

Bakunin & German Social-Democracy

The following text reproduces for a large part extracts
from chapter 6 of

Bakounine politique, révolution et contre-révolution en Europe centrale.

René Berthier, Éditions du Monde libertaire, 1991

ISBN 2-903013-19-5

Bakunin was accused of saying that there was connivance between Marx and Bismarck. This is totally false. On the contrary, he says: “Far be it from me to establish a shadow of conscious solidarity between M. von Bismarck and the leaders of the Party of Socialist Workers' Democracy of Germany! Not only do I not think: I *know* that there is absolutely nothing in common between them, and that they are, on the contrary, fierce enemies¹.” However, in spite of the flagrant oppositions between the Bismarckian program and the socialist program, there is a common trait between them, says Bakunin: “Both tend towards the formation of a centralized, unitarian and Pan-German state.” Bismarck wants to erect this empire by means of the bureaucratic and military nobility and the monopoly of the large financial companies, while the leaders of socialist democracy “want to base it on the economic emancipation of the proletariat”. “But one as well as the other is eminently patriotic, and in this political patriotism, unwittingly and without seeking it, they meet – the logic of trends and situations being always stronger than the will of individuals”².

What Bismarck himself says of universal suffrage seems to corroborate Bakunin's point of view. The representative system was, in fact, an indispensable tool for the realization of the Chancellor's political project, who used it to counterbalance the influence of the court, to destroy the power of the Junkers, to divide the classes of German society, to weaken the Liberals. It was, as Bakunin put it, a safety valve.

Bismarck proclaimed that he was educating Germany in parliamentary government. He complained that he did not have a stable majority who could

¹ “Aux compagnons de la Fédération jurassienne”, Oeuvres, Champ libre, III, 30.

² *Ibid.*

work hand in hand with the government. He criticized the Germans for having “eight or ten factions, without a stable majority, without recognized leadership”, but this was a hypocritical lament, for it was from this division that he derived the bulk of his power. Bismarck had set up the representative system to ruin the liberals, his opponents of the 1860s, in the wake of a military victory that realized the aspirations of the same liberals³. When Engels declared in 1870 that Bismarck unwittingly worked for them⁴, he had not understood a basic element which Bakunin had perfectly understood: the representative system is the guarantee that nothing fundamental will be altered in the working-class condition.

In the eyes of Bakunin, Marx was not only a “learned socialist”, but also a very skilled politician who, like Bismarck, wanted “the greatness and power of Germany as a state”⁵. But Marx was a socialist, and as such worked not only for the emancipation of the German proletariat but also for the emancipation of the proletariat of all the other countries, “which makes him completely in contradiction with himself”. The only way out of this contradiction would be to proclaim that “the greatness and power of Germany as a state is the supreme condition of the emancipation of all the world, that the national and political triumph of Germany, is the triumph of mankind, and that everything contrary to the advent of this new great omnivorous power is an enemy of mankind”⁶. This “identification of the cause of mankind with that of the great Germanic fatherland” is not absolutely new: Marx is placed by Bakunin in the line of Fichte, the author of the *Addresses to the German Nation*⁷.

Bakunin has often been accused of exaggerating when he asserts that Marx assimilated:

1) The necessity of German unity for a historical advance which, by centralizing the State, concentrated the power of the German proletariat;

³ On July 1866 the Prussians won a battle against the Austrian army at Sadowa (or Königgrätz, The Prussian victory effected Austria's exclusion from a Prussian-dominated Germany.

⁴ “Bismarck is doing a bit of our work, in *his own* way, and without meaning to, but all the same he is doing it.” Engels à Marx, 15 August 1870. MECW, vol. 44, p. 47.

⁵ Oeuvres, Champ libre, III, 205.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The *Addresses to the German Nation* was written in 1808 by Johann Gottlieb Fichte who advocated German nationalism in reaction to the occupation and subjugation of German territories by Napoleon's French Empire.

2) The political interests of the German workers' movement to those of the international labor movement.

On this issue, however, the author of the *Manifesto* is remarkably consistent:

- In the *Critique of the Philosophy of Law*, Marx makes a remarkable criticism of the political impotence of the German bourgeoisie, but he concludes on the appropriation by the proletariat of German philosophy and theoretical capacity. He evokes the “radicalism of German theory, therefore (*sic*) of its practical energy” – a somewhat idealistic assimilation, which leads him to the conclusion that “The *emancipation of the German* is the *emancipation of man*. The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*”⁸.

- In 1844 he says again: “...not one of the French and English workers' revolts has presented such a theoretical and conscious character as the revolt of the Silesian weavers”. Marx adds that “it has to be admitted that the German proletariat is the *theoretician* of the European proletariat”⁹. The political backwardness of Germany becomes an advantage: “A philosophical people can find its corresponding practice only in socialism, hence it is only in the *proletariat* that it can find the dynamic element of its emancipation.” (*Ibid.*)

- In the *Manifesto* Marx declares that “the Communists turn their attention chiefly to Germany”¹⁰. The point of view of Marx and Engels on the occasion of the French defeat in 1870 is well known: The French defeat would have made it possible to centralize the German State for the greater benefit of the German working class and to transfer the center of gravity of the workers' movement from France to Germany, which would have asserted the pre-eminence of “our theory” says Marx, on Proudhonism¹¹.

⁸ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Introduction, 1843, MECW, vol. 3, p. 187.

⁹ Marx, Critical marginal notes on the Article “The king of Prussia and Social Reform by a Prussian”, MECW vol. 3, pp. 201-201.

¹⁰ The complete sentence is: “the Communists turn their attention chiefly to Germany, because that country is on the eve of a bourgeois revolution that is bound to be carried out under more advanced conditions of European civilisation, and with a much more developed proletariat than that of England was in the seventeenth, and of France in the eighteenth century, and because the bourgeois revolution in Germany will be but the prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution.” MECW, vol. 6, p. 519.

