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THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AS ARCHETYPE:

1848 OR THE FAILED 1789 OF

THE GERMAN BOURGEOISIE

Chapter 3 of

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Studying Bakunin and the German Revolution of 1848 presents a difficulty: The perspective differs depending on whether one examines his activity in 1848-49 or the reflections he offers us twenty years later. In 1848-1849 he was a direct actor of the events and he was not yet an anarchist. A close examination of his activities shows that he traveled extensively throughout Central Europe, participated in two insurrections, was arrested, sentenced to death by two governments and extradited to Russia. In the late 1860's and early 1870's, he had become an anarchist and offered us hindsight analysis based on his experience and on his reflections on the history of central Europe.

In 1848 his aim was twofold: to act in favor of the national independence of the Slavs and to propose an alliance between the Slavs and the German democrats who demanded national unity and democracy.

He later recognized that his socialist convictions were then vague. One might add that they were even vaguely Jacobin, even Blanquist. When thirty years later he revisited these events, it was the anarchist who was speaking. During this time Marx's thought was certainly not fixed, but from the *Manifesto* to *Capital* he had remained a Communist. It is not the same for Bakunin who underwent several stages before reaching the anarchism of maturity. This fact should be borne in mind when considering Bakunin's views on the German Revolution of 1848.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Reading Bakunin and Marx reveals the admiration they both bore for the revolutionary energy of the French bourgeoisie of 1789, the vigor of the thought of the philosophers who, since the Enlightenment, had prepared, in terms of ideas, the great upheaval. Above all, bourgeois and philosophers appear as men who asserted clear objectives and expressed their ideas with transparency.

Obviously, the model which the two men had in mind – but which differed in some respects – had been formed in reference to contemporary politics, particularly that of Germany, and in reference to the demands of social revolution. “The impotence of the German bourgeoisie”, denounced by Bakunin, is echoed in many of Marx’s texts: this impotence is the expression of the political division of Germany, of the backwardness of German capitalism and of this dramatic discrepancy which places the bourgeoisie in a situation of antagonism with the proletariat, while it is still posing the liberal demands of 1789. These are points that are found identical in the two men. The divergences appear in the practical conclusions they draw on the field, which we will try to highlight.

Unlike its French counterpart, the German bourgeois was incapable of thinking in national terms. Timorous, hesitant in practice, they displayed in the places where they talked – especially cabarets, says Bakunin – extravagant goals that irritated him to the highest degree. They fell into the most extreme abstraction while being incapable of giving a universal meaning to their objectives. Unlike the French bourgeoisie of 1789, they were not aware of their true interests and created fictitious ones. They were frightened, they did not connect themselves to the peasantry whose mass had constituted a formidable lever in France. They were incapable of conceiving a political alliance with the Slavic nationalities dominated by Prussia and Austria; on the contrary, they summoned them to acknowledge the subjection in which they had been for centuries. Bakunin shows that Marx and Engels had the same blindness as the German democrats. While the armies of Year II of the Revolution had been moved by ideas of universal emancipation and had crossed the Rhine as liberators (for a short time, it is true), the German bourgeois expected nothing but the constitution by the Monarchy of a great unified Germany including the Slavic territories.

The “Memories of 1792” and the “Armée de l’An II” (or “Army of Year II”, that is 1793, in reference to Year II of the revolutionary calendar) constitute one of the founding myths of modern France. On 20 September 1792 the Austrian and Prussian armies, who were about to take Paris, were crushed by the Army of the Revolution at Valmy. The Republic was proclaimed the next day.

In 1793 again, France was threatened on all sides: the Revolution excited against it the anger of the European princes, who invaded the North and East of the country in September. Within a few months the Committee of Public Safety formed a new army, the army of Year II. The soldiers of the Revolution who faced the carefully-equipped Prussian and Austrian infantrymen were very poorly equipped. Some did not have shoes, weapons were missing, but they welcomed the enemy cannonballs at the cries of “Liberty!” The whole country mobilized; the shoes and shirts were requisitioned; the bronze bells of the churches were melted down into cannons. Saltpetre was extracted from cellars to make gunpowder. Scientists such as Monge, Berthollet, Fourcroy, Chaptal, worked to discover new methods of armament. This improvised and motley army rose to the assault singing “La Marseillaise”, crushed the invasion and eventually carried the revolutionary war throughout Europe.

Presented in this way, the events that constitute the myth are not false but require some clarification. The French populations did not feel equally affected by the threat: those in the South of France were less concerned than those in the Northeast, who were directly involved. Moreover, the Revolution had expropriated the immense lands of the nobles and the Church for the benefit of the peasantry. A victory of the princes would have meant the restitution of these lands to their former owners, which explains the fervor of the fighters of the Revolution.

