

Genesis of German liberalism

From Chapter 1 of *Bakounine politique, révolution et contre révolution en Europe centrale*,

René Berthier

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“The amiable knight, the virtuous priest, and the honest bourgeois”

The passages in which Bakunin deals with the the Middle Ages provides one of the keys to his analysis of the failure of German liberalism. It is from this period onwards that appears a pattern of relations between classes characteristic of Germany, and this pattern is linked mainly to the geopolitical situation of the country, situated at the marches of the Slavic countries.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when an extraordinary development took place throughout Europe, Germany produced only the order of the Teutonic knights and the order of the Livonian sword-bearers, who pushed German expansion towards the North and the North-East. The process of Germanization of these territories described by Bakunin is interesting in that it shows a first example of subordination of the interests of the bourgeoisie to the existence of a nobiliary class. It is this particular type of subordination which, according to the Russian revolutionary, constitutes one of the principal characteristics of Germanic society. German cities were formed around the entrenched camps of the “armed civilizers”. Then came the clergy and the bourgeois.

Bakunin believes that in the thirteenth century the bourgeoisie missed an opportunity to firmly establish its positions, but he also explains that the national energies were oriented towards the occupation of the Slav lands in the East, which provided an outlet for both the nobility, the German clergy and the bourgeoisie. These energies, moreover, have been monopolized by the external policy of the emperors, obsessively turned towards Italy. German policy has not concentrated on internal problems such as the constitution of a national state, as has been the constant obsession of the kings of France.

The respective analyzes of Bakunin and Engels, which are very close in some respects, are often complementary. The inability of the Germanic emperors to centralize power is a common theme. As Bakunin, Engels observes that the Emperor's policy was “more foreign and expansionist than German and integrationist”¹. Engels even says that in the thirteenth century “Germany had no Emperor at all”. But on the contrary of Engels, Bakunin does not expressly say that feudalism never really reached its end, nor that it was at first quite weak, so much so that the peasants began gradually to free themselves from serfdom until the fifteenth century. It is not this aspect that interests the Russian revolutionary, more concerned to show how the progressive occupation of the Slav lands in the East contributed to strengthen feudalism, a phenomenon about which Engels says that this was the essential obstacle to the emancipation of the peasants of the South-West, at the same time as it was the prelude to the subsequent extension of feudalism to all Germany:

¹ Engels, “Notes historiques sur l’Allemagne”, *Ecrits militaires*, L’Herne, p. 93.

“It was, therefore, the anti-centralising element of the nation – the feudal nobility of the princes – that triumphed in Germany, successfully using violence for colonization and expansion in the East and South. The princes enlarged their domain and power by gradually consolidating the feudal regime which kept on ceaselessly to exist.²”

The importance of the process of colonization in the East (“the assimilation or the Germanization of Slavs,” Engels says) is therefore perceived as a constant feature of German politics. Engels insists on the divergence of interests between the main classes involved. He shows that the towns plunder the peasants, that the knights plunder the peasants and oppress the towns; but, unlike Bakunin, he does not seem to grasp the dialectic of these relations. The Russian revolutionary clearly shows the *de facto* association between the nobility and the bourgeoisie in their common oppression of the peasantry, particularly in the eastern marches where the entrenched camps of the “armed civilizers”, as Bakunin says, allowed the bourgeois and the clergy to settle down. It is this particular model of relationship: nobility and bourgeoisie against peasantry, which, according to Bakunin, provides the key to the political history of Germany. This divergence of perspective between Bakunin and Engels may be explained by the fact that the latter sees things from a point of view internal to German society, whereas Bakunin is more concerned with highlighting the phenomenon of domination of the Slav peasantry by the nobility, the bourgeoisie and the clergy.

Engels attributes two causes to the failure of the formation of the German nation. The first is the excessive divergence of interests between classes. From what Bakunin said, the bourgeoisie and the nobility had rather interrelated interests, and by the very fact of the military occupation of the Slav lands, the bourgeoisie was dependent on the nobility which provided it with the necessary security for business development. This, says Bakunin, is a characteristic feature of Germany up to the present day.

The second cause indicated by Engels is the displacement of international trade routes, which pushed Germany back into a corner, which “shattered the strength of the bourgeoisie”. Bakunin, on the other hand, explains the decline of the bourgeoisie by their lack of political sense and by their exclusive interest in short-term profit, their inability to develop a project.

It is interesting to note that in his handwritten notes Engels frequently deplores the absence of the political and ideological fact – the centralizing monarchy – that could have contributed to the formation of a national state: The power of the emperor was “wasted abroad” because he “believed to be the successor of Rome”. When the State is “called to great social functions” but can not exercise its functions, “there is social stagnation”. Engels observes that in Germany “the contribution of the State was much reduced”. But he does not link the two phenomena: impotence of the bourgeois class and weak action of the State.

Bakunin observes that the German cities of the thirteenth century “could not, like the communes of France, rely on the growing power of monarchical centralization” because the power of the emperors “resided much more in their personal abilities and influence than in political institutions, which consequently varied with the change of persons, having never been able to consolidate or take shape in Germany³.” Moreover, Bakunin adds, the emperors “spent three quarters of their time outside Germany”⁴. The bourgeoisie could not develop into a sufficiently strong social power, nor could it benefit from the natural support of the monarchical State against the nobility, as was the case in the French model. But the English model was also not possible, namely the alliance of cities with the landed aristocracy against the monarchical power, for the German nobles, “unlike the English aristocracy,” said Bakunin, had always “distinguished themselves by a complete lack of political sense”⁵.

² Engels, “Notes historiques sur l’Allemagne”, *Ecrits militaires*, L’Herne, p. 94.

³ Bakounine, *L’Empire knouto-germanique*, éditions Champ libre, VIII, p. 69.

The quotations from Bakunin will refer to his works published by Éditions Champ libre and will mention the volume and the page. Ex. Bakunin, IV, 124.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

The German cities could therefore count only on their own strength and on their alliance with one another. Now, the Hansa, says Bakunin, was never but an “almost exclusively commercial alliance”; to be a real effective power, “it should have assumed a decidedly political character and importance: it should have intervened as a recognized and respected part in the very constitution and in all the internal and external affairs of the Empire”⁶.

The bourgeoisie, in short, has not been able to anchor itself in the institutional fabric of the Empire. Now, precisely, the circumstances in the thirteenth century were extremely favorable, thinks Bakunin, diverging in this from the point of view of Engels. The German bourgeoisie could have taken advantage of the dissolution of the institutions and of the power to constitute itself as an autonomous power and give the Hanseatic League “a much more positive political character, that of a formidable collective power demanding and enforcing respect”.