¹¹ “The French deserve a good hiding. If the Prussians win, then centralisation of the STATE POWER will be beneficial for the centralisation of the German working

• In the 1874 preface to *The Peasant War in Germany*, Engels refers to the theoretical and practical superiority of the German workers, who belong to the “most theoretical people of Europe”. “Without German philosophy, particularly that of Hegel, German scientific Socialism (the only scientific Socialism extant) would never have come into existence. Without a sense for theory, scientific Socialism would have never become blood and tissue of the workers.” It is evident that this argument serves to legitimize the superiority of the German proletariat.

In the eyes of Marx and Engels, Bismarck realizes, by a sort of “trickery of reason”, the conditions that will make socialism possible by unifying Germany and achieving the political centralization of the state¹². The conquest of the State by the working class organized as a political party is a necessary condition for this project. However, Bakunin is mistaken when he attributes to Marx a patriotic point of view. Marx only considers that the pre-eminence of his theory is an indispensable element of this process (a sort of “objective” necessity). Whether the individuals or the social forces who implement the conditions that allow the realization of socialism do so knowingly or not does not matter. Revolution is an impersonal phenomenon of which Bismarck implements the conditions, driven by external pressure.

Thus Engels does not blame Bismarck for having annexed for the benefit of Prussia the possessions of the three princes of the German Confederation, which, in short, were no less of divine right than the King of Prussia himself. It was, says Engels, a “complete revolution, carried out by revolutionary means”. (But the “revolution” he refers to has nothing to do with the proletarian revolution...): “What we reproach him with is that he was not revolutionary enough, that he was no more than a Prussian revolutionary from above, that he began a whole revolution in a position where he was able to

class. German predominance would then shift the centre of gravity of the West European workers' movement from France to Germany, and you need only to compare developments in the two countries from 1866 to the present day to realise that the German working class is superior to the French both in theory and organisation. Its predominance over the French on the international stage would also mean the predominance of our theory over Proudhon's, etc.” Marx to Engels, 20 July 1870. MECW, VI. 44, p. 3-4.

¹² According to Hegel, Reason governs things, and to carry out its purposes, it uses the wills or passions of individuals. To the question: Do men really do what they want? Hegel replies that Reason uses “trickery”: one can call “trickery of reason” the fact that it does not act on its own, but allows human passions to act in its place.

carry through only half a revolution, that, once having set out on the course of annexations, he was content with four miserable small states¹³.”

Bakunin perfectly understood Marx and Engel's approach, but did not approve of it. He did not pity the German princes who were victims of the Bismarckian steamroller, but he did not see in what way Bismarck's policy, even involuntarily, was favorable to the interests of the German working class in the long run. Above all, he did not see how the participation of the working class in the institutions set up by the Chancellor could be useful: “In the present political order in all the countries of Europe, parliaments are nothing; nothing but safety valves for the state, or masks behind which lies the truly despotic power of the state, founded on the bank, the police, the army¹⁴.”

More than any other, Bakunin had foreseen the immense means a government could use to render parliamentary forms ineffective. In this sense, he unquestionably saw through Bismarck much better than Marx. Did not the chancellor write in 1871 that “the action of the State is the only means of counteracting the socialist movement? We must implement what seems justified in the socialist program and which can be implemented within the present framework of the State and of society¹⁵.”

The function of representative democracy appears in all its limitations in a passage from *Statism and Anarchy* in which Bakunin deals with the different ways which had opened up to Prussia after the fall of Napoleon Ist. The first way was to grant reforms and to “take the lead in the German constitutional movement”, unifying Germany on this basis. Bakunin highlighted the different reasons that prevented this choice: the weakness of Prussia, the situation of competition in which it was with Austria for the hegemony over Germany. The second way, which was adopted, was to side with the reaction by categorically refusing any reform. The third way had been discovered, said Bakunin, formerly by the Roman emperors, but forgotten and rediscovered recently by Napoleon Ist and “cleared and improved by his pupil Prince Bismarck: the way of state, military and

¹³ Engels, *The rôle of force in history*, MECW, vol. 26, p. 481.

¹⁴ Oeuvres, Champ libre, III, 115.

¹⁵ Quoted by A.J.P. Taylor, Bismarck, Hamish Hamilton ed. p. 162. At the moment I translated this text I no longer had at my disposal the AJP Taylor's book, so I could not produce the exact quotation in English, but only a translation from French.

political despotism concealed under the flowers and the most ample as well as the most innocent forms of popular representation¹⁶.”

In 1815 this path was premature: “At that time, no one suspected this truth, which has since become evident to the most silly despots, that the so-called constitutional or parliamentary regime is not an obstacle to state, military, political and financial despotism, but that, by legalizing it in some way and giving it the deceptive aspect of a government of the people, it can confer on it more solidity and strength”.

The remark that follows this statement is particularly interesting: if, in 1815, this was not known, it was because the breach between the exploiting class and the proletariat was not as evident as today. Governments, which were still modeled on the Old Regime, believed that the people were backing the bourgeoisie. Today the people and the bourgeoisie are in opposition, and the latter knows that against social revolution “there is no refuge for it other than the State”. But it wants a strong state which ensures a dictatorship “endowed with the forms of national representation which enable it to exploit the masses in the name of the people themselves”. Thus the representative system is very explicitly designated as the means found by the bourgeoisie to dilute the demands and the program of the working class in the fiction of national representation.

Bismarck's Germany and worker's Germany

There is in Bakunin a real fascination for Germany: It is no exaggeration to say that his writings express a quest to discover the secret of this nation which, situated between heaven and earth, torn by contradictions, fails to realize in practice the dreams to which it aspires. History may provide some keys, as well as an analysis of the particular situation of the classes of German society.