Marx evoked the memory of 1792 and of the Army of Year II when France, once again, was besieged by the German armies in 1870. But he was then extremely anxious at the idea of a mass uprising of the French population which would reverse the situation, making the unification of Germany impossible, or at least problematic.

The theoretical model that Bakunin and Marx had formed owed much to the historians of the Restoration¹. Guizot, in particular, the “illustrious doctrinaire statesman”, as Bakunin calls him, stated that the key element in the interpretation of the French Revolution lied in the victory of the bourgeoisie over the nobility. This theme was constantly developed by Marx and Bakunin, as well as the idea, inspired by the same historians, that the French Revolution does

¹ The “Restauration”, understood as the restoration of Monarchy is, roughly, the period of French history going from the fall of Napoleon in 1815 to the Revolution of 1848. About this period, Bakunin says that “it was a ridiculous attempt to give back life and political power to two degenerate and fallen bodies: the nobility and the priests.” (VII, 236.)

During this period appeared a certain number of historians who prepared the ground for the materialist study of history. Cf. René Berthier, “Historians of the Restoration and ‘Historical Materialism’.” <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article331>.

not end until 1830. But for bourgeois historians, the French Revolution represented the end of history: since the bourgeoisie had triumphed, there no longer was a dominated class. According to Bakunin and Marx it was, on the contrary, a revolution which had not yet been completed.

If the French Revolution is only a stage, then the transition from absolutism to bourgeois society can serve as a model for the transition from bourgeois society to socialist society, without classes. This is exactly what Marx does. Bakunin and Marx proceeded from the presupposition that the French Revolution was necessary because within a society politically dominated by the nobility, the bourgeoisie had become socially dominant. They do not demonstrate this hypothesis, unless we consider as a demonstration Marx's summary indications in *German Ideology*, or the rapid picture Bakunin makes in the conference to the workers of Saint-Imier. Bakunin, however, frequently recalls the long work of ideological preparation which, in his opinion, has made the revolution effective in the minds before making it possible in the facts. Far from being an idealistic affirmation, this is, on the contrary, an observation of the long underground work of an idea which, when it seizes the masses, becomes a material force. All the literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced the "subterranean channels" which developed the idea of materialism, rationalism and free thought and culminated in the conflagration of the Revolution. These links seem so obvious to Bakunin that Robespierre is presented as the heir of Rousseau and Mirabeau as that of Voltaire ².

The German Revolution of 1848 was literally a test which made it possible to verify the conceptual framework developed by Marx. In the preceding years, Marx had not ceased to oppose the political revolution, of which 1789 was the archetype, to the social revolution. This argument was mainly addressed to the German Democrats. Political Revolution and Social Revolution are two distinct processes, having an opposite content and form, but at the same time they are linked in that they present themselves in a necessary order of historical succession: the first is the condition of the second because it allows the implementation of the foundations of the organization of the proletariat as a class.

Hence, the texts show in 1847-1848 frequent hints to the German proletarian revolution as an immediate consequence of the political revolution which would have abolished the vestiges of absolutism: "...in Germany, says *The Manifesto*, the bourgeois revolution will be the immediate prelude to a proletarian revolution." Marx and Engels tried to mobilize all the anti-absolutist forces around the question of political democracy and to subordinate the action of the proletariat to this demand: the sooner political democracy is established, the

² Cf. IV, 288.

quicker the transformation of the bourgeois revolution into a social revolution would be accomplished. It was guided by the evolutionist conceptions the *Manifesto* and of *Moralising criticism and Critical morality* (1847) that Marx determined his orientations, themselves modeled on the obligatory model of the French Revolution.

Marx stuck to the idea that 1848 was the German 1789 and that the achievement of German unity and its liberation from absolutism is a political priority. Indeed, as long as there were vestiges of class relationships inherited from absolutism, the bourgeoisie constituted a progressive force. Do the workers, says Marx, have any reason to “prefer the brutal harassment of the absolute government with its semi-feudal retinue to *direct bourgeois rule*”³ – an approach which excludes any other possibility: for instance that the bourgeoisie also resorts to brutal vexations and that workers have no reason to prefer the ones rather than the others. Marx thinks that the workers have more interest in bourgeois domination, primarily because the bourgeoisie is obliged to make concessions:

“The workers know very well that it is not just politically that the bourgeoisie will have to make broader concessions to them than the absolute monarchy, but that in serving the interests of its trade and industry it will create, willy-nilly, the conditions for the uniting of the working class, and the uniting of the workers is the first requirement for their victory. The workers know that the abolition of bourgeois property relations is not brought about by preserving those of feudalism. They know that the revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie against the feudal estates and the absolute monarchy can only accelerate their own revolutionary movement. They know that their own struggle against the bourgeoisie can only dawn with the day when the bourgeoisie is victorious. (...) They can and must accept the *bourgeois revolution* as a precondition for the *workers' revolution*. However, they cannot for a moment regard it as their *ultimate goal* ⁴.”