The Empire was then weakened by the struggle of the Guelphs and the Ghibellines⁷. The German bourgeoisie could have “conquered its independence and established its political power already in the thirteenth century”. But for that, it would have been necessary for the Hanseatic bourgeoisie to have a political will. Instead, it “never left the bounds of moderation and wisdom, asking only three things:

- That it be peacefully allowed to enrich itself by its industry and commerce;
- That its organization and internal jurisdiction should be respected,
- And that it should not be asked to make too great a sacrifice of money in return for the protection or tolerance which it was granted.

As to the general affairs of the Empire, both internal and external, the German bourgeoisie left it exclusively to the “great gentlemen” (*den grossen Herren*), too modest itself to meddle in it.”

On this point Engels agrees with Bakunin:

“The middle classes, the money-loving bourgeois, found in this continued confusion, a source of wealth; they knew that they could catch the most fish in the troubled waters; they suffered themselves to be oppressed and insulted because they could take a revenge upon their enemies worthy of themselves: *they avenged their wrongs by cheating their oppressors*⁸. »

Neither Engels nor Bakunin have so far given any convincing reason for the inability of the German bourgeoisie to constitute “developed class interests” (Engels) or to develop a “decidedly political character” (Bakunin). Engels seems to think rather of external causes: the displacement of trade routes would have “broken the strength of the bourgeois”, which exonerates them from all responsibility, whereas Bakunin is rather inclined to see internal causes: dependence on the nobility, narrowness of views. Both of them raise, however, an interesting question, that of the fate of the peripheral regions of the Empire.

Engels evokes the disintegration of the territory of the Empire, which first gained the periphery. Thus, Holland was “the only part of the Hansa to retain its commercial importance, but it detached itself from Germany” and ended by “dominating all German commerce”. The bourgeoisie of small Holland had developed class interests which had made it more powerful than the much larger German bourgeoisie. Although Engels does not say so, we can deduce that the Dutch bourgeoisie had reached a political cohesion that did not have the German bourgeoisie. In other words, it succeeded in doing on its own scale what Bakunin accuses the German bourgeoisie of not being able to do.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The Guelphs and the Ghibellines were factions supporting respectively the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor in the Italian city-states of central and northern Italy. During the 12th and 13th centuries, this rivalry formed a particularly important aspect of the internal politics of medieval Italy. The division between the Guelphs and Ghibellines in Italy persisted until the 15th century.

⁸ Engels, « The State of Germany », *The Northern Star*, n° 415, October 25, 1845. MECW, Vol. 6, p. 17.

Outside Germany, in the other Protestant monarchies, Bakunin says that the people maintained a sense of independence and “maintained their freedom and rights against the invasions of the nobility and against those of the monarchy⁹.” Anticipating on Max Weber, he declares that “the Netherlands owed their political birth to Protestantism, which drew them out of nothing by the first triumphant popular revolution in Europe”. The Protestant movement “gave the young Dutch nation an industrial, commercial, artistic, and even scientific and philosophical development, which soon transformed this small Holland into a country as rich as powerful, and which later became the refuge of all free thinkers”. One naturally thinks of what Max Weber said of the Netherlands :

“The rising middle and small bourgeoisie, from which entrepreneurs were principally recruited, were for the most part here and elsewhere typical representatives both of capitalist ethics and of Calvinistic religion¹⁰.”

Everywhere, says Bakunin, Protestantism produced the spirit of liberty and initiative, “giving mainly to the middle class and the workers' guilds of the towns a vigorous and enlightening boom”. Why is Protestantism accompanied in Germany by the despotism of the princes, the arrogance of the nobles and the submission of the working classes¹¹? The answer may be found in the first centuries of the formation of the German nation.

At the end of the eleventh century and in the twelfth century, writes Bakunin, as municipal liberties developed in Europe, as the Vaudois heresy appeared in the south of France, as the scholastic philosophy – considered by Bakunin as the “first implicit revolt of reason against faith” – developed in France and England, Germany remains motionless.

Two facts, however, are to be noted: the creation of the order of the Teutonic Knights and the Order of the Livonian Brothers of the Sword, who will push the Germanic expansion towards the North and the North-East of Europe. The process of Germanization of these territories, as described by Bakunin, is interesting in that it shows a first example of subordination of the interests of the bourgeoisie to the existence of a nobiliary class. Quoting the Polish historian Lelewel, Bakunin writes: “In order to secure their power and their conquests, the princes established among the Slavs various military posts commanded by guards of the marches or frontiers, called counts of frontiers or margraves”. Thus the margraviate of Brandenburg, which was the embryo of the present kingdom of Prussia, was formed among the Slavonic populations. Nearly all this kingdom, according to Bakunin, would be “a vast Slavic ossuary.”

The Russian revolutionary points out that in the Middle Ages, there was no mention of civilization, but of Christianization, which meant, for the Slavs, “plunder, massacre, rape, extermination or slavery. Thus the Germans successively civilized or converted all the Slavic populations between the Elbe and the Oder”¹².

“As soon as a new Slavic country had been conquered, the emperors divided it into dioceses and established bishops there, who obeyed the archbishop still resident in the center of the military colony. Then, around the bishops, the good bourgeois of Germany brought together with them, in these barbarous countries, their respectable labor and industry, their customs, their municipal administration, and the worship of authority. In this way new German cities were formed on the Slavonic territory, and around these towns were built the castles of these military leaders, converted into feudal lords, masters of the whole country cultivated by the spared portion of the Slav population, henceforth attached to the glebe¹³.”

According to Bakunin, the bourgeois, who came after the soldiers, were “humble, servile, cowardly respectful of the arrogance of the nobles”, but

⁹ Bakunin, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, VIII, 81.

¹⁰ Weber *Ethics* Routledge, note 23, pp. 148-149.

¹¹ Bakunin, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, VIII, 416.

¹² Bakunin, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, VIII, 418.

¹³ Bakunin, *Ibid.*, VIII, 418.

“excessively harsh and contemptuous for the defeated indigenous populations”¹⁴.

Bakunin thus indicates the material basis of the dependence of the German bourgeoisie on the military caste, which ensures both political security and economic opportunities. The development on the eastern marches of what Bakunin called bourgeois civilization was linked to a policy of territorial expansion and depended directly on the hegemony of the military class, the prime mover of this policy. Engels mentions this policy¹⁵ of expansion, but he does not reveal the political dependence of the bourgeoisie.

