing social conditions and the principles of political economy..”

Notwithstanding his anti-slavery sentiments, Marx in his polemic against Proudhon, tried to justify slavery in America on the ground that it was an economic necessity, arguing in line with his theory of economic determinism, that slavery was progressive phase in the evolution of society:

”...slavery is an economic category like any other. Slavery is just as much an economic pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery or credit... without slavery, North America, the most progressive of countries, would be turned into a primitive country. Abolish slavery and you will wipe America off the map of nations..” (quoted from Poverty of Philosophy in Handbook of Marxism; International Publishers, 1935, p.357)

Marx’s attitude is justified by the editors of the Handbook... on the grounds that while slavery was an economic necessity in 1847, when the North was industrially backward, the development of industry in the 1860’s made slavery economically unnecessary. The question, How progressive is a country whose very existence depends on slavery? never occurred to Marx. In his polemic with Duhring, thirty one years later in 1878, Engels repeated that ”the introduction of slavery in Greece”, was both an economic necessity and ”a great step forward.”

How Diemer, in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence, can insist that ”Marx was not an economic determinist”, supporting his argument with two long quotations from Engels, which in no manner whatsoever, invalidate their theory of economic determinism, is difficult to understand. (see Anti-Duhring p.202)

To back up his charge that Bakunin was expelled from the International in 1872, because Bakunin’s secret Alliance conspired to ”take over the International”, Diemer cites George Woodcock’s Anarchism page 168. (There is no reference to this on page 168 or anywhere else). He also cites Eileen Kelly, an ignorant, scandal monger whose review article in the New York Review of Books

gether with Nechaev, or under his influence, ”...a number of tracts that displayed a despotic Machiavellan approach to revolution..” Diemer writes that in these pamphlets Nechaev and Bakunin advocate a new social order, to be erected by (he quotes from the pamphlets) ”...concentrating all the means of social existence in the hands of Our Committee, and the proclamation of compulsory physical labor for everyone ...compulsory residence in communal dormitories, rules for hours of work, feeding of children ... etc.

Diemer, to be sure unintentionally, omits vital information and makes factual errors which must be corrected. He does not identify the pamphlets in question, nor the source of the quotation. The quotation is not part of any of the pamphlets. It comes from an article in Nechaev’s periodical Narodna ja Raspravy (The People’s Vengeance) Spring 1870. An editorial note attached to the article reads”

...those desiring a more detailed exposition of our principles should read our article, The Communist Manifesto, which outlines the practical measures necessary to attain our aims...

Nechaev himself wrote the article and edited the paper. Bukin took no part in writing the articles or editing the paper. In any case, the measures advocated by Nechaev in his Catechism and other writings are in flagrant contradiction to everything Bakunin ever wrote or did. (source. Michael Bakunin and His Relations With Sergei Nechaev - in French - edited with introduction and notes by Arthur Lehning: International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 1971, p. XXVIII)

The charge that Bakunin ”...was infatuated with violence is false. Bakunin insisted again and again that destruction must be directed not against persons but against institutions:

”it will then become unnecessary to destroy men and reap the inevitable reaction which massacres of human beings have never failed and never will fail to produce in society...” (Bakunin on Anarchy, p.13)

power for themselves but insist increasingly that all power must derive and flow back to the grass-roots organizations spontaneously created by the revolution.

Because Bakunin tried to organize this secret organization he has been regarded by some historians as a forerunner of the Leninist Bolshevik dictatorship. Nothing can be further from the truth. Lenin would agree that an organization exercising no overt authority, without a state, without the official machinery of institutionalized power to enforce its policies, cannot be defined as a dictatorship.

Bakunin used the terms "invisible collective dictatorship" to denote the underground movement exerting maximum influence in an organized manner. According to the rules of his secret Alliance; "... no member... is permitted even in the midst of full revolution, to take public office of any kind, nor is the organization permitted to do so ... it will at all times be on the alert, making it impossible for authorities, governments and states to be re-established..."

The question of the relationship between revolutionary minorities and mass movements, like the problem of power, will probably never be fully resolved. But it is the merit of Bakunin, and the libertarian movement as a whole, that it endeavors to reduce its built-in defects to a minimum. There is no point in scolding Bakunin. If he did not have foolproof answers he did ask the right questions and this is no mean achievement. Our critics would be better advised to come up with satisfactory answers.

In his remarks concerning Bakunin's relations with the ruthless, amoral terrorist Sergei Nechaev, Diemer reluctantly admits that "...Bakunin did indeed repudiate Nechaev when he found out the true nature of his activities..." Recent research by Michael Confino, (Daughter of a Revolutionary) conclusively proves that Nechaev, NOT BAKUNIN was the SOLE author of the most notorious document in socialist history: Rules That Must Inspire The Revolutionary (better known as Catechism of the Revolutionary). During his brief association with Nechaev, Bakunin is accused of writing to-

is on par with Diemer's irresponsible allegations. Diemer's assertion that "most historians" think that Bakunin was guilty is false. All responsible historians insist that Bakunin and his close comrade James Guillaume were expelled in a rigged congress packed by hand picked "delegates" who "represented" non-existent sections of the International.