In fact, the pre-established pattern Marx had in mind undermined all his action during the beginning of the revolution and led him (and Engels) to stifle the activity of the German labour movement. And when he changed at last his perspective after a few months, that is, when it became obvious that the German bourgeoisie *did not want* to make its 1789, it was too late.

The irony of history is that it was Bismarck who, by conceding “from above” universal suffrage in 1866, liquidated the liberal movement in Germany by defusing its action. On the basis of this example, Bakunin showed that the

³ Marx, *Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality*, MECW, vol. 6, p. 332.

⁴ *Ibid*, p 333.

coexistence of feudal political relations and economic relations of capitalism is perfectly possible, as we shall see.

“NEITHER FEUDAL NOR REALLY MODERN”

In 1848, the German situation presented a certain number of analogies with that of France in 1789, because of the persistence of an absolutist system and class relations inherited from feudalism. However, Marx and Bakunin had clearly seen that the driving force of the events in Paris in 1848 was the antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, whereas in Germany the bourgeoisie was confronted with the double problem of national unity and of the antagonism with its own proletariat.

Bakunin says that what made the strength of the French bourgeoisie of 1789 was its chronological advance on the proletariat in matters of class consciousness. It had acquired a cohesion, a collective consciousness of its objectives, of the antagonism which opposed it to the proletariat, which were lacking to the German bourgeoisie. Thanks to this advance, the French bourgeoisie could present its own claims as universal claims. In 1848, this advance had, if not disappeared, at least considerably diminished.

In Germany the proletariat was becoming conscious of itself and was beginning to organize with a magnitude that Bakunin had well perceived, but which Marx and Engels tried to minimize because the premature emergence of the working class on the stage would have upset the pre-established pattern of the founders of so-called “scientific socialism”.

One might think that a bourgeoisie which has taken such a long historical delay to move against feudal relations that the main antagonism had shifted to the one opposing it to the proletariat has definitely missed its historical chance. Can we then still say with Marx that the workers know that “their own struggle against the bourgeoisie can only dawn with the day when the bourgeoisie is victorious”⁵?

Twenty four years after *Moralising Criticism*, Bakunin will show the “revolutionary inconsistency of the German bourgeoisie”, to use his own words, in its fight against feudal relations. Since the main antagonism was no longer the one which opposed the bourgeoisie to the survivals of the feudal order still existing in Germany, but that which opposed it to the working class, the bourgeoisie no longer had any reason to consider the dominant political regimes then in Germany as the main enemy; it had, on the contrary, every reason to privilege an alliance with the political power against the working class and the peasantry.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Especially since the destruction of feudal relations was in any case, in Prussia at least, done at the initiative of the State itself. Bakunin shows that the establishment of the Customs union (*Zollverein*) and the innumerable economic measures taken centrally by the Prussian State in favor of industrial and commercial development have done more to destroy the feudal relations than all the timid attempts of the German liberals. The first cannon of the Krupp factories, let us recall, came out in the year of the publication of the *Manifesto*. Both were to contribute, twenty-three years later, to the hegemony of the German proletariat in Europe.

In 1870 Bakunin commented on the problems posed by the application to Germany of the model of the French political revolution, in connection with the question of the successive phases of evolution of political regimes. In two condensed pages he refutes the thesis which Marx developed in 1848 and shows that a feudal system can “dissolve” by itself under the pressure of capitalist development, without the bourgeoisie taking power.

“They are equally wrong”, he says in *L’Empire Knouto-Germanique*, “those who speak of Germany as a feudal country and those who speak of it as a modern State: it is neither feudal nor absolutely modern”. It is no longer feudal because the nobility has long since lost all power separated from the State. But, he adds, if a modern State means a State governed by the bourgeoisie, Germany is not modern. “As far as the government is concerned, it is still in the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is modern only from the economic point of view; in this respect in Germany as elsewhere, what dominates is bourgeois capital.”

As for the nobility, it “no longer represents an economic system distinct from that of the bourgeoisie”. The few remaining feudal survivals “can not fail to disappear soon before the invading omnipotence of bourgeois capital”. Against this, Bismarck, Moltke, and the Emperor can do nothing. “The policy they will implement will necessarily be favorable to the development of the bourgeois interests and the modern economy. But this policy will be made not by the bourgeois, but almost exclusively by the nobles⁶.”

Bakunin shows here a regime that has made its transition from feudalism to capitalism without going through the French model but through the dissolution of the old political forms under the irresistible push of capitalist development. He also shows that the control of the State apparatus by the bourgeoisie is fundamentally incidental, which contradicts the established Marxist pattern. In a conference at the Sonvilliers International, Bakunin declared: “Germany since 1830 has presented us and continues to present to us the strange picture of a country where the interests of the bourgeoisie predominate, but where political

⁶ Cf. VIII, 154-155.

power does not belong to the bourgeoisie, but to the absolute monarchy under a mask of constitutionalism, militarily and bureaucratically organized and served exclusively by the nobles⁷.”