The description of the bourgeois youth of the 1870s is an astonishing anticipation: “learned, thoughtful, persevering and cold, they do not lack courage, but they lack absolute dignity and human respect¹⁷.”

What about the German officer, this “civilized wild beast, this lackey by conviction and executioner by vocation”:

“If he is young, you will be surprised to discover, instead of a bogeyman, a blondie boy with pink complexion, a light down under his nose, discreet, placid, even timid, but proud – the morgue begins to break through – and surely sentimental. He knows by heart Goethe and Schiller, and all the humanist literature of the Great Century has passed through his

¹⁶ *Statism and Anarchy*, Oeuvres, Champ libre, IV, 294.

¹⁷ Oeuvres, Champ libre, III, 15.

head without leaving the least human thought, any more than the least sense of humanity in his heart.¹⁸”

In another text¹⁹ Bakunin compares the situation of Italian and German bourgeois youth. In Italy there is still a heroic youth, but “downgraded, disinherited in Italian society, and consequently capable of embracing with sincere enthusiasm and without bourgeois backwardness the cause of the proletariat.” Such a youth does not exist in Germany, where the bourgeois youth is more reasonable, older than the old. The survivors of the Revolution of 1848 may still be haunted by the innocent dreams of utopian freedom, but their sons have been trained in the mold that produces bureaucrats and soldiers. Go and seek in this youth the heroes of liberty, says Bakunin: “Always obedient, and capable of all crimes when commanded by their leaders, they are terrible instruments of enslavement and conquest in the hands of a despot”²⁰.

The latent, unformulated violence contained in German bourgeois society must seek “a kind of legitimation in an ideality, an illusion or some sort of abstraction”²¹. This civilized and learned brutality finds a veil, a pretext, in the “great civilizing mission of the Germanic race”²². The “professors and pseudo-liberals”, and even, says Bakunin, the majority of the bourgeois leaders of the Social-Democratic Party, think that “the Latin race is dead”; that the Slav race, plunged into a barbarism with no way out, is incapable of civilizing itself; that the two living races are the “pure Germans above all, then the Anglo-Saxons, the latter finding grace before them only because they consider them a branch of the Germanic race”²³.

¹⁸ Oeuvres, Champ libre, IV, 265.

¹⁹ “To the Companions of the Jura Federation”, Oeuvres, Champ libre, III, 14-15.

²⁰ Oeuvres, Champ libre, III, 15.

²¹ Oeuvres, Champ libre, III, 15

²² In the 19th century the word did not have the same meaning as today. Bakunin says somewhere that the unity of the “Western world of Europe” must be attributed to the “natural unity of the Germanic race”. This thesis is interesting in that it gives Bakunin the opportunity to define what he means by “race”: it is the “identity of the natural temperament, customs, manners, sentiments, ideas, and primitive organization brought by the Germanic peoples into the different countries of Europe” (Oeuvres, Champ libre, I, 133). We then see that the concept of “race” is exclusively limited to the cultural field; It does not include any “ethnic” or “genetic” characteristics. In fact, it is synonym to “people”.

²³ Oeuvres, Champ libre, III, 15.

“Listen to them; they already dream of the voluntary or forced addition of German Switzerland, part of Belgium, of Holland as a whole, and of Denmark, besides the Slavonic peoples whom they have always regarded as their historical victims. Listen to them! They do not even stop at Europe. They will lower their voice a little to tell us that the United States of America already has five million German citizens, and that, with new emigrations from Germany helping, we must not despair of being able to achieve, sooner or later, the Pan-Germanization of all America²⁴.”

Up to now the Germans had been posing as “civilizers of the Slavs”. They still insolently claim that this is their chief “historical mission”. And let us note, adds Bakunin, that this is not only the opinion of the rulers and of the military aristocracy; it is the unanimous opinion of universities, scholars, and the whole bourgeoisie of Germany. “But today, encouraged by the victory over France in 1871, exalted “to madness, even to stupidity by the unexpected victories that her armies have won in France, she believes herself strong enough to threaten the the whole of Europe. She has reached the maximum of her national delirium; she threatens, she claims aloud Switzerland, the North of France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark...”

The industrial, commercial, literary and scholarly bourgeoisie of Germany expresses in the press, books, and newspapers that the French race has made its day. They were already convinced of it for Spain, Italy, French-speaking Switzerland, Belgium and Portugal, says Bakunin, but now that France is defeated, they no longer retain their feelings on her account. “They still do to the English and North Americans the honor of considering them as half Germans, and to the Dutch, the Danes, the Swedes, and the Swiss as denatured Germans whom it is necessary to bring back to the fold²⁵.”

It is obviously difficult not to reconcile these warnings of Bakunin, written after the birth of the Second Reich, with the program applied seventy years later by the Third... It remains to be seen whether these warnings were merely a hazardous prediction based on fancy and intuition, and on which no teaching can be founded, or whether they were the result of a rational historical analysis based on the observation of the political and social reality of Germany of the time.

According to Bakunin, Germany has created a new type of State which, from the 16th century onwards, has developed particular characteristics and which, through a slow maturation, has resulted in what he regards as the paradigm of the modern, perfected, efficient state: the Bismarckian State. The

²⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁵ Oeuvres, Champ libre, VIII, 404-406.

Germany of the Second Reich, constituted after the defeat of France in 1870, represents the prototype of the state in an industrially developed society in the same way that English capitalism represented for Marx the model on which the industrial economy was to spread on the planet. We thus seem to be confronted with two models of capitalist society, apparently contradictory: the one defined by Marx and the one defined by Bakunin.