Marx's friend Sorge, residing in the United States, sent Marx a dozen blank credentials from non-existent groups which Marx distributed to his stooges. Serrailier, Secretary for France, in the General Council, also came to the Congress with a handful of credentials which could not be verified. Of the five members of the Commission of Inquiry chosen to investigate the charges against Bakunin and other libertarian members of the International and report their findings to the Congress, one, Walter (whose real name was Von Heddeghem) was a Bonapartist police spy. The Commission reported that "... the secret Alliance did at one time exist, but there is INSUFFICIENT PROOF OF ITS CONTINUED EXISTENCE..." (my emphasis) Nor could the Commission prove that the Alliance established rules opposed to the rules of the International when it did exist. Roch Spingard, a member of the Commission submitted a minority report contending that Bakunin was being indicted on insufficient evidence. He declared that "...I am resolved to fight the decision before the Congress..."

On the last day of the Congress after over half the delegates went home, the Marxist clique staged a successful coup to kill the International by moving its headquarters to New York. Nearly all the delegates, including Marx's strongest supporters, refused to accept the decisions of the Marx-Engels cliques. They joined the Bakuninist sections of the International, not because they agreed with their anti-statist, anti-parliamentary political action policies, but because they demanded the complete autonomy of the sections irrespective of different political or social ideas. They revolted because the phony Congress enacted a resolution giving the Marx-

ist dominated General Council power to expel sections and even whole federations from the International.

Marx's authorized biographer, Franz Mehring noted that the Congress of the International "...which the General Council in New York called for in Geneva, drew up ... the death certificate of the International..." while the Bakuninist counter-Congress which also took place in Geneva was attended by delegates from all sections and federations of the International - the Marxist congress consisted "mostly of Swiss who lived in Geneva... not even the General Council, was able to send a delegate..." (Karl Marx, pp.495-496).

Bakunin did NOT try to dominate the International. In his Letter to La Liberte (Bakunin on Anarchy p.278) Bakunin declared

"...since reconciliation in the field of politics is impossible, we should practice mutual toleration, granting to each country the incontestable right to follow whatever political tendencies it may prefer or find suitable for its own particular situation. Consequently, by rejecting all political programs from the International, we should seek to strengthen the unity of this great association solely in the field of economic solidarity. Such solidarity unites us while political questions inevitably separates us..."

There is no reference to a post-revolutionary state in any of Bakunin's anarchist writings (there is none on page 153 of my Bakunin on Anarchy given by Diemer.

There is not one shred of evidence to back up the charge that Bakunin ever wrote that "...Marx was part of an International conspiracy with Bismark and Rothchild..."

The motion to invest the General Council with more power was NOT made by Bakunin but by Marxist delegates. Bakunin voted for the motion because it was presumably directed against the resolution of the bourgeois delegate. In an article titled *Mia Culpa* (I am guilty) Bakunin admitted that he had made a serious mistake.

It is true that Bakunin, in anarchist opinion mistakenly, advised Italian members of the Alliance to become deputies in the gov-

ernment, as a temporary measure dictated by extraordinary conditions. Bakunin acknowledged that it constituted a violation of anarchist principles. But to stress this contradiction as the essence of Bakunin's doctrine is a gross distortion.

The question of whether Bakunin was a collectivist who advocated that workers be paid according to the amount they produced and not according to need is discussed by his close associate James Guillaume. (Bakunin on Anarchy , p.157-158) Bakunin was not in this sense a collectivist. Nor was Marx a strict "communist" for whom payment according to need would prevail in the final stage of communism, and payment according to work would prevail during the socialist transition period.

In connection with secret societies Bakunin's well known predilection for the establishment of tightly organized hierarchical organizations, for which he worked out elaborate rules in the style of the Freemasons and the Italian Carbonari, can be attributed partly to his romantic temperament and partly to the fact that all revolutionary and progressive groups were forced to operate secretly. Bakunin's secret organizations were actually informal fraternities and groups connected by personal contact and correspondence, as preferred by his closest associates who considered that his schemes for elaborate secret societies were incompatible with anarchist principles.

For anarchists intent upon guiding the revolution in a libertarian direction by libertarian means, the question of how to stop authoritarians from seizing power without instituting a dictatorship of their own becomes increasingly complicated. Bakunin understood that the people tend to be gullible and oblivious to the early harbingers of dictatorship until the revolutionary storm subsides and they awake to find themselves in shackles. He therefore set about forming a network of secret cadres whose members would prepare the masses for revolution by helping them to identify their enemies, fostering confidence in their own creative capacities, and fight with them on the barricades. These militants would seek no