At the same period, Engels made the same observation: in the 1870 preface of *The Peasant War in Germany*, he writes that capitalism has developed fantastically since 1848 in Germany. “How, then, is it possible that the bourgeoisie has not conquered political power, that it behaves in so cowardly a manner toward the government?”⁸ Surprised that the facts may not agree with the theory, Engels concludes that “in view of the enormously increased interaction of the three most advanced European countries, it is today no longer possible for the bourgeoisie to settle down to comfortable political rule in Germany after this rule has had its day in England and France. It is a peculiarity of the bourgeoisie, in contrast to all former ruling classes, that there is a turning point in its development after which every further expansion of its agencies of power, hence primarily of its capital, only tends to make it more and more unfit for political rule⁹.”

One can conceive the possibility that the bourgeoisie temporarily abdicates the exercise of power, by exception. This is what happens in the episodes that Marx designates under the name of “Bonapartism”, or Bakunin under the name of “Caesarism”. But curiously, this phenomenon does not seem to be an exception, it is constant: indeed, Engels tells us that in England the bourgeoisie was only narrowly able to bring its representative (Bright) to the government; in France, the bourgeoisie as such “held power for only two years, 1849 and 1850, under the Republic”.

An astonishing observation: the exclusion of the bourgeoisie from the exercise of its own power is therefore not a circumstantial phenomenon, for eighty years had passed since the Great Revolution. The mechanistic thesis of the systematic correlation between the development of productive forces and the political forms of domination seems to be contradicted by facts, as well as the validity of the Marxist model of transition from feudalism to capitalism. Germany is an example of an Ancient Regime that has defeated a democratic revolution in 1848, while at the same time considerably developing industrial capitalism, which contradicts the very foundation of Marx's theory according to which outdated political forms must break out to enable the development of new productive forces. If facts are stubborn and impose on men constraints from

⁷ Bakounine, “Trois conférences aux ouvriers du val de de Saint-Imier, *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, VII, p. 237.

⁸ Engels, Preface to the 2nd Ed. of *The Peasant War in Germany*, MECW, vol. 21, pp. 96-97.

⁹ *Ibid.*

which they disentangle with difficulty, men are also able to learn from facts in order to circumvent obstacles.

History cannot be reduced to repetitive patterns.

NAPOLEON AND BISMARCK

The German revolution desired by Marx never occurred: neither the bourgeois revolution nor the proletarian revolution which was to be its consequence. Marx's attitude during that period has gone relatively unnoticed because he had no hold on reality. The policy he advocated at that time saw no realization and remained totally ignored by the social strata to which it was addressed. However, his positions were not left unnoticed by the German workers, who will take a long time to forget that he advocated an alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie at a time of great workers' agitation. This is undoubtedly one of the explanations of the long preponderance of Lassallism over Marxism. For here is a man who intended to found the power of the proletariat but who dissolved the workers' party at the outset of the revolution, and who feared an excessive workers agitation which would disrupt the *de facto* alliance he had contracted with the democratic bourgeoisie whose revolution came first on the agenda.

Marx simply did not understand one thing that other contemporaries – such as Bismarck – had perfectly assimilated: one does not make twice the same revolution. Bismarck had learned a great deal from the French revolution. His main concern was to preserve an independent military force in order to avoid reproducing the fatal mistake committed by Louis XVI, on July 14, 1789, by not sending the troop. The King of Prussia and the Emperor of Austria made all concessions to the Diet, to the Assembly of Frankfort, and to the Constitution, but they kept the army at Potsdam, preserving an intact armed force: Frederick-William waited a year for divisions to appear in the revolutionary camp before restoring order.

But the French example has not benefited only the dominant classes, it also served the middle classes. The revolutionaries of 1789, who were composed of the bourgeoisie and part of the aristocracy, had appealed to the Parisian crowd without anticipating all the possible consequences. The German middle classes had learned the lesson and showed much more circumspection in appealing to the urban crowd. Thus, one understands all the less Marx's obstinacy in wanting to reproduce the French model, even more so since he had all the elements to measure its limits.

The reproduction of the French model in Germany does not seem conceivable to Bakunin. The French Revolution may well be a reference, a subject of reflection or inspiration, but not an operational model. As an actor of

the events, more than Marx was, he knew that to win, the German Revolution would have to rely on the peasants, which the German democrats absolutely did not want to do. In 1848, he says, the Germans had never read so many French books. The factious spirit of the French had succeeded in penetrating the country. These dispositions of mind, says Bakunin in 1874, “were by no means hampered by Hegelianism, which, on the contrary, was delighted to express in French, of course in a heavily distinguished way and a German accent, its abstractly revolutionary deductions”. Revolutionary writings penetrated everywhere. The *History of the Girondins*, of Lamartine, and the works of Louis Blanc and Michelet, were translated. “And the Germans began to dream of the heroes of the Great Revolution and to divide their roles for future times: some imagined they were either a Danton or an amiable Camille Desmoulins; others were either a Robespierre, a Saint-Just, or a Marat. Nobody, or almost nobody, was content with being oneself, because for this, one must have a true nature. For among the Germans you have everything: depth of thought, elevated feelings, but no nature, and if there is one, it is servile¹⁰.”