However, it is this dependence which determines, according to Bakunin, the character of class relations peculiar to Germany, and especially to Prussia. In fact, the bourgeoisie had, beneath it, a defeated indigenous, peasant population. Therefore, to the phenomenon of economic exploitation is added the question of national oppression. Parallel to the characteristic opposition of feudal relations (peasant-nobility) in which the bourgeoisie sides with the feudal point of view, there would have been a national opposition between German occupiers and occupied Slavs, whose traditions, especially in land ownership, were very different.

The Bakuninian thesis shows a German bourgeoisie who, throughout its history, was on the side of power against the peasantry, even when their interests demanded an alliance with this class; but the German bourgeoisie had acquired since the most remote times a conditioned reflex of submission to the military, to authority.

The fate of the Hanseatic League fits in well with Bakunin's scheme. The League was, in fact, closely dependent on the Teutonic Knights, commercially and politically. The crushing of these by the Poles was one of the causes of the decline of the towns of the Baltic. But the process described by Bakunin in northeastern Germany also applies to the South-East with Austria. Engels rightly says that Austria and Brandenburg are “Bavarian and Saxon colonies in Slavic territory”?

To illustrate the bourgeoisie's dependence on the nobility, Bakunin describes German civilization as “aristocratic-bourgeois.” It is represented, under the oppression of the Teutonic Knights – the “ancestors of the present-day lieutenant-squires of Prussia” – by the amiable knight, the virtuous priest, and the honest bourgeois.

Whether in Poland or Bohemia, the nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the clergy, German or Germanized, would naturally make common cause against the Slavic peasant mass. The latter did not allow itself to be germanized or christianized with enthusiasm. The religious heresies, which from the twelfth to the fifteenth century had crossed Germany without finding an echo, found propitious ground in Bohemia, “whose people, enslaved but not Germanized, cursed with all their heart this servitude and the whole aristocratic-bourgeois civilization of the Germans”¹⁵.

It was only after the heresies had developed in Bohemia that they appeared again in Germany and settled there within the peasantry. Terrible peasant revolts shook Bohemia and sowed terror among the Germans and the partisans of the emperor, said Bakunin. The Taborites “defeated all the troops of Saxony, Franconia, Bavaria, the Rhine, and Austria which the emperor and the pope sent in crusade against them; they cleansed Moravia and Silesia, and carried the terror of their arms into the very heart of Austria¹⁶.” The Taborites were finally beaten by the betrayal of a Czech party formed by the coalition of the indigenous nobility and the bourgeoisie of Prague, “Germans of education, position, ideas and morals”. Thus, the German model, according to the hypothesis of Bakunin, still prevailed...

The political impotence of the German bourgeoisie has always been a great fascination for Bakunin. The explanations he gives are not limited to psychological causes, however tempting, such as the spirit of submission, or servility. The Russian revolutionary concentrates mainly on the historical and social causes of collective behavior. Bakunin constantly endeavors to show that the great historical evolutions are expressed by confrontations and political

¹⁴ Bakunin, *Ibid.*, VIII, 82.

¹⁵ Bakunin, *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 75

¹⁶ Bakunin, *Ibid.*, VIII, 77.

alliances. The German bourgeoisie has been particularly disadvantaged, unable to find support either from the State against the nobility, as in France, or from the nobility against the state, as in England. Nor was it able, as in Italy, to find for its freedom an encouragement in the political conflicts in society which, by “dividing its oppressors, its exploiters... necessarily diminishes the evil power of the one and the other.” One would come to almost pity this class which was propelled in the industrial era without ever being able to take an independent historical initiative.

What credit can one give to Bakunin's interpretation of the history of German society in the Middle Ages?

The Christianization of the Germanic territories from the reign of Charlemagne largely contributed to consolidate the position of the Germans in the North and in the Center of Europe. Military expeditions regularly departed eastward to procure slaves. Carsten, in *Origins of Prussia*, 1 describes the constitution of the eastern marches and explains that Christ appeared to the Slavs as a “Teutonicus Deus”, a “foreign religion which was brought to them at the point of the sword.” The abduction of slaves also assumed the character of a crusade against the pagans. Thus, says Bakunin, the Slavs “detested Christianity, and with much reason, because Christianity was Germanism.”

However, Bakunin is mistaken when he systematically *subordinates* religious expansion to military expansion. He does not seem to perceive the close interdependence of the two processes, although this does not contradict the general sense of his analysis. Religious expansion, in fact, often took place in a military form, as a justification of political aims. Thus, the founding of the bishopric of Brandenburg and Havelberg by King Otto I in 946-949 was a political act consolidating the territorial claims on the right bank of the Elbe. Moreover, when the occupation of a Slav territory is done by an order of monk-soldiers, it is difficult to say which of the two motivations, religious or political, dominates...

The resistance of the Slavs took the form at the outset of an opposition both to the Germans and to Christianity. The Prussians, originally a people related to Lithuanians and Latvians, put up a desperate resistance to Christianization, which only the Teutonic Knights could reduce after fifty years of fierce struggle and genocide. Bakunin says nothing of the origin of the Teutonic Knights, and he never speaks of it except to mention their role in the Germanization of the eastern territories of Germany. Founded at Jerusalem, however, the order assumed this role only by chance, after it had settled successively at Acre, Venice, and Marienburg. Called by Duke Conrad of Massovia, who was unable to pacify the Prussians, they were offered land and privileges as well as entire sovereignty over any territory conquered over the Prussians. Aided by Crusaders from all over Europe, they systematically reduced the territories to the East of the Lower Vistula. A new state was thus formed in the south-eastern corner of the Baltic, led by a powerful ecclesiastical aristocracy, which took in 1308 all Danzig and its province, and cut off Poland from the sea.

The new Prussian ecclesiastical state was much better administered, much more advanced than the contemporary principalities of Poland and Germany. Carsten writes on this subject that to this day “the vast archives of the Teutonic Order bear witness to its uniform criteria of administration, its division of labor among many professional civil servants, its highly centralized organization, its great wealth and its financial strength.”

But if Bakunin is not mistaken about the role played by the Teutonic Knights and the Order of the Livonian Brothers of the Sword, who had been attached to them in 1237, he does not mention the fact that in many cases the Slavic aristocracy collaborated, and found it advantageous to attach themselves to the Germanic Empire, as was the case in Pomerania and Silesia.