Marx foresees in the *Manifesto* that the capitalist system, the description of which is based on the England of his time, will spread on the planet by destroying the archaic social structures, laying the foundations for the development of productive forces which will enable the edification of socialism. It is therefore essentially on the expansion of the English model of capitalism that the Marxist idea is based. The English economy of the time is an economy of free competition, in an international context where there is no competing capitalism. But free exchange, the touchstone of liberal theory, will only work for a very short period of the history of capitalism. Yet it is on this system that Marx builds his theory²⁶.

The so-called free trade economy represented by 19th-century England was in fact an economy for which freedom existed only for the dominant economy. The extreme violence imposed by British imperialism on India is a perfect example of this: the expansion of the British textile industry took place at the cost of the destruction of the Indian textile industry.

The *Manifesto*, which was published on the eve of the 1848 revolutions in Europe, did not say a word about the national question, which was to be the great claim of the peoples of Europe for the following years. According to the *Manifesto*, “the demarcations and national antagonisms between peoples disappear more and more (...) The day when class antagonism falls within one nation, also falls hostility between nations”... Such simplistic conceptions could not encourage Marx to consider a further evolution actually much more complex.

If Bakunin has little merit in seeing things differently, in that his analysis dates back thirty years after the publication of the *Manifesto*, it remains that, as early as the Revolution of 1848-49, when he was very active, he had, much better than Marx, grasped the importance of the national question. The Bismarckian model he describes thus corresponds to a phase of evolution of capitalism much more advanced than that described by Marx in the 1840s –

²⁶ In 1892 Engels modulated the Marxist thesis on free trade: he re-published his 1842 book on the situation of the working classes in England. He criticizes it and rightly suggests that free trade is not a definitive category of capitalism, as the *Manifesto* affirms, but an accident of historical evolution.

which Marx of course could not foresee: a conjuncture in which national States are called upon to take protective measures in favour of national capitalism, and thus in which antagonisms between States can be exacerbated for the conquest of markets. Nothing to do with the free exchange model which Marx was observing in England. The global expansion of capitalism is not perceived as a gradual nibbling of outdated modes of production by the industrial economy, but as a war between states, a war to which the Bismarckian model is perfectly adapted.

This model, even today, remains the same. Free trade is invoked by the protagonists in an incantatory way, but the most powerful states use their power to impose their standards, and those who invoke the most free trade are those who intervene most to protect their own economy.

The efficiency of the Bismarckian state system stems from the “misleading scenery” that has been put in place. Of course, Germany enjoys “all constitutional freedoms and an elective and widely developed parliamentary regime”²⁷, but “one must not be very perspicacious to guess, through the artificial noise made by the unfortunate representatives of the so-called Germanic freedoms, the brutal voice of the master who does not admit a reply”²⁸.

“Today, in all this parliamentary scaffolding, there remain only three serious institutions: finances, the **police**, both internal and external, both temporal and spiritual, and the army²⁹.”

This extraordinary nation, which produced Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Feuerbach, Humbolt, and “a brilliant, incomparable phalanx of heroes and creators of positive science”, a “luminous crowd of great intelligences whom one might call the prophets of humanity”, did not make anything happen in the practical and political life. “Theoretical mankind is their dream; but brutality alone constitutes their practice”. Bakunin observes that these immortal creations were the products, “not of unity, but of Germanic anarchy”. Now political unity will infallibly kill and begins already to sterilize the living sources of the creative spirit in Germany³⁰.”

The German bourgeoisie appeared too late, it did not or could not produce, like the French bourgeoisie of 1789, this “phalanx of energetic men”, determined, capable of leading the masses. Today, in 1872, Germany's

27 Oeuvres, Champ libre, III, 24.

28 Oeuvres, Champ libre, III, 24-25. Note sur Engels

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*

future lies in the proletariat, which, if it does not allow itself to be sidetracked by its bourgeois leaders, is called upon to fulfill a grandiose mission. While the German state and society since the Middle Ages had the task of enslaving the Slav populations, the German working class can now help with their emancipation:

“We must not wait until the Slavic peoples, taught by new and cruel experiments, at last find this path of emancipation by themselves. They must be helped to find it; and no one could do it better than the proletariat of Germany, who, much more enlightened and advanced than the Slavonic proletariat in all respects, seems to be called by its geographical position, as well as by its history, to show their brothers in the Slav countries the way of deliverance, as the German bourgeoisie in their time had shown them that of slavery³¹.”

These remarks – which must be put into perspective and conditioned on the implementation of a different policy within the German socialist movement – may seem surprising if one keeps in mind the image traditionally conveyed of a fiercely anti-German Bakunin. On the contrary, these remarks are perfectly clear when one recalls that Bakunin's opposition exclusively concerns the bourgeois society and the State of Germany, and *never* the working class or German culture. The German proletariat is never associated in the global critique of German civilization, to which it does not participate voluntarily. But Bakunin nevertheless believes that the German proletariat is not on the right path.

The German workers have made considerable progress in the organization of their power. But, driven by their leaders, they dream of a “new workers', people's State (*Volkstaat*) necessarily national, patriotic and Pan-German, which places them in flagrant contradiction with the fundamental principles of the International Association”³².

By legal means, “followed later by a more pronounced and decisive revolutionary movement”, they hope to succeed in seizing the State power and transforming it into a people's State. This remark shows that Bakunin did not interpret Marxian politics as mere reformism, and that he understood the indications of the *Manifesto* on “despotic encroachments” against bourgeois property. The disadvantage of this policy, Bakunin observes, is “to put the

³¹ Oeuvres, Champ libre, III, 44. In reading this passage from Bakunin, it is difficult not to think of the expectation of the Russian proletariat of a German revolution after 1917...

³² Oeuvres, Champ libre, VIII, 56.

socialist movement of German workers in tow with the party of bourgeois democracy”, to shrink and distort the socialist program³³.