With Marx and Hegel, Bakunin observes the duplication of the German nation: life, he says, is divided into two opposing worlds, one characterized by a humanism of high elevation and scope, but basically abstract, the other immersed in platitude and meanness. “It is in this duplication of the German nation that the French Revolution surprised Germany”, says Bakunin. It was in these same conditions that the Germans welcomed the revolution of 1848. In the 1830s and 1840s, the Germans thought that when the hour of revolution was to ring, “the philosophers of the Hegelian school would leave behind the most audacious actors of the 1790s and would astonish the world by the rigorous and implacable logic of their revolutionism.”

Alas, experience destroyed these illusions: “Not only did the German revolutionaries not surpass the heroes of the first French Revolution, but they did not even succeed in matching the French revolutionaries of 1830.”¹¹ Among the reasons of this failure, Bakunin mentions “the abstract method which they adopted to march to the revolution. Once again, in accordance with their nature, they did not go from life to idea, but from idea to life; for there is no way to go from metaphysics to life¹².” This comment could very precisely apply to the positions taken by Marx in 1848.

Marx, who had perfectly seen that the French bourgeoisie of 1789 had felt a retrospective fear of its own revolution, did not envisage that it could be the same for the German bourgeoisie of 1848. In this he proved infinitely less

¹⁰ *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, IV, 315-316.

¹¹ *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, IV, 309.

¹² *Ibid.*

perceptive than Bismarck, whom Bakunin curiously defined as the man who had realized the model of State to which Napoleon aspired. The comparison, at first glance, may seem surprising. According to Bakunin, Napoleon had been carried by the wave of the French Revolution, which self-destructed itself because the “triumph of unrestrained and disorderly democracy necessarily led to that of revolutionary dictatorship.” But Napoleon Bonaparte is also the inventor of a new conception of the State which aims at “establishing in Europe a new, more powerful and even more crushing despotism than the absolute monarchical despotism which had succeeded (...) the Thirty Years war”. But while Marx considered the Bonapartist-type of State as an outdated political form, it is for Bakunin the prototype of the State of the future, which does not allow itself to be carried away by “any political, religious or class predilection, taking into account all the scientific and industrial progress of the century and using all the real and serious elements of modern society for its edification”¹³.

Bakunin calls this phenomenon Caesarism, which can be compared with the Bonapartism of Marx. It shows the tendency of the State to become autonomous from the social classes, which allows it not to be drawn into any class predilection. Marx also said that Napoleon “oppresses liberalism as a despot” and considers the State as “an end in itself.”

But, according to Bakunin, Napoleon, the “grandfather of the evil which torments and distorts the existence of modern society”, was unable to fully realize his goal. His idea of a universal despotic State was “neither mature enough nor sufficiently freed from a host of conditions and considerations which were foreign to them.” The moment had not come for its realization, for “the representatives of monarchical power and feudal interests in Europe had stupidly rejected themselves in the old forms of their existence, refusing the most necessary concessions¹⁴.”

But above all, Napoleon was not “the man fit for the realization of the new idea”: he was not master of his passions; the object of his passion was himself, his power, his greatness. “He carried to madness and to rage, the love of ostentation”. This eternal actor, living only by the noise that was made around his name, “very often sacrificed reality to effect, and to slow but solid results preferred brilliant feats¹⁵.”

This new type of State inaugurated by Napoleon was still imperfect in the years following the French Revolution: It still was enveloped in the sediments of the old regime. Another man will implement this “new despotism” and it will be precisely “the task which the Count of Bismarck has imposed upon himself.”

¹³ *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, VIII, 486.

¹⁴ *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, VIII, 486.

¹⁵ *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, VIII, 487.

The filiation Bakunin establishes between the two men might surprise. Bakunin considered that despite everything, Napoleon had consolidated the achievements of the Revolution, whereas Bismarck was the man from a reactionary class, serving a reactionary class. The analogy is elsewhere: it lies in the fact that the emperor and the chancellor occasionally upset the classes of society, without distinction, for the achievement of their objective, that is the implementation of a State system that serves all modern means. The success of Bismarck consists in his not being carried away by any prejudice, by any false vanity, and that on the contrary of Napoleon he never sacrificed reality to effect.