Similarly, if what Bakunin says of German expansion is on the whole correct, he does not mention all the causes. The demographic growth of Western Europe, particularly in Germany, the reduction of the number of lands, the natural disasters played as much as the desire for conquest, the need to house the younger sons or the flight of serfs. A vast movement of emigration towards the East was sketched out which included all classes of Germanic society: nobles,

clergy, servants, bourgeois, peasants. The military class played an essential role, at least initially, but soon economic tasks took over: clearing, drainage, construction of roads, bridges ...

Carsten indicates that the Slavs quickly adapted themselves to German domination because they took advantage of it. Military considerations in the Slavonic principalities have played no great part. "It was only in Prussia that they continued to play an important part in the colonization of the country: the resistance of the natives continued for a long time."

Thus, although Bakunin's scheme is not fundamentally contradicted, it must be qualified. The Russian revolutionary underestimates in particular the importance of the Church in the colonization of Slav lands. The Church possessed a third of the lands of Brandenburg; the four Prussian bishoprics "have received even wider territories, probably because of the ecclesiastical character of the Prussian state," says Carsten.

The orders of knights – the monks soldiers – played a decisive role in the expansion, but not as exclusive as Bakunin seems to think. In some cases they settled *after* the bishoprics, but then they managed to acquire colossal possessions. In Pomerania, the German nobles arrived relatively late, after the monasteries, and without conquest or dispossession of the Slavic nobles with whom they eventually merged. The most eastern lands of Germany in the time of Bakunin are not, therefore, as exclusively as he says "a vast Slavic ossuary." The fact remains that most of the picture he draws is on the whole correct.

The Hanseatic League

The other point on which Bakunin relies in his examination of the origins of German society is the history of the Hanseatic League. Bakunin's thesis, it should be recalled, is that the German bourgeoisie lacked political sense, that it missed the opportunity of asserting its hegemony, that it submitted to the military aristocracy against the peasantry.

The Hanseatic bourgeoisie greatly benefited from the progress of colonization towards the east, and the German cities flourished until the fourteenth century. The towns of the Baltic occupied a dominant position on the road from Bruges to Novgorod. Several factors have led to the decline of this vast organization, and to a large extent the lack of political sense of the bourgeoisie mentioned by Bakunin is justified. Certain causes, however, would have appeared anyway, and the lack of political sense was revealed above all in the inability of the Hanseatic bourgeoisie to adapt to new circumstances.

Goods traveling between Bruges and Novgorod had to be transhipped to avoid circumventing the Jutland peninsula. This was suitable for products such as spices, furs and fabrics, but not for bulky goods such as wood or wheat, which were growing in demand in the West. So another way was found, around Jutland, which disadvantaged Lübeck.

The cities of Prussia had at first welcomed the direct foreign trade which emancipated them from Lübeck's control. The Dutch merchants sold large quantities of goods in the interior of Prussia and Poland, but as early as 1401 the Hanseatic merchants of Novgorod complained that the Flemish merchandises were purchased on credit. More products arrived in Russia than the market could absorb. The merchants, who had to pay their Flemish lenders, were selling at the lowest price, even at a loss. The unbridled competition between English, Dutch and Hanseatic merchants contributed in part to the decline of the Hansa, but a political fact was also decisive: the Teutonic Knights, who were an important trading partner of the Hansa, were beaten by the Poles at the Battle of Tannenberg; the order declined and a period of wars, invasions, followed by depopulation ensued. Currency lost value, crises and insecurity greatly affected the trade and wealth of the Baltic cities in the fourteenth century. The incomes of the nobles and landowners fell, and the lack of manpower in the country affected agriculture, and consequently the supply of the towns. Foreign competitors appeared at a time of market contraction. They penetrated into the interior and bought the wheat directly from the producers, and loaded it into ports which escaped the control of the Hanseatic ports.

In 1417 Lübeck proposed to no longer accept the Dutch as bourgeois in the Hanseatic cities and to reduce their freedom to trade. Others complained that the Dutch and the Zeelanders went daily to Livonia and sent their sons to study the Oriental languages. They also complained that the Flemings had the best boats. The complaints of the Hanseatic merchants reveal their lack of dynamism, their inability to adapt to new circumstances: “The League tried to exclude competitors by restrictive and protectionist measures, a difficult task, even if there had been unity among the cities of the Hanseatic League”, says Carsten.

Events outside the control of the Baltic bourgeoisie have contributed to the decline of their cities: contraction of markets, agrarian crisis, competition, wars, brigandage. But “last but not least”, Carsten says, what was decisive was the protectionist policy they adopted, which they were not even able to impose. It was natural for the Hansa to try to preserve its monopoly, to restrict trade to certain cities, to strengthen privileges for the benefit of a narrow merchant aristocracy, but such attempts were doomed to failure.

One example can be mentioned: Nuremberg, which at that time flourished under a liberal commercial policy. It is astonishing that when the circumstances became more favorable, in the sixteenth century, the German cities of the Baltic were unable to get back on their feet. The ultimate cause of decline was due to the fundamental internal defects in the Hansa rather than to external events.

“The decadence of the cities of the East was a fact of fundamental importance in the course of German and European history. It paved the way for the rise of the nobility, and separated events from the East and those from the West. There, the new rise of towns and the urban middle classes transformed the state and society, but the East stopped participating in this development.”¹⁷

The German merchants of the Hansa were, therefore, unable to cope with the competition of the Dutch, the Zeelanders and the Flemish, who were more imaginative, better equipped, and more dynamic. The religious history of the Germanic Empire, and particularly that of the Reformation, reveals that these commercially active men will show the same vigor in the political sphere.

The Peasant War

The destiny of Germany was once more at stake in the early 16th century with the Reformation and with the tragedy that broke all its positive effects, the peasant war of 1525. It is from this date that begins, according to Bakunin, the long sleep that fell on the country until the middle of the eighteenth century.

Lassalle considered that the peasant revolt had been a reactionary movement because the German peasants had demanded the abolition of the privileges of the princes and the exclusive representation of free and independent landed property at the Diets (Assemblies). On the other hand, the movement of princes, claiming a power that escaped the guardianship of landed property, would have represented a “concept of the State” which constituted “a progress of freedom in historical evolution and hence a revolutionary movement”¹⁸.

Bakunin violently attacked Lassalle for having defended this point of view but made the mistake of confusing the latter's positions with those of Marx and Engels. By classifying them as “Doctrinaires of German Communism,” he shows that he did not know Engels' pamphlet, *The Peasant War in Germany*, published while he was in prison.