According to Bakunin, the Social-Democratic Party Democracy was definitively organized at the Nuremberg Congress in September 1868, held under the presidency of Bebel³⁴. Bebel, elected deputy to the Reichstag of Northern Germany in 1867, was a member of the central committee of the Federation of Workers' circles, which he helped to transform into a political party.

“After the death of Lassalle, a third party was formed under the direct influence of the friends and followers of M. Marx, the German Social-Democratic Labor Party, in addition to the Workers' circles and the General Association of German Workers. Two men of talent took the lead, the one semi-manual, the other literary and at the same time disciple and agent of Mr. Marx: MM. Bebel and Liebknecht³⁵.”

This party, which, according to Bakunin, was founded at the instigation of Marx, was to be the German section of the IWA, and was to serve “to introduce into the International the integral program of Marx”. By “integral program” or by “German program”, Bakunin means the attempt to make mandatory in the International Workers' Association of the constitution of the proletariat as a political party and the conquest of power.

Bakunin greatly overestimates the role played by Marx in the constitution of the German Socialist Party and the influence he had in it. The two main leaders of this party, Bebel and Liebknecht, had different and often antagonistic objectives. Both used Marx to arbitrate their disagreements. Neither of them attached importance to the IWA and made efforts to develop it in Germany. It was only after the end of the International that they referred to it, as to a mythical fact, when there was never a German federation in the IWA. However, since the Germans were the only ones to whom Marx could refer to (he was not supported by any federation), he had a tendency to overvalue events in Germany in order to establish his position in the General Council.

It was at the Congress of Eisenach that the Social-Democratic Workers' Party was actually formed, which, the Russian anarchist asserted, had taken over the “integral program”.

As for the IWA, it had no program, apart from its statutes and recitals. The so-called “program” of the IWA is the Inaugural Address written by

³³ Cf. Oeuvres, Champ libre, VIII, 57 sq.

³⁴ Oeuvres, Champ libre, IV, 352.

³⁵ Oeuvres, Champ libre, IV, 352.

Marx and published on November 5, 1864 on behalf of the Provisional General Council: this Address was never intended to be discussed in congress. It reads in particular: “The conquest of political power is therefore the first duty of the working class.” The Geneva Congress of the IWA (1866), to which Bakunin constantly refers, only says that economic emancipation is the great goal to which all political movement must be subordinated.

Bakunin is mistaken about the Eisenach congress, for it does not refer to the conquest of political power, but only to democratic freedoms such as universal suffrage, freedom of press, association, and so on. It can in no way be considered as Marxist inspiration. Marx and Engels were far from approving the policy of Bebel and Liebknecht. They complained that Bakunin was making them responsible for the slightest acts and gestures of the German Social-Democratic leaders. Engels wrote to Bebel in 1875:

“Abroad we are held responsible for any every statement and action of the German Social-Democratic Workers' Party. E.g. by Bakunin in his work *Statehood and Anarchy*, in which we are made to answer for every injudicious word spoken or written by Liebknecht since the inception of the *Demokratisches Wochenblatt*³⁶.”

From May 22 to 27, 1875, the Congress of Gotha was held, during which the two currents of the German workers' movement – the “Eisenachians” and the “Lassalleans” – merged to form the German Social-Democratic party. Marx engaged in a fierce criticism of the program of the new party.

By anticipation he had written to Wilhem Bracke on May 5, 1875:

“After the Unity Congress is over, Engels and I will publish a short statement to the effect that we entirely disassociate ourselves from the said programme of principles and have nothing to do with it. This is indispensable because of the view taken abroad—a totally erroneous view, carefully nurtured by party enemies—that we are secretly directing the activities of the so-called Eisenach Party from here. Only recently, in a newly published Russian work, Bakunin suggests that I, for instance, am responsible, not only for that party's every programme, etc., but actually for every step taken by Liebknecht from the day he began co-operating with the People's Party.⁷⁶ Aside from this, it is my duty to refuse recognition, even by maintaining a diplomatic silence, to a programme which, I am convinced, is altogether deplorable as well as demoralising for the party³⁷.”

³⁶ MECW, Engels to Bebel, 18-28 Marx 1875, vol. 45, pp. 64-65

³⁷ MECW, Marx to Wilhelm Bracke, 5 May 1875, 45, pp. 69-70.

We see that Bakunin is mistaken when he attributes to Marx the paternity of the new party and its program, but he is not responsible for this mistake: Arthur Lehning pointed out that the information needed to properly situate Marx's point of view was missing.

Marx had made a severe criticism of the socialist program adopted in Gotha, whose inspiration was very clearly Lassallean: the congress ended with the song of the “Marseillaise of the Workers” whose text said: “We follow the audacious path that was shown to us by [...] Lassalle” – which certainly did not please Marx. The socialist leaders did not want to hear about Marx’s disagreements concerning the Gotha program, so Marx’s critical text was not published. And when Marx asked Liebknecht to communicate it to Bebel, Liebknecht refused. When Bebel eventually read these critical notes in 1891 (Marx was dead), he tried by all means to prevent their publication... Lassalle was seen as the man who had given life to the German labour movement after the failure of 1848³⁸. It is Lassalle who had put in place the theoretical and organizational structures of what will soon be called German Social-Democracy.

Ironically, the Lassaleans showed more (but not *very* much more) interest than Liebknecht and Bebel for the International. These two men were practically the only contacts Marx and Engels had in the socialist movement in Germany. When Engels wrote in 1865 that Liebknecht was “the only reliable link we have in Germany”³⁹, it must be remembered that:

a) He was a contact that Marx and Engels considered as “growing increasingly dull under the impact of the South German stupidity”⁴⁰, someone “not enough of a dialectician to criticize both sides at once”;

b) That Liebknecht was materially dependent for his living on non-socialists organizations;

c) That he has always shown (Bebel as well) a very mild interest in the International.