Thus, he proclaimed in the Reichstag in 1881: "I have no fixed opinion, make proposals, and you will not meet with me any objection of principle ... Sometimes one must govern liberally, sometimes in a dictatorial way, there is no eternal rule." In the eyes of Bakunin, the genius of Bismarck – and in this the Prussian Chancellor surpassed Napoleon by far – is to have understood that political concessions were all the more essential as they did not alter the dominant system. Contrary to the wishes of Marx and Engels, universal suffrage was not favorable to the workers' movement; on the contrary, it accentuated the internal divisions of German society, which favored the power. Bakunin believed that the representative system (which Bismarck set up in Germany in 1866) did not lead to a less authoritarian regime than the despotism which the French Revolution had overthrown, nor that universal suffrage in any way accelerated the perspective of socialism. Bakunin says that the genius of Bismarck was to understand that the modern capitalist economy requires, in order to ensure its development, a vast centralized State apparatus capable of guaranteeing the exploitation of millions of workers.

Bakunin endeavors to show that the two dynamics, that of the State and that of capitalism, follow a parallel trend towards concentration. The concentration of capital has its corollary in the constitution of large State blocs, a process which tends to lead to the creation, however impossible, of a great "universal State". Representative democracy is not only perfectly adapted to the demands of developed capitalism, it is also essential to it: democracy combines two indispensable conditions for the prosperity of large-scale industrial production: political centralization and subjugation of the people to the minority which claims to represent them.

We are obviously not prepared to admit that Bismarck is the man who realizes the objectives of the French Revolution. This would be a ruse of history against which all our education of good Frenchmen would revolt. Yet Bakunin's perspective deserves to be taken into consideration, if only in the light of the simple observation of the facts of contemporary democratic society. Bismarck said coldly that he intended to destroy parliamentarism by parliamentarism. He created a system in which all power is concentrated in the State.

Throughout his life, Engels had aspired to the universal suffrage which would allow the proletariat to take power, provided that “the representatives of the people concentrate all power in their hands (...) if one has the support of the majority of the people”. But Engels complains that in Germany “the government is almost omnipotent and the Reichstag and all other representative bodies have no real power”¹⁶! In other words, he noted that the demands of 1848 had been met (unity of the State and representative democracy) but that no progress had been made...

The most superficial examination reveals that today – in France in particular – Parliament is virtually useless: it contributes to 10% of the legislative texts that are promulgated, the government contributing for the rest, and the government also has the legal means to impose decisions the Parliament would refuse. The elections themselves lose their meaning in a system where the constant rearrangements of electoral districts allow the Government to readjust the votes to the expected results. Of course, such manipulations have limits and would be inoperative in the case of an electoral tsunami, but such occurrences are rare.

The function of Parliament is essentially to create a facade legitimacy for power. The men who are, or aspire to power are perfectly in agreement on the essential: we must maintain things as they are. Parliament now serves as a moral sanction for power: “This sanction must be so obvious and simple that it can convince the masses who, after being reduced by the power of the State, must now be brought to moral recognition of the latter’s right”¹⁷.

In other words, the representative system is not used to represent the population vis-à-vis the State, but the State vis-à-vis the population. The function of Parliament is reduced to giving voters the illusion that they are for something in the great political choices that are made by the government: the mainstream media, through the pseudo-face-to-face they propose, serve only as a relay. The reality of the formula of the French Revolution, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”, is fully explained by Bakunin in *Statism and Anarchy*: “Bourgeois Government, Privilege of Capital, Exploitation of the Proletariat.”¹⁸

END OF LIBERALISM

Bakunin and Marx assert that the French Revolution is the consequence of the inevitable advent of bourgeois society within the society of the old regime. This is the classical model of bourgeois revolutions which allow the “historical

¹⁶ Engels, *A Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Program of 1891*, MECW Volume 27, p. 226.

¹⁷ Bakunin, *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, VIII, 142

¹⁸ *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, IV, 507

class” – the expression is Bakunin’s – to establish its domination. However, they do not explain this contradiction that the bourgeoisie of the old regime had no real connection with industrial capitalism.

In 1848, Marx's concern was obviously to integrate the French Revolution into the materialistic conception of history – of which *German Ideology* had established two years earlier the conceptual framework – in order to promote the German revolution. By deciphering the matrix, he believed he could clear the path that the liberals and the German democrats would inevitably follow. In his later anarchist writings, Bakunin breaks the rigid order imagined by Marx, showing that capitalism could be constituted under other models than that offered by the French Revolution. He explicitly recognized that the main opposition between him and Marx was not political or organizational, but that it originated in his refusal to admit that the theory of successive and necessary phases of production had an absolute character.

In reality, as is often the case in the oppositions which he manifests towards Marx, it is not so much the principle elaborated by his rival that he rejects, but the exclusive manner in which the latter intends to apply it.