Lassalle's argument is presented as an illustration of the communist theory of successive phases of historical development. “The doctrinaires of German communism are so convinced that, apart from this path, there is no salvation for the people, that they dare to say and to print (see Lassalle) that it was a great happiness for the German people that the uprising of the peasants in 1525 was suppressed by the united efforts of the nobility and the princes of Germany, supported by the indifference, not to say by the hostility of the bourgeoisie of

¹⁷ Carsten *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁸ A. Lehning, Bakounine, *Œuvres* VIII, note 153.

the towns, and encouraged by the encyclicals of the Gentle Melanchthon and of Luther¹⁹.”

Bakunin adds that according to Lassalle, the success of the revolt would have “diverted the German nation from the normal line of its economic and therefore also public development, by establishing and consolidating among the peasants of Germany the aristocratic principle of individual and hereditary property of the earth”. As if, said the Russian, this principle had not been imposed in spite of the repression of the revolt.

Elsewhere, Bakunin says:

“The theorists of German Communism, Ferdinand Lassalle and many others, betraying their bourgeois instincts, driven by their singular but systematic antipathy against any spontaneous revolutionary movement of the peasants or of the workers of the land, have stated this baroque idea that the defeat of the peasants of Franconia in 1525 by the combined forces of the lords and princes, who made a terrible massacre of them, was, from the point of view of the rational and normal development of liberty and socialism, an immense advantage for Germany, because the peasants, they say, tending, as now, to individual property, represented and still continue to represent the aristocratic, feudal, and landed element; while the cities, by the development of their productive labor, necessarily tend to become more and more collective; and by the increasingly extensive mobilization of private fortunes, tending also necessarily to associate in immense capital sponsors of industry and trade, they inevitably and increasingly represent the democratic element²⁰.”

Bakunin's comments on Lassalle's point of view literally constitute a lesson in the materialist analysis of history. If one pursues Lassalle's reasoning, he said, it was a great misfortune that the French peasants had been emancipated by the Great Revolution and that they acquired the property of the Church and of the emigrated nobility. Of course, it would have been more fortunate if the French peasants could have become collective and not individual owners of the land; but the collectivist ideas were then ignored, they were only proclaimed at the end of this great revolutionary drama by Babeuf.

Should the French peasants have refrained from seizing the land before they understood the collectivist ideas? Should they have remained serfs or proletarians until then? As for the German peasants, are they more sensitive today to socialist propaganda than the French peasants?

Bakunin considers the question from two points of view: that of political strategy and that of historical evolution. On the first point, he shows that the peasantry's accession to individual property is a political necessity. If the French peasants had not taken possession of the land of the nobility and of the Church, the power of the first and of the second would have remained upright, as is still the case with the German nobility, “so that the socialist revolution would now have to fight, along with the malignant power of the bourgeoisie, also that of these two old bodies”. The accession of the peasantry to property thus contributes to breaking the material foundations of the power of the classes of the ancien regime, founded precisely on landed property; and it is a guarantee of the success of the bourgeois revolution. Indeed, if the French peasants had not found “their liberty and their interest” in the revolution, they would not have defended it against the whole of Europe, which was united against it. If, therefore, the peasantry's ownership is a political necessity, it is also, from the point of view of the bourgeois revolution, a historical necessity.

If the insurrection of 1525 had triumphed, “the German peasants for three and a half centuries would have been freed from serfdom, they would now have had behind them more than three and a half centuries of individual ownership of the land. The German people would have been very stupid, and they are far from being so, if they had not let freedom develop its positive fruits, and property its negative fruits”²¹. The triumph of the revolution in the countryside would necessarily have brought about the revolution of the German cities; the power of the feudal lords would have been overturned, and the opposition

¹⁹ Bakunin, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, VIII 464.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 437.

²¹ *Ibid.*, VIII, 465.

between the towns and the countryside would have been “to a certain extent at least”, deleted, says Bakunin..

The extracts of Bakunin mentioned are taken from two fragments of the *Knouto-Germanic Empire* which deal with what the Russian revolutionary calls “historical fatalism”, that is to say, the successive phases of historical development. But it is in the letter to *La Liberté* of October 18, 1872, that the theoretical divergences with Marx are most clearly expressed on the substance. The Marxists, as Bakunin says, “do not reject our program in an absolute manner. They reproach us only for wanting to hasten, to anticipate the slow march of history, and to disregard the positive law of successive evolutions.”

However, like all the theoretical oppositions of Bakunin towards Marx, this one must be relativized. Indeed, it is not really the theory of successive evolutions that Bakunin disputes, but the absolute character that Marx seems to want to give it. It is true, says Bakunin, that historians who have hitherto attempted to trace the “picture of human society” have always been inspired by an idealistic point of view: they have neglected the “anthropological and economic point of view, which nevertheless forms the real basis of all human development²².” Marx certainly developed this point of view, says Bakunin, but the German communists see in human history only the necessary reflection of the development of economic facts. “This principle,” says Bakunin, “is profoundly true when we consider it in its true light, that is, from a relative point of view,” but “contemplated and posited in an absolute manner, as the sole foundation and the primary source of all other principles”, it becomes completely false.²³ Bakunin criticizes Marx for not taking into account “the evident action of political, legal and religious institutions on the economic situation”²⁴.

At the end of his life, Marx confirmed the Bakuninian point of view: in 1881 he recognized that the “historical fatality” of the capitalist society was “expressly restricted to the countries of Western Europe²⁵.” Similarly, a year after Bakunin's death, Marx acknowledged that his “sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe” in successive stages had to be considered with reserve²⁶. It is nothing less than an alignment (discreet it is true, and without consequence on the body of doctrine of Marxism) to the reservations formulated by Bakunin. On the other hand, to take a closer look at it, the close examination of Bakunin's criticisms of Lassalle reveals that he is more or less reproaching him for not respecting the law of successive evolutions, by skipping the step that constitutes the accession of the peasantry to individual property, a stage which is a condition for the destruction of the feudal order.

This is one of the causes of the failure of the democratic revolution in Germany. The failure to establish political institutions based on classes which would have had access to the individual ownership of the land, has maintained feudal relations in the countryside; the German bourgeoisie thus found themselves deprived of the assistance of that peasant mass indispensable to the success of the revolution – as was the case in France.

The peasant war took place both in the Renaissance movement and in the Reformation movement. Bakunin invites us to distinguish between these two movements, at least as far as Germany is concerned, for they seemed to be confounded for several years, from 1517 to 1525, but they were animated by two entirely opposite spirits. The first was “deeply humanitarian,” the second, fanatically religious. The Renaissance was revolutionary *in principle*, says Bakunin, while the Reformation was forced to be revolutionary by position. It is

²² *Ibid.*, VIII, 283.

