

The First International and the Development of Anarchism and Marxism

**Anarchism originated in the 1st International, through the Marx-Bakunin
split.**

Wayne Price

June 11, 2017

Contents

The Charges	3
The Problem of Power	6
Further Developments	7
Conclusion	8

Both anarchism and Marxism developed in the 19th century out of movements for democracy, workers' rights, and socialism. With this common background, they had a great deal of overlap—plus deep divisions. They split in a bitter faction fight in the First International—officially called the International Workingmen's Association. The International was founded in 1864 and their fight took place in the early 1870s, in the same period as the rebellion of the Paris Commune (1871). The anarchist movement, strongly influenced by Mikhail Bakunin, developed through the First International. On the other hand, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had been working out their views since the 1840s, but Marxism expanded theoretically and practically in the First International.

By and large, most available accounts of the conflict in the International are written from the point of view of the Marxists. However, in recent years there have been a number of histories of the conflict in the International from the viewpoint of the anarchists. (See Berthier 2015; Eckhardt 2016; Graham 2015—all excellent.)

Like other political fights within left-wing groups, there were personality clashes, misrepresentation of other's views, sharp dealing, and undemocratic manipulation—on both sides. But the issues were real and important. A century and a half later, the issues still resonate. Radicals today can still learn from this clash among giants of our history. Personally, I identify with the anarchist tradition, while also being influenced by Marxism. I find this history fascinating.

Years after the final split in the International, Errico Malatesta, a colleague of Bakunin's, stated that both the anarchists and the Marxists "sought to make use of the International for our own party aims....We, as anarchists, relied chiefly on propaganda...while the Marxists...wanted to impose their ideas by majority strength—which was more or less fictitious....But all of us, Bakuninists and Marxists alike, tried to force events rather than relying upon the force of events." (quoted in Graham 2015; 137) (By "party" he meant movements or tendencies.)

What were the issues? In the abstract, Bakunin was to declare, once the conflict broke out, that it was "a great struggle between two principles: that of authoritarian communism and that of revolutionary socialism." (quoted in Eckhardt 2016; 77) But actually, there was little direct discussion of theoretical disagreements between Marxism and anarchism. For example, the question of whether there should be a transitional "workers' state" ("dictatorship of the proletariat") after a revolution did not come up in any major debate. Nor did the question of whether socialism would come about through centralized state ownership or through popular decentralized associations. (The one really political issue will be discussed in a moment.)

The Charges

Instead, Marx and his friends accused Bakunin of organizing a secret conspiracy behind the scenes, whose aim was to take over the International—or, if it could not, to destroy it from within. In his turn, Bakunin claimed that Marx already dominated the General Council of the International and manipulated its congresses, in order to push for his agenda.

The anarchists and Marx (and other tendencies) agreed that the International should promote labor unions everywhere. Marx's additional program was to demand that every national branch of the International form a political party to run in elections. He rammed through a resolution stating this at a completely unrepresentative gathering in London in 1871. However, Bakunin and the anarchists did not insist that the branches be forbidden to organize parties. Instead they

proposed that each section be able to decide for itself whether to run in elections (which was how the International had been operating from its inception). But Marx wanted the organization to be more centralized in order to demand party-building.

Marx's justification for this electoralist strategy has never been clear to me. After the Paris Commune rebellion of 1871 (which was before the London congress), Engels wrote a new introduction to the Communist Manifesto, quoting from Marx's *Civil War in France*: "One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes'" (Marx & Engels 1955; 6) This insight would seem to point to a rejection of an electoral strategy. It implies that the working class and oppressed either could not take over the capitalist state, or, if it did, the working class could not use it for its liberation. It means the existing state must be overturned and replaced with other institutions. Yet Marx and Engels continued to push for workers' electoral parties, and even argued that they might get elected to state power in some countries, such as Britain and the U.S.

On the other hand, "Bakunin's argument [was] that participating in politics would result in the labor movement being tied to the state and thus make carrying out their social-revolutionary demands impossible....Freedom can only be obtained by refusing to participate in the existing power structures, destroying those power structures, and creating new forms of community." (Graham 2015; 15)

The Marxist David Fernbach writes, "Marx hoped to transform the International's organizations in the various countries into political parties centered on London. Already in 1867...Marx had written to Engels, 'In the next revolution...we (i.e. you and I) will have this powerful engine in our hands.' ...The remaining condition for transforming the International into a more centralized and disciplined body was a certain degree of ideological homogeneity.... [At congresses of the International] Marx and Engels...were certainly not above using foul means when political necessity demanded." ("Introduction," 1992; 47 & 49) (I am deliberately quoting the pro-Marx Fernbach, an authority on Marx's life and work, rather than from pro-anarchist texts. But when referring to weaknesses of Bakunin and the anarchists, I will cite from pro-Bakunin sources.)