That history was a succession of necessary steps was not particularly original at the time: The idea can be found in Hegel in an idealistic sense. It is also found, with a clearly materialistic point of view, in Saint-Simon and all the historians of the Restoration in France. Bakunin simply states that Marx's thesis is only *relatively* true, provided that other political, legal, religious, etc. determinations are taken into account which may in turn become material causes, and on condition, finally, of taking into account the extreme complexity of their interrelations. Perhaps this would be one of the explanations for the polymorphous character of the political domination of the bourgeoisie from 1789 to 1870. Bakunin's assertion that a historical phenomenon can only be the result of multiple and complex causes is undoubtedly the consequence of his observation of the damage produced by the rigid Marxian conception in 1848.

Liberalism is defined as the revolutionary theory on which the bourgeoisie relied to overthrow despotism. However, the fall of the latter leads to the degeneration of the liberal theory, which enters its phase of decline. 1848 marks according to Bakunin “the crisis of liberalism, a crisis which ended in its complete collapse”¹⁹. Nevertheless, as far as Germany was concerned, there had never been “as many inflammable materials and revolutionary factors accumulated as on the eve of 1848”. The discontent, the desire for change had assumed a general character, except in the high spheres of bureaucracy and nobility. In the bourgeoisie many proclaimed themselves revolutionaries and

¹⁹ *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, IV, 319.

“were justified in taking that name,” for they were not satisfied with literature but were ready to give their lives for their opinions.

For a month all the governmental forces were swept from German territory. The revolutionaries could do whatever they wanted. But, Bakunin noted, three quarters of the deputies of the Assembly of Frankfort happened to be reactionaries; “And not only reactionaries, but children in politics, very learned, but of extreme candor”²⁰. They still believed in the promises of the princes; they thought they simply had to draft a Constitution for the German governments to submit to it without flinching.

Two questions were then posed to the revolutionaries:

1. Should the German States form a republic or a monarchy? The majority of the Assembly opted for the monarchy. Bakunin cites ten years later Dr. Jacoby's speech, in which he said: “If ever an age has taught us how far the monarchical element has rooted the hearts of the people, well it is the year 1848.”

2. Centralized State or Federal State? To constitute a centralized State, Bakunin points out, would have led to innumerable local revolts; all the princes, except one, should have been driven out of Germany. The question was settled in favor of a federal monarchy consisting of a multitude of small monarchies with an emperor and a parliament common to all Germany.

Hence a third question arose: who will be the emperor? The only possible candidates were the King of Prussia and the Emperor of Austria. The sympathies of the Assembly went to the second. The capricious Frederick-William IV was discredited; moreover, all southern Germany, largely Catholic in its historical traditions, leaned towards Austria, which was on the edge of an abyss, shaken by revolutionary movements in Italy, Hungary, Bohemia, and even in Vienna, while Prussia was under arms and ready to fight. In March 1848, Bakunin noted, the German governments were “demoralized and frightened, but they were far from being annihilated; the old State organization, bureaucratic, legal, financial, political and military organization remained intact”²¹.

The deputies of Frankfort lost six months trying to define the fundamental rights of the German people, whereas the assembly had no real authority, having no money, no power, no means of action. The so-called revolutionary Radical Party formed a minority in the Parliament of Frankfurt. In the local parliaments the revolutionaries were also paralyzed, because the influence of these parliaments on the conduct of German affairs was infinitesimal, and because even in Vienna, Berlin and Frankfurt the parliamentary activity was reduced, according to Bakunin's opinion, to a simple verbalism. Referring to the work of

²⁰ *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, IV, 323.

²¹ *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, IV, 323.

the Prussian Constituent Assembly, which also devoted several months to the examination of the draft Constitution, Bakunin said that “all the revolutionary incapacity, not to say the unfathomable stupidity of the German revolutionaries, appeared openly. The Prussian radicals gave a thorough play in the parliamentary game, and were disinterested in all the rest. They believed seriously in the virtue of parliamentary decisions, and the most intelligent among them believed that the victories they obtained in parliament decided the fate of Prussia and Germany”²².

They had set themselves, as Bakunin concluded, an impossible task: to reconcile democratic government and equal rights with monarchical institutions. The German radicals were limited to wanting to reorganize the monarchy on a democratic basis. This monarchy, defeated in March but not at all annihilated, was reorganizing itself, gathering forces. “The feudal-monarchist reaction was not a doctrine, but a considerable force, which had the whole army behind it. It dreamed of “restoring also the whole of the bureaucratic administration, the organism of the whole State, which had at its disposal immense financial means”. Is it possible that the Radicals could have believed that they would succeed in controlling this force with the constitution and the laws, with what Bakunin calls “paper weapons”?”²³

The only way was the “revolutionary force of the pre-organized people”. Bakunin seems to neglect the relation of the real forces existing in the Germany of 1848. In reality he knows very well that the bourgeoisie then did not want to take power: these reflections should only be seen as a projection, on the revolution of 1848 in Germany, of the measures he had advocated during the Franco-Prussian War and during the Paris Commune.