²³ Lettre à *La Liberté*, 5 novembre 1872.

²⁴ In his handwritten notes, Engels makes a note, almost modestly, a remark that sounds eminently Bakuninian: “The ideas arising from material conditions thus take on a material form, and act upon the future evolution.” (*Ecrits militaires*, p. 98). Bakunin obviously did not know this. It can be said in his defense that, obviously, many Marxists do not know it either.

²⁵ Marx, *Œuvres*, La Pléiade, II, p. 1557, lettre à Vera Zassoulitch, 8 mars 1881.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1555, réponse à Mikhaïlovski.

precisely in this way that he defines the personality of Luther, who is presented as a contradictory personage, animated by a healthy vigor and a leonine temperament, such as Bakunin likes them; he is a revolutionary by predisposition who would bend only before God. But as a theologian, he was necessarily reactionary.

The first roars of this “rough and great German” were revolutionary: his manifestos against Rome, his invectives against the princes of Germany, his passionate polemic against Henry VIII of England; from 1517 to 1525, “nothing was heard but the shouts of thunder in that voice which seemed to call the people of Germany to a general renovation, to revolution.” It is the gentle Melancthon, the “learned theologian, nothing but a theologian (...) in reality his master, who muzzled this leonine nature”, which definitely chained him to reaction.

The peasants rose up with the cries of “war in the castles, peace in the cottages.” This was a critical moment for the whole political destiny of Germany. If Luther had taken the lead, if the bourgeoisie of the towns had supported him, it would have been the end of the Empire, of princely despotism, and of the insolence of the nobility. But for that, said Bakunin, it would have been necessary for Luther not to be a theologian, and for the citizens of the German towns not to be German bourgeois...

At the same time, Thomas Münzer and the Anabaptists of Münster were among the first in history to proclaim the dogma of political and social equality²⁷. But ten years after the crushing of the revolt, was also crushed the last insurrection provoked in Germany by the Reformation: an attempt made by a “mystico-communist organization”, the Anabaptists of Münster, led by Jean de Leyde, who, Bakunin says, was tortured under the acclamations of Luther and Melancthon.

In 1530, the two theologians had presented to the Emperor and the princes their Augsburg Confession which “sealed all the subsequent movement, even religious”, says Bakunin. A new official Church was then constituted in the hands of these Protestant princes, which, even more absolute than the Roman Catholic Church, was as servile to the temporal power as the Church of Byzantium – says Bakunin. It was an instrument of terrible despotism, more absolute than the Catholic Church, which condemned the whole of Germany, Protestant and Catholic as well, to at least three centuries of the most stultifying slavery²⁸.

The tendency of the princes to appropriate the remains of the pope's spiritual power, and, incidentally, the property of the Church, to constitute themselves as heads of the Church within the limits of their respective states, is common to all Protestant monarchies, said Bakunin. This was the case in England, Sweden, Denmark and Norway. But in these countries the people have maintained their rights against the invasions of the nobility and the monarchy. In Germany, the people, “so full of dreams, but so poor of free thoughts and action or popular initiative,” was melted into the mold of submission to power. The German, people “had a dream of freedom and they awoke more slave than ever. From then on, Germany became the true center of reaction in Europe.”

Bakunin's intention is obviously not to work as a historian of the peasants' war, but to highlight the mechanism by which the crushing of the peasant revolt, the absence of a link between the peasant movement and the bourgeoisie, the rallying of the latter to the princes against the peasantry, led to the establishment of a political system and a type of relationship between the classes of which the Germany of the 1870s is still dependent.

The events of 1525 forged Germany today, he says in substance: the crushing of the revolt during which the peasants were “abandoned and betrayed by the bourgeois of the towns”, massacred by the nobles and the German princes resulted in the creation of a bureaucratic system: the idea is interesting because it is undoubtedly the first example of a theoretician of the workers' movement who attributes the constitution of a state bureaucracy to the defeat of a popular revolt. “It was precisely at this time that the growing and supposedly

²⁷ Bakunin, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, VIII, 387.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, VIII 80-81.

progressive and revolutionary power of the military, bureaucratic and quietly despotic state began to develop in all its strange splendor in Germany²⁹”.

While the German bourgeoisie had been capable of great dynamism, the economic, industrial and commercial movement slowed considerably. The twofold revolution which marked the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern age, namely:

- The economic revolution, “which, on the ruins of feudal property, was to found the new power of capital”;
- The religious revolution “which had awakened political life in all other countries”. This double revolution led to impoverishment and material numbness in Germany, as well as intellectual and moral prostration.

The crushing of the peasant revolt of 1525 had weakened the popular energies; the Reformation had resulted not in the emancipation of the mind but in the subjection of religion to the power of princes. At that time, says Bakunin, the words “homeland”, “nation”, were completely ignored in Germany. There was only the State, or rather an infinity of States large, medium, small and very small (...). For the subject, and even more so for the official, Germany did not exist: he knew only the State, large, medium or small, which he served and which was summarized for him in the person of the prince³⁰. In a way, the feeling of belonging to the State was a substitute for the national sentiment which had no ground for expressing itself. The multiplicity of States led to the multiplication of this class of civil servants charged with the most rational management of the sovereign's affairs:

“All the science of the bureaucrat consisted in maintaining public order and obedience, and to extract as much money from them as possible for the treasury of the sovereign, without ruining them completely and without pushing them through to revolt³¹.”

The absence of a national unified state provoked an hypertrophy of the idea of the State. One can imagine, says Bakunin, what must have been the spirit of those honest Philistines of the German bureaucracy who, recognizing after God no other object of worship except this horrible abstraction of the State personified in the prince, conscientiously immolated him everything: “A new Brutus new in a cotton bonnet and his pipe hanging from his mouth, every German official was capable of sacrificing his own children to what he called the reason, the justice and the supreme right of the State³².” In Germany, the bureaucracy became a science taught in the universities: “This science could be called modern theology, the theology of the worship of the State³³.”

It is also interesting to note that Bakunin attributes to the bureaucracy a sacerdotal character³⁴. When the political power and the ideological power merge, when the sovereign holds at the same time the role of head of the state and of the Church (“the sovereign takes the place of the good God...”), the bureaucrats become the priests of the State and the people is “the victim always sacrificed on the altar of the State³⁵.” Bakunin pointed out that the “science of the service of States”, political science, consisted of two main disciplines: bureaucracy and diplomacy. The first was born in Germany, the second in Italy under the inspiration of Machiavelli. Both were formed within politically fragmented nations in response to specific needs.