³⁸ In the German labour movement, Marx was not much in favour because of his activity during that period: he had dissolved the Communist League, the first Communist Party in history and had advocated an alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie.

See: “Quand Marx dissout le premier parti communiste de l'histoire...”
<http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article602>

³⁹ Engels to Marx, 7 August 1865. MECW, vol. 42, p. 179.

⁴⁰ Marx to Kugelmann, 24 June 1868. MECW, 43, p. 29.

Thus, at the London conference of the International, in 1871, at which the exclusion of Bakunin and James Guillaume was bureaucratically decided, Marx complained that

“Germany was not represented either by delegates or by reports, and no financial contributions have been received since September 1869. It is not possible for the purely platonic relationship of the German workers' party to the International to continue. The party cannot expect services to be performed by the one side without any services being performed by the other in return. This relationship compromises the German working class⁴¹.”

Marx complained bitterly that the leadership of the German party did nothing for the “organization of the International in Germany”.

One wonders why Marx waited for the London conference of 1871 to observe a deficiency that had been going on for years. It is well known that the sections of the IWA which had been manipulated to vote for the exclusion of the two anarchists at the Hague Congress (1872) soon after all disavowed the maneuver of which they had been the victims. It was clear that since Marx had by then no more support from the Trade Union leaders, he felt the need to strengthen ties with the German party, feeling that he would eventually find himself completely isolated. Four months before the Congress of The Hague, which was to ratify the decisions of the London Conference of 1871, Engels wrote an urgent letter to Liebknecht:

“What view does the 'Committee' in Hamburg take of the International? We must now try and clear up the situation there as quickly as possible so that Germany can be properly represented at the Congress. I must ask you straight out to tell us frankly how the International stands with you. Roughly how many stamps have been distributed to how many places, and *which* places are involved? The 208 counted by Fink are surely not all there are?”

Then Engels inquired about the measures taken so that the mandates “cannot be queried at the Congress” and adds that

“*a*) that [the Party] it would have to declare itself to be the German Federation of the International in reality and not merely figuratively and *b*) that as such it would pay its dues before the Congress.”

It is then almost a panic that blows under the pen of Engels:

⁴¹ Marx to Gustav Kwasniewski, 29 septembre 1871. MECW, 44, p. 139

“ The matter is becoming serious and we have to know where we are, or else you will force us to act on our own initiative and to consider the Social-Democratic Workers' Party as an alien body for whom the International has no significance. We cannot allow the representation of the German workers at the Congress to be fumbled or forfeited for reasons unknown to us, but which cannot be other than petty. We should like to ask for a clear statement about this quickly⁴². ”

It is difficult to express more clearly the total lack of interest of German Social-Democracy towards the IWA, and the energetic and interested zeal of Marx and Engels to see it involved.

Lassalle and State Socialism

There was in Germany an implicit agreement to designate Lassalle and Marx as the co-founders of social democracy (a thesis which strongly displeased Hal Draper), beyond the disagreements between the two men, and in spite of the predominant influence of Lassalle.

At that time, Marx and Engels were in fact cut off from the German labour movement. Until his death in 1864, Lassalle was their only contact with the working class in Germany before Liebknecht and Bebel took over. The two men, however, were more concerned to create a democratic opposition to Prussia than to develop a socialist movement, and they relied on all democrats – manual workers, lawyers, teachers, traders. And when the party of Eisenach was created in 1869, its social composition was very varied. Bebel won an election campaign in 1867 in a semi-rural constituency dominated by household manufactures.

Lassalle is an amazing character. He first spoke at a workers' meeting in April 1862. In August 1864 he died in a duel. In two years, he succeeded in forming a workers' party which durably marked the German proletariat with its imprint.

The state socialism which Bakunin denounced so violently in German Social-Democracy is less the child of Marx than that of Lassalle. The amalgamation made by Bakunin between Lassalle and Marx is largely explained by the attitude of Marx himself. It is possible that the latter, who had been in correspondence with Lassalle since 1848, had at first found his account in the constant references that his friend (and nevertheless rival) made to Marxism. Indeed Lassalle contributed in some way to spread the ideas of Marx in Germany

⁴² Engels to Liebknecht, 22 May 1872. MECW, vol. 44, p. 376.

Exiled in England, Marx must have thought that his intellectual superiority would ultimately prevail. Perhaps this explains why he constantly refrained from publicly attacking Lassalle. In private it was something else. In the correspondence of Marx and Engels the reader can note the panic fear, and also the bitterness of the two men, at the idea that the socialist agitator should appropriate and distort their ideas.

“That braggart has had the pamphlet you’ve got, the speech on the ‘workers’ estate’, reprinted in Switzerland with the pompous title *Workers’ Programme*. As you know, the thing’s no more no less than a badly done vulgarisation of the *Manifesto* and of other things we have advocated so often that they have already become commonplace to a certain extent. (...) Is not this the most egregious effrontery? The fellow evidently thinks himself destined to take over our stock-in-trade. And withal, how absurdly grotesque ⁴³!”

It must be borne in mind that Lassalle was an extremely efficient and eloquent agitator. He was a great charismatic tribune, who listened to the masses and who was at the head of a real political party, which was not yet a mass party, strictly speaking, but which was not negligible. Besides, the workers came to fetch him to become their leader! Lassalle was, in short, all that Marx was not, who was isolated, far from Germany, without direct and physical contact with the workers' movement, and who was, moreover, incapable of speaking in public. Let us add to this that Lassalle lived in ease, that he had success with women and that he died – stupidly, without any doubt – following a duel because of a woman.