Marx's "foul means" included calling congresses to which few of those on Bakunin's side could attend, printing blank delegate papers in order to stack the congresses, passing on false information about Bakunin's forces, using name calling and slander. For example, Marx denounced Bakunin as being a "pan-Slavist" reactionary, even though Bakunin had abandoned that viewpoint years ago. Marx blamed Bakunin for evil deeds carried out by a young psychopath and nihilist named Nechayev, whom Bakunin had befriended, "...although they knew that Bakunin was guilty of nothing worse than crass misjudgment and gullibility." (Fernbach 1992; 49) This was used as a justification for expelling Bakunin, his comrade James Guillaume, and other anarchists from the International in 1872. This caused an organizational split in the International.

As for Bakunin, it was true that he had initiated an international political organization, one which worked inside and outside of the First International. It went under various names, sometimes the "International Brotherhood," but mostly the "International Alliance of Socialist Democracy." In general, it was a network of Bakunin's fellow-thinkers and friends, spread throughout Europe. At times it had a mass membership, particularly in the Jura region of Switzerland and in Spain. Originally it had asked to join the International as a body, but this was not allowed. The Swiss section was accepted as a branch of the International.

Although claiming to be dissolved, the Alliance really continued. In itself, this does not seem to be such a terrible thing. Why couldn't the anarchists (or anyone else) have a transnational socialist caucus inside the International? Marx argued that this secret conspiracy existed to take over (or to destroy) the International. Actually members of the Alliance were known to have worked hard to build sections of the International in Switzerland, in Spain, and in Italy.

Part of the problem here was that Bakunin was notorious for constantly creating, *on paper and in his imagination*, secret conspiracies run by hierarchical authorities, with himself at the top—conspiracies which were to act behind the scenes of the mass movement. “Our aim is the creation of a powerful but always invisible revolutionary association which will prepare and direct the revolution.” (Bakunin quoted in Dolgoff 1980; 10) “We must be the invisible pilots guiding the Revolution...by the collective dictatorship of all our allies [members].” (same; 180). This was balanced by contrary statements that he did not want this association to rule over the workers or to be an overt dictatorship. Yet, as Morris, a pro-Bakunin writer, puts it, “Bakunin’s writings on secret societies often seem to contradict his own anarchist principles...” (1993; 150) Dolgoff, an admirer of Bakunin, writes, “Bakunin’s...closest associates...considered his schemes for elaborate, centralized secret societies incompatible with libertarian principles.” (1980; 182) This says something about the peculiarities of Bakunin, but not much about the movement. Almost all the other anarchists (or “federalists” or “revolutionary socialists” as they often called themselves) saw the Alliance as a loose association of comrades.

For that matter, Marx and Engels also had a loose network of friends and allies which they sought to build. They had regular correspondence with the German social democrats. They sent one of Marx’s sons-in-law into Spain to try to out-organize the anarchist sections, and to split them if necessary (this failed). Marx was also willing to ally himself with the Blanquist sect, which was highly centralized and secretly conspiratorial; they supported his drive to centralize the International.

In theory, Marx had declared that he was against the formation of sects, with their own dogmas, inside the workers’ movement. He claimed that they would dissolve in the actual course of the popular struggle. The historical process would produce the correct general direction. Therefore he opposed any factions based on specific, pre-established, political views, within the International.

But Marx believed that *he knew the course which history would take*. He was sure that the workers would form political parties and run in elections; that this would lead, somehow, to the workers forming their own states and then nationalizing the economy as the beginning of communism. Marx did not see this as a program which he was proposing to the workers, so much as the more-or-less inevitable course of history which the workers needed to take to move toward workers’ power and socialism. It was, I believe, this certain belief in a foreordained future which justified (to Marx) his authoritarian and “foul” methods. Similarly, it was this sense of absolute surety which was to rationalize the later Marxist-Leninists in carrying out their atrocities of dictatorship, mass murder, and super-exploitation. They were sure that it would come out right in the end, in a free and cooperative society.