Bakunin, as we have said, did not know *The Peasant War in Germany*, published in 1850 while in prison. The little book was, moreover, scarcely

²⁹ Bakunin, III, 208.

³⁰ Bakounine, *Écrit contre Marx*, Œuvres, III, 211.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

³² *Ibid.*, 211.

³³ Bakunin, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, VIII, 82.

³⁴ See: René Berthier, *Éléments d'une critique bakouninienne de la bureaucratie*. monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Elements_d_une_theorie_bakouninienne_de_la_bureaucratie.pdf

³⁵ Despite his restrictions concerning the theory of “successive phases” of forms of production, Bakunin refers to it several times, but does not adopt the Marxian scheme. Thus, the clergy of the Middle Ages until the eleventh century is considered a dominant class, oligarchical owner of land capital, reproduced by recruitment into the elites of society, united by a totalizing ideology.

disseminated and received no echo in the press. There are many common points between the views of the two men, but of course the conclusions they reach are different.

Both recognize the role of Luther's preaching in the outbreak of the insurrection. It is striking that they both have in mind the revolution of 1848 when they evoke the peasant war. The last lines of Bakunin in the chapter devoted to the history of German liberalism³⁶ meet the first lines of Engels' book. Bakunin says that since the existence of a Germanic nation until 1848, only the peasants proved that they were capable of revolting against oppression. Engels, from the beginning of his book, seeks to demonstrate that "the German people also have revolutionary traditions". But the only example he can give is that of a peasant insurrection. In the aftermath of the failure of the Revolution of 1848 Engels was motivated above all by the need to recall that Germany also had rough and vigorous wrestlers, and that the opponents of 1525 remained to a large extent the same as in 1848. The analyzes of Bakunin and Engels on Luther and Melancthon are the same. For the Russian, Luther is a "great German", a revolutionary temperament, but unfortunately also a theologian. The "gentle Melancthon" was a "learned theologian, and nothing but a theologian". It was Melancthon who led Luther to reaction, he was the "master of this leonine nature." Engels, on the other hand, said of Melancthon that he was the "model of a hectic stay-at-home Philistine".

According to Engels, Luther first attacked the dogmas and the constitution of the Catholic Church in 1517, but his opposition did not exclude more radical tendencies. "Luther's sturdy peasant nature asserted itself in the stormiest fashion in the first period of his activities." Bakunin and Engels agree that the German people set in motion after Luther's preaching, but that from that time the tendencies of German society separated and that Luther betrayed the movement he had launched, and rallied the camp of reaction. In general, Bakunin's reflections on German society show that the leaders of revolts or opposition movements end constantly up rallying to power, as if they were frightened by the dynamics they have helped to launch.

Bakunin and Engels compare the initial radicalism of Luther, followed by the most slender moderation, to the behavior of the German liberals of 1848. Both point out that the abandonment of the peasant movement by the bourgeoisie led them to place themselves under the domination of the princes.

Of Thomas Münzer, Engels declares that he "greatly exceeded the ideas and immediate demands of peasants and plebeians". According to Bakunin, Münzer and the Anabaptists were the first to proclaim the dogma of political and social equality; they share with Babeuf the merit of being among those men who anticipated the ideas of the future, "as the play of the morrow is sometimes announced in the theater"³⁷. However, the interest of Engels' book for our purpose lies not so much in the analogies that may exist between his theses and those of Bakunin, as in the vision of the Revolution of 1848 contained in the analysis of the revolt of 1525 and in the role attributed to the peasantry.

In *German Ideology*, Marx writes that "The great risings of the Middle Ages all radiated from the countryside, but equally remained totally ineffective because of the isolation and consequent crudity of the peasants"³⁸. On closer inspection, this sentence contains more than it seems. At the same time that it definitively excludes the peasantry as a positive actor of the revolution, it defines the conditions for a social revolution: to the dispersion of the peasants he opposes the concentration of the working class. To the "crudity" of the peasants he opposes the possession by the working class of the nation's philosophical heritage; here are the two titles which legitimize the leading role of the German working class in Europe.

But strangely, Engels endeavors to show in the *Peasants' War* that dispersion did not prevent from organizing efficiently and that the peasantry was far from being uncultivated, if by this we mean that, relative to the period, it mastered a knowledge which contributed to create a unity of thought and of interests and ensured its ideological and practical cohesion. Moreover, in the person of Münzer and his disciples, it had a real vanguard which developed a coherent

³⁶ Bakunin, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, VIII, 67-82.

³⁷ Bakunin, VIII, 465.

³⁸ Marx, *German Ideology*, MECW, vol. 5, p. 66.

revolutionary orientation. The failure of the peasant movement may have been due to its dispersal, but this was certainly not the main cause, and this failure is not so much due to the peasant nature of the revolt as to a complex set of factors, among which the betrayal of the urban bourgeoisie comes in the first place.

In the history of the prodromals of the insurrection, Engels obviously takes pleasure to explain the work of those preachers who, through the interpretation of the Bible, inspired the peasant masses with the feeling of their right, which is, according to Bakunin, the first condition of a revolution. Engels marvels at the receptivity of the masses to these sermons and at the welcome they gave them: here, an assembly of 40,000 people, there an army of 16,000 peasants besieging a castle.

The tenacity of these men who rebuilt their secret organization whenever it was dismantled is also highlighted. The leaders, scattered by repression, returned shortly after to start again their work of organization. The preachers traveled from province to province, escaping repression thanks to the support of the population who hid them. Thus, dispersion appeared as a condition of the success of the extension of the movement. The revolutionary peasants found everywhere support:

“The greatest admiration is due the tenacity and endurance with which the peasants of upper Germany conspired for thirty years after 1493, with which they overcame the obstacles to a more centralised organisation in spite of the fact that they were scattered over the countryside, and with which, after numberless dispersions, defeats, executions of leaders, they renewed their conspiracies over and over again, until an opportunity came for a mass upheaval.” (Engels)

The Hungarian peasant movement, described by Engels, is a demonstration of their capacity for concerted action, and even their political capacity. After seizing the city of Csanad, they proclaimed the republic, the abolition of the nobility, the equality of all, and the sovereignty of the people - a program which traditionally in the Marxist vision of history, belongs to the bourgeoisie, and which in this case goes well beyond the demands of the German bourgeoisie of 1848.