Lassalle was the man who connected Marx and Engels organically to the German labour movement: it is therefore not without some reason that Bakunin declares that he actually realized what Marx would have liked to do. It may be imagined that Marx and Engels had developed an exasperated jealousy and frustration towards Lassalle. Until his premature death in 1864, Lassalle *was* the German labour movement. Bakunin was perfectly right to note that it was only after his death that Marx openly and publicly attacked his friend and rival, but it was too late: Lassallism was firmly anchored in the German working class. And it was undoubtedly not the least of the frustrations for Marx to have to see, until the end of his life, the posthumous triumph of Lassalle, which the ‘Critique of the program of Gotha’ failed to erase... because his social-democratic comrades refused to publish it!

⁴³ Marx to Engels, 28 January 1863. MECW, vol. 41, p.452-453.

In spite of his anti-state proclamations, Bakunin does not deny the historical character of the state which, just as religion, responds to a historically determined need. But from the point of view of the emancipation of the proletariat, the State is simply an outdated institution. The warnings given by the Russian anarchist aim at warning the workers against the dangers of state socialism, organizer of “state-sponsored labor” which will be “the sole capitalist, banker, lender, organizer, the director of all national work and the distributor of its products”⁴⁴. The turn ultimately taken by the States of “real socialism” should no doubt justify a closer attention to Bakuninian analysis.

Against the alternative that actually appeared in the practice of German Social-Democracy: the triumph of bourgeois democracy or state socialism, Bakunin demands “economic emancipation, and consequently also the political emancipation of the proletariat, or rather its emancipation *from* politics⁴⁵...”

On the Gherman and Slav workers of Austria

The German Social-Democracy constitutes for Bakunin a true anti-model. However, he never confused the leaders of the workers' organizations and the workers' movement itself. He has never had a derogatory word towards the German proletariat, for whom he had a sincere sympathy: “I deeply respect this proletariat because they are not at all in solidarity with this unpleasant thing called civilization of Germany. They do not participate in any of its advantages, nor in its crimes or in its shame; on the contrary, they are its first victim⁴⁶.” The anarchist adds: “The whole human future of Germany is in them.”

Bakunin pays tribute to this proletariat, which alone had the courage to protest, while “nobility, bourgeois, literary, artists and scholars in Germany all celebrated the emperor's homicidal and liberticidal triumphs” – allusion to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. Several times in his writings, one finds tribute to those of the Social-Democratic leaders who opposed the war: “I like to acknowledge that, on this occasion, their leaders, for whom, as we know, I have only a very mediocre sympathy, have acted in as noble a manner as the proletariat itself. They have paid with their liberty the price of their courageous claims.”

⁴⁴ Oeuvres, Champ libre, VII, 99.

⁴⁵ Oeuvres, Champ libre, VII 97.

⁴⁶ Oeuvres, Champ libre, III, 10.

The German proletariat did not contribute to the foundation of the Prussian-German Empire. The course taken by the labor movement of the Germanic countries was doubtless not inevitable. The action of the socialist leaders was decisive in the orientations that Bakunin condemns severely. Prefiguring a much later debate, “the historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership”⁴⁷.

An event which greatly marked Bakunin is significant: on 2 August 1868 the workers who had assembled in Vienna rejected before the delegates of the German Volkspartei, including Liebknecht, the national policy of this party and adopted positions which appeared to Bakunin as clearly internationalist. Bakunin praised these workers who, “in spite of the exhortations of the Austrian and Swabian patriots, refused to place themselves under the Pan-German banner⁴⁸. Indeed, “they rightly believe that they can not, as Austrian workers, display any national flag, since the proletariat of Austria is composed of the most diverse races: Magyars, Italians, Rumanians, above all Slavs and Germans: and that, for this reason, they must seek a practical solution to their problems outside the so-called national state⁴⁹.” These positions were clearly in contradiction with those of Marx. Bakunin, on the other hand, could rightly see in them a first step towards his own conceptions

“A few more steps in this direction and the Austrian workers will understand that the emancipation of the proletariat is absolutely impossible in any state and that the first condition of this emancipation is the destruction of every state; and this destruction is possible only by the concerted action of the proletariat of all countries whose first proof of organization on the economic field is precisely the aim of the International Workers' Association⁵⁰.”

Following this course of action, the German workers of Austria would promote their own emancipation, as well as that of all the non-German masses of Austria, including the Slavs, who, on such bases, would find advantage in rallying the organization of the German workers. Unfortunately, Bakunin said, this development has been broken by the “German-Patriotic Propaganda of Liebknecht and other Socialist Democrats” who have endeavored to “divert the sure social instinct of the Austrian workers from the international

⁴⁷ Trotsky, *Transitional Program*.

⁴⁸ Oeuvres, Champ libre, IV, 240.

⁴⁹ Oeuvres, Champ libre, IV, 240-241.

⁵⁰ Oeuvres, Champ libre, IV, 241.

revolution and direct it to the political agitation in favor of a unified state, described by them as a popular state⁵¹...”

Under these conditions, Bakunin could not encourage the Slav workers to join the social democratic organization for they would fall under the German yoke and take part in the constitution of a German State, which is necessarily opposed to the interests of the Slavs. “On the contrary, we will endeavor to divert the Slav proletariat from an alliance with that party, which is by no means popular, but by its tendency, its aims, and its means, purely bourgeois and, moreover, exclusively German, that is to say, mortal for the Slavs⁵². Bakunin does not say that Slav workers should turn away from German workers, but from their organizations and leaders, who are essentially bourgeois. On the contrary, they must be all the more closely linked to the International Workers' Association, of which the social-democratic program literally takes the opposite view.