Unfortunately, Bakunin had other authoritarian traits which made his cause “foul.” Especially this included his writings (many not published at the time) which denounced Marx for being a German Jew, and denounced both Germans and Jews in vicious racist terms. An anarchist biographer writes, “This anti-Semitism was a vile and disturbing theme in some of his writings in this period.” (Leier 2006; 247) In 1869, he was accused by Hess of trying to destroy the Interna-

tional and associating with a police spy. Bakunin responded to this slander by “writing a lengthy response [which] degenerated into an anti-Semitic rant...” (Graham 2015; 125)

Bakunin wrote of Marx that he showed, “subterranean intrigues, vain grudges, miserable personal animosities, dirty insults and infamous slurs, *which moreover characterize political struggles of almost all Germans...*” (quoted in Berthier 2015; 159; my emphasis) Bakunin wrote, “Mr. Marx is a [German] patriot no less ardent than Bismarck....He desires the establishment of a great Germanic state, one that will glorify the German people....Marx...considers himself at least as Bismarck’s successor....What unites them...is the out-and-out cult of the State....” (in Dolgoff 1980; 314–315) He claimed that the Slavs and Latin “races” were naturally libertarian, while the Germanic people were invariably authoritarian. “The anti-Jewish sentiments [of] Bakunin’s...were often a byproduct of his anti-German attitude....Such remarks are not in keeping with the anarchist ideas which Bakunin became famous for.” (Eckhardt 2016; 196) (In his letters, Marx sometimes made national chauvinist and racist comments, but they were nothing compared to Bakunin’s tirades, nor do they justify Bakunin.)

This anti-Germanism was not unique to Bakunin. His closest comrade, James Guillaume, wrote a book, *Karl Marx, Pan-Germanist*. This racist anti-Germanism later played a part in persuading a minority of prominent anarchists to support the imperialist Allies against the imperialist Germans in World War I—including Kropotkin and Guillaume.

The Problem of Power

Overall I believe that the anarchists had the better opinions and practice in the fight inside the First International. History has shown that the electoral strategy of the Marxist parties led to accommodation to capitalism and its state. The anarchists were correct to oppose this strategy.

Marx was actually not a worshipper of the state. He agreed with the anarchists on the goal of ending the state. But his strategy was for the workers to use the state as the key instrument for workers’ rule and the beginning of socialism. *The anarchists were correct in opposing the Marxist perspective of seizing state power* (whether by election or through a revolution which replaces the capitalist state with a new state).

This issue was somewhat confused, in my opinion, due to the anarchist approach to “power.” Anarchists often declare that they are not in favor of the workers “taking power.” Actually they generally favor the workers creating councils and assemblies, in workplaces and neighborhoods, federated to replace the state and capitalism. They are for working people overturning all capitalist institutions, and replacing them with a new society. I would call this “taking power.” The key difference with the Marxists is that the Marxists wanted to “take *state power*.” They sought to create a new, “workers’ state”—but the state is an alienated social machine, with bureaucracies, regular military and police, professional politicians, etc., standing over the rest of society and holding down the population. *This is what anarchists are absolutely against.*

As Berthier puts it, the Marxists sought “the conquest of political power through elections,” while the anti-authoritarians aimed to “conquer social power, creating new and radically different forms...through which it would be able to go forward to social reconstruction.” (2015; 13) The anarchists’ goal was “having working class *social power* replace bourgeois *political power*.” (same; 80)

Further Developments

At the time of the split in the International, the anarchists had most of the membership and national sections. Even groupings which had worked with Marx, such as the Blanquists and the British union officials, fell away from him. Outside of the German socialists (who had played little role in the International) there were few Marxists. However, over time the Marxists came to have the largest section of the international workers' movement. Up until World War I, the anarchists still were the mainstream of the far left within the movement. But with the Russian Revolution, when the Marxists seemed to have shown that they could make a revolution, the anarchists were reduced to a minority even on the far left.