The political balance-sheet drawn by Bakunin from the revolution of 1848 revolves around several points:

1. During the June battles in France, were confronted for the first time, without a mask, the savage force of the people “fighting not for others, but for themselves”, and the savagery of the military, that is to say, the State. In previous revolutions, writes Bakunin, the army was confronted not only by popular masses, but also by the honorable citizens, by the youth of the universities and by the bourgeois: this imposed certain limits on the use of military force. In 1848 it was a question of “making sure the proletariat no longer desires to engage in revolutionary movements”. In France, “the bourgeoisie and the proletariat met face to face as enemies”. In other countries

²² *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, IV, 327.

²³ *Ibid.*, 328.

the revolution was defeated by foreign troops after a fierce struggle; in Italy by the Austrian soldiers; in Hungary by the Russian and Austrian troops; “In Germany”, said Bakunin, “it was ruined by the own failure of the revolutionists.”

2. The German bourgeoisie was paralyzed by two contradictory aspirations which Bakunin expresses in these terms: “A society desirous of founding a strong State necessarily seeks to submit to power; a revolutionary society tends instead to free itself from this power. How can we reconcile these two contrary aspirations which are mutually exclusive? They must necessarily paralyze each other, and this is what happened to the Germans, who in 1848 did not succeed in having neither freedom nor a strong State but who, on the other hand, suffered a frightful defeat”²⁴.

These two aspirations can not be manifested simultaneously in one nation: one of them must necessarily be a “fictitious aspiration”²⁵. The aspiration for liberty was a delusion, a deception. On the other hand, the aspiration to a Pan-German State was real, at least in the cultivated bourgeois society, but also among the radicals and the reddest democrats.

3. In other words, the German Radicals wanted to preserve the State at the same time as they were fighting it: “All their action was undermined and paralyzed in its essence”. They found themselves in the “tragicomic necessity of rebelling against the power of State in order to to push it to become more powerful”. Bakunin concludes: “Who wants not freedom but the State must not play at revolution”²⁶. What displeases the German bourgeois is not to have a master, it is “the impotence, the weakness and relative helplessness of the one to whom he must obey”²⁷.

4. The revolution of 1848 demonstrated to the Germans that “not only were they not able to conquer liberty, but they did not want it; it had also proved that if the Prussian monarchy did not take the initiative, the Germans were not able to attain their fundamental purpose nor strong enough to create a powerful unified State.”

Germany has long been politically humiliated, acknowledges Bakunin. In the 1820s, the Germans “willingly called themselves liberals and believed for good in their liberalism”²⁸. They execrated Russia, which personified despotism and “rejected on Russia all responsibility for the policy of the Holy Alliance”. In the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 333.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 333.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 335.

²⁷ *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, VIII, 65.

²⁸ *Œuvres*, éditions Champ libre, IV, 252.

early 1830s, the bloody repression of the Polish revolution by Russia increased the indignation of the German liberals, although, added Bakunin, Prussia had taken part in it.

The reaction which followed the defeat of the revolution of 1848 differed from that of 1812-1813 in that, at the time of the establishment of the Holy Alliance, the Germans had been able to maintain the illusion that they aspired to liberty, and that if they had not been prevented by far superior forces of a coalition of several governments, they might have succeeded in constituting in Germany a democratic government and a unified State. "Now, says Bakunin, this consoling illusion is no longer valid." During the first months of the revolution there had been no force capable of opposing the revolutionists; afterwards, it was "they who, more than anyone else, helped to restore that strength. So that the null blow of the revolution was due not to external obstacles, but to the own deficiency of the German liberals and patriots"²⁹.

"The feeling of this deficiency seemed to have become the foundation of political life and the guiding principle of the new public opinion in Germany. The Germans had apparently changed and had become practical men. They had abandoned the great abstract ideas which had given universal importance to their classical literature, from Lessing to Goethe and Kant to Hegel inclusively; They had abandoned the liberalism, democracy and republicanism of the French, they now sought the accomplishment of German doctrines in the policy of conquest of Prussia³⁰."

The period between 1849 and 1858 is designated by Bakunin as that of the hopeless submission of the German people. Until 1866 the agonizing German liberalism sustained, before succumbing, the struggle against Prussian absolutism, which finally triumphed in 1870.

A new Germany arose, profoundly changed, due to the corruption that inevitably appears with the "capitalist system of monopolies". This corruption, which everywhere and always accompanies the progress and expansion of State centralization, wins the German public. The "famous honesty"³¹ which characterized the Germans disappears in the face of "this feeling of pride which puts him in a state of mad exaltation".

When German unity is finally achieved, the "German concept of the State"³² will triumph in Europe.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 335.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 335.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 358.

³² *Ibid.*, 360.