Bakunin's point of view, motivated by quite practical considerations, is the consequence of an observation of the extremely complex situation of the multinational proletariat of Austria. In all the cities of the Empire, he says, in which the Slav population is mingled with the German population, the Slav workers “take the most active part in all the general manifestations of the proletariat. But in these cities there are hardly any other workers' associations apart from those which accept the program of the Socialist Democrats of Germany, so that practically the Slav workers, trained by their socialist

⁵¹ The initial development of the IWA in Germany had been essentially the achievement of Johann Philip Becker, an old revolutionary of 1848 and also for a time a member of the Bakuninist Alliance. Although generally in agreement with Marx, Becker distanced himself from him insofar as he sanctioned the organisation of IWA federations by language rather than by nation-state as Marx preferred. Further Becker preferred organisational forms based on the workplace, concepts that were very suspect and anarchistic. Marx wrote to Engels about this that Becker was “transforming our very natural and rational system into a wicked artificial construction, founded on linguistic links instead of the real links formed by nations and states. (Marx to Engels, 27 July, 1869; MECW, Vol. 43, pp. 332-3.) If linguistic criteria were applied when an organisation was founded, there would certainly be some mismatch when it came to intervention against a state within the law, and parliamentary strategies would become somewhat inappropriate. The fact that men – in struggle, speaking the same language – might communicate and organise irrespective of national frontiers was thus termed an ‘artificial construction’ whilst bonds formed by the state were real ones. The problem Marx addressed concerned the end-goals of an organisation: Becker’s conceptions contradicted participation by the proletariat in state parliamentary institutions. See: René Berthier, *Social-Democracy and Anarchism*,

⁵² *Oeuvres*, Champ libre, IV, 241.

revolutionary instinct, are enlisted in a party whose obvious and highly proclaimed aim is to form a Pan-German state, that is to say, an immense German prison⁵³.

The Slav workers are therefore faced with the following alternative:

1. Following the example of the German workers, “their brothers by social condition, by the community of fate, they can join a party which promises them a German state, certainly, but “fundamentally popular, with all the possible economic advantages to the detriment of the capitalists and the possessors and to the benefit of the proletariat”.

2. Or, driven by the Slavic patriotic propaganda, they can rally the party “at the head of which are their daily exploiters and oppressors, bourgeois, manufacturers, merchants, speculators, Jesuits in cassock and owners of immense estates.” This party promises them a “ national prison, that is to say, a Slavic State ⁵⁴.”

Without hesitation, Bakunin says that if there is no other solution, the Slav workers must choose the first: “even if they are wrong, they share the common fate of their brothers of work, of convictions, of existence, whether German or not, it does not matter. In the other case, they are obliged to regard their avowed executioners as brothers. “Here they are deceived, there they are sold.”

This illustration of Bakunin's point of view on the question of the multinationality of the workers of the Austrian Empire is interesting because it shows once again the priority given by the Russian revolutionary to the class criterion on the national criterion. It should be remembered that he had also asserted that even if the “German program” was dominant in the International, and if the General Council, relying on German Social Democracy, excluded those who opposed this program, the excluded workers should not spare their efforts to support the German workers if they were in conflict.

The history of the thirty years following Bakunin's reflections has amply demonstrated the legitimacy of his anxieties. In any event, it confirmed Bakunin's ability to foresee the consequences of the situation in which the Austrian labor movement was. Georges Haupt in *Les Marxistes et la question nationale* (The Marxists and the national question) shows that the growth of

⁵³ Oeuvres, Champ libre, IV, 247.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

the workers' movement in Cisleithany at the end of the 19th century was accompanied by an increase in national tensions among its ranks. Quoting a police report, he comments: "It is at the cost of great difficulties that the Social-Democratic party manages to overcome the national divergences within it". The new recruits, industrial workers, "are more attracted by the national dynamics than they are sensitive to the unitary aims of social democracy. All the more so because the latter is incapable of facing on both fronts the realization of their social aspirations and their national aspirations."

Georges Haupt says that in the mid-nineties, the fractions won over to nationalism had considerably enlarged: thirty per cent of organized workers fell under the influence of German or Czech nationalist organizations. Social rivalries appeared between German skilled workers and maneuvers from other nationalities. These rivalries were prolonged in the relations between socialist organizations of different nationalities and created attitudes of superiority of the Germans in relation to the Czechs, of the Poles in relation to the Ruthenians and of the Italians in relation to the Slovenes. "The persistent divergences between the German and Czech trade unions led in 1910 to an open rupture which marked the victory of the separatist tendencies of the Czech labor movement."

Moreover, the German worker of Austria, Haupt adds, who feels threatened in his privileges and in his hegemonic position within the workers' movement, succumbs to the nationalistic tendencies manifest in the Social-Democratic party: "Unveiled before international socialist opinion, the extent of nationalist pressures within the Austrian movement, the 'little International', provoked surprises and consternation⁵⁵."

Bakunin's fears and warnings were largely justified. This catastrophic development for the workers' movement of the Austrian Empire can certainly be attributed to the unequal economic and cultural development of the different nationalities. Bakunin was the last to ignore these inequalities, since it was precisely on this basis that he asserted that the IWA, in its first phase, should not establish a compulsory political program so as not to divide the workers who experienced very different levels of life and political consciousness. He believed that the practice of struggles and the imperatives of international solidarity, which had been seen to be a reality and one of the main causes of expansion of the AIT, would necessarily create the need for a political program, but that it could only be the result of collective elaboration within the organization. Certain forms of organization necessarily generate certain forms of practice: The social-democratic type of organization,

⁵⁵ Georges Haupt, *Les marxistes et la question nationale*, p. 44.

Bakunin affirms, can not by its very nature, and in spite of its proclamations, promote or practice international solidarity of the workers.

Between the alternative of adhering to German Social-Democracy or the bourgeois nationalist parties, Bakunin proposed a third term: “The federal organization of industrial and agricultural workers' associations based on the program of the International”. In retrospect, one can of course ask: would that have changed much? But if a solution existed, it was perhaps that one that had to be implemented.