What weaknesses did the anarchists display which led to this relative marginalization? One problem was the lack of theoretical development among the anarchists, who often succumbed to anti-intellectualism. Bakunin had often expressed great admiration for the theoretical work of Marx. Even in his most bitter attacks on Marx, Bakunin would repeat his respect for Marx's political economy. Other anarchists were similarly impressed by Marx's theories (but not his politics). Yet this was not built on by the anarchist movement. There were valuable works by Kropotkin and others which discussed what an anti-authoritarian society might look like. But there was little or no analysis of how capitalism worked and how the workers' movement should react to it under varying conditions. "The disappearance of a mass movement went hand in hand with a breakdown in the theoretical level of the movement." (Berthier 2012; 133)

Berthier cites what he regards as one major problem in the anarchist/anti-authoritarian movement. He believes that the anarchists overreacted against Marx's drive for bureaucratic centralization of the International by becoming opposed to almost all authority and organization. "There developed opposition to all forms of organization as a reaction against the centralization and bureaucratization put in place by Marx....The very basis of the doctrine elaborated by Proudhon and Bakunin—with federalism as its center of gravity—would be abandoned....The great theoreticians of the libertarian movement...advocated federalism, i.e. an equilibrium between...the autonomous action of basic structures, and...centralization." (Berthier 2015; 154-5) While not anti-organizational, Graham (2015) has a somewhat different opinion, but I agree with Berthier's analysis.

A rejection of specific anarchist self-organization was consistent with a perspective of individual or small group actions. Instead of working to build mass movements, through propaganda and union organizing, many anarchists turned to small scale "propaganda of the deed," which was often interpreted as unsupported little insurrections or individual terrorist actions. They had hoped to inspire revolution but instead this orientation led to isolation for the anarchists. Others (particularly the anarcho-syndicalists) reacted to this isolation by returning to support of mass actions, including union organizing and strike participation.

Some continued (or revived) the tradition of Bakunin's Alliance by organizing specific anarchist federations—in democratic forms. Over time, this became "dual-organizationalism" (or "neo-platformism" or "especificismo"): that revolutionary anarchists who agree with each other form a "specific" federation. This was to improve their effectiveness when being involved in broader organizations, such as unions or community groups or antiwar movements.

Conclusion

After the split in the International, the Marxists went on to build fairly large social democratic parties in Germany and other major countries. Most of these parties were to betray socialism by supporting their imperialist states in World War I and to oppose revolutions afterward. Today they have abandoned any pretense of advocating a new society. Part of the Marxist movement tried to revive its revolutionary heritage, under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky. This wing ended up creating monstrous authoritarian mass-murdering state capitalisms, before collapsing back into traditional capitalism. So far, *Marxism has utterly failed in its original aim of working class revolution in the industrialized countries.*

Anarchism spread throughout the world, at various times and places creating major unions, popular armies, and anarchist federations. *Yet anarchism has so far also failed,* in that it has not led to successful revolutions of the working class and other oppressed people.

We who believe in freedom need to learn from our mistakes and our successes if we are finally to succeed in making revolutions, before the final crises of capitalist collapse, nuclear war, or global ecological catastrophe. Therefore we must study our history, going back at least to the First International.

References

- Berthier, Rene' (2015). *Social Democracy and Anarchism in the International Workers' Association 1864—1877.* (Trans. A.W. Zurbrug.) London: Anarres Editions.
- Dolgoft, Sam (ed.) (1980). *Bakunin on Anarchism.* Montreal Canada: Black Rose Books.
- Eckhardt, Wolfgang (2016). *The First Socialist Schism; Bakunin vs. Marx in the International Working Men's Association.* (Trans. R.M. Homs, J. Cohn, C. Lawless, N. McNab, & B. Moreel.) Oakland CA: PM Press.
- Fernbach, David (ed.) (1992). *Karl Marx; The First International and After; Political Writings; Vol. 3.* London: Penguin Books/New Left Review.
- Graham, Robert (2015). *We Do Not Fear Anarchy, We Invoke It; The First International and the Origins of the Anarchist Movement.* Oakland CA: AK Press.
- Leier, Mark (2006). *Bakunin; The Creative Passion.* NY: Thomas Dunne Books.
- Marx, Karl, & Engels, Friedrich (1955). *The Communist Manifesto.* (Ed. S. H. Beer.) Northbrook IL: AHM Publishing.
- Morris, Brian (1993). *Bakunin; The Philosophy of Freedom.* Montreal, Quebec, Canada: Black Rose Books.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Wayne Price

The First International and the Development of Anarchism and Marxism
Anarchism originated in the 1st International, through the Marx-Bakunin split.
June 11, 2017

<http://anarkismo.net/article/30330>

theanarchistlibrary.org