After one of the many waves of repression and arrests that befell the peasant movement, a worthy chief, Joss Fritz, “an outstanding figure”, appeared. Engels praised “the diplomatic talent and the untiring endurance of this model conspirator” who succeeded in involving an incredible number of people belonging to the most diverse social categories. “it is almost certain that he organised several grades of the conspiracy, one more or less sharply divided from the other. All serviceable elements were utilised with the greatest circumspection and skill”.

Engels also points out that “the vagrants and beggars were used for subordinate missions”, that Joss Fritz “stood in direct communication with the beggar kings, and through them he held in his hand the numerous vagabond population. In fact, the beggar kings played a considerable role in his conspiracy.” But when Engels wrote a preface to his book in 1870, he nevertheless took care to point out that the lumpenproletariat is the worst ally of the workers' movement and that “every leader of the workers who utilises these gutter-proletarians as guards or supports, proves himself by this action alone a traitor to the movement”.

We are warned...

The inculturation of the peasants, as evoked by Marx and Engels, is not a convincing argument. We must understand inculturation in the political sense: what was their degree of reflection on the society of their time? Engels, in fact, endeavors to show that the religious heresies which have traversed Germany constituted, under a religious garment, the ideological form of opposition to feudalism, and that the claims formulated revealed a developed political consciousness with regard to the time. Engels even says that the heresy of the peasants went “infinitely farther” than that of the cities: “It invoked the ‘equality of the children of God’ to infer civil equality, and partly even equality of property.” The peasant-plebeian heresy “developed into a clearly distinctive

party opinion and usually occupied an independent place alongside the heresy of the burghers”³⁹. The capacity of a class to constitute itself autonomously from a theoretical and organic standpoint is precisely a criterion of its political maturity. Engels cites the example of the Taborites of Bohemia who “showed even a republican tendency under theocratic colouring”.

Thomas Münzer is the most interesting character of this period in that he prefigures in his preaching the demands of the proletariat. It is significant, however, that although Bakunin often referred to Münzer, he did not dwell on it, whereas the content of his doctrine could be a confirmation of his remarks on the German peasantry. In fact, he is convinced that all the heresies have crossed Germany without finding an echo: the Vaudois, Fraticelli, Wicleff. He does not deny that Germany has had its share of heresies, but, according to him, the Czech people preceded the German people by a century: John of Huss, Jerome of Prague and the terrible Taborites testify to this chronological antecedent⁴⁰.

Formulated at different times, the reflections of Bakunin and Engels denote the same concern to show the parallel between the revolt of 1525 and the situation of Germany in 1848-1849. These reflections are in a way the positive and the negative of the same film. Bakunin shows that the German bourgeoisie missed another historic chance in 1525 and that it made the same mistake in 1848. Engels endeavors to show that the peasant revolt of 1525 was a revolutionary precedent of which the German bourgeoisie could have been inspired.

A French Marxist author, Emile Bottigelli attributes to the difficulties in the League of Communists the reasons why Marx and Engels lost interest in the *Peasant War in Germany*. More probably, this lack of interest may be due to the fact that the failure of the revolution of 1848 no longer justified any reference to this model of *peasant* revolution.

Written in the context of the revolution of 1848, the book obviously tried to show that the German people did indeed have revolutionary dispositions. But the founders of “scientific socialism” might have perceived a certain uneasiness to highlight the fact that it was the peasantry that had shown revolutionary dispositions, not the bourgeoisie, whose class consciousness Marx and Engels had unsuccessfully attempted to awaken – to the detriment of all activity in the direction of the labor movement.

Bakunin shows that in 1848 the German peasantry had begun to move, but the attitude of the German bourgeoisie, which Marx and Engels had hoped it would assume its historical role, had the same attitude with the peasantry as in 1525, all proportions kept. The failure of the revolution of 1848 no longer justified any reference to this model of peasant revolution.

Bakunin reiterates that the constitution of state unity can only be achieved on the ruins of the popular movement. According to him, the demand by the proletariat for a centralized national state is suicidal, for it hinders the awakening of popular initiative as well as the intellectual, moral and even material development of peoples.

Now, when the mind of the masses awakens on one point, it necessarily spreads over all the others. The intelligence of the people “breaks away its secular immobility and, getting out of the limits of a mechanical faith, shattering the yoke of traditional or petrified representations or notions that had taken the place of all thought, it subjects all its idols of yesterday to a severe and passionate criticism, directed by its common sense and by its honest conscience, which are often better than science⁴¹.”

In other words, periods of political instability are an accelerator of the development of the political consciousness of the masses. Did the Italian bourgeoisie not benefit from political instability in the Middle Ages in order to develop into a political power? It is true, however, says Bakunin, that this emancipation has ceased with the causes which made it possible, when the struggle between the emperor and the pope ceased; Similarly, in France, the gradual submission of the nobility to the monarchy was accompanied by a

³⁹ Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, MECW, vol. 10, p. 413.

⁴⁰ See Bakunin, VIII, pp. 75-78.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

simultaneous loss of the privileges of the bourgeoisie. It remains that in the meantime both have benefited from several centuries of expansion.

In Germany, it was not until 1832 and 1848 that signs of a demand for freedom appeared. This demonstration will come once more from the peasantry, and once again the bourgeoisie will subordinate itself to the nobility in order to crush the peasantry.

Reformation

The physiognomy of contemporary Germany would not be what it is without the Reformation. Protestantism, with few exceptions, has been characterized by the development of political freedom. The first Protestant sects, relying on the Bible itself, proclaimed the dogma of political and social equality. True, said Bakunin, this dogma was placed under the aegis of the good God, the natural protector of economic and social inequalities, so its implementation was never realized.

Bakunin also observes that the expansion of Protestantism coincides almost everywhere with industrial, commercial, and political growth; On the other hand, the persecutions against the French Protestants “immediately resulted in the decadence of industry in France⁴².” After a long account of the development of the Reformation in Europe⁴³, Bakunin observes that the only two countries where the stagnation and “voluntary slavery of the spirit” reigned were Spain, where the Reformation never took hold, and Germany.

In parallel with the expansion of German society towards the outside world, with the Empire's orientation towards Italian politics and territorial expansion to the detriment of Slav lands, there is a process of internal fragmentation. Bakunin's text entitled “Statism and German liberalism”⁴⁴ shows the process of disengagement of those fractions of the Empire that wanted to develop political freedom and economic initiative. Engels had also noted the phenomenon of the “disintegration of German territory”, which ended in depriving Germany of its “peripheral territories”. There would thus be a double movement: in the East and South-East there were political units based on military conquests: Brandenburg with Prussia conquered on the Slavs; Austria with Bohemia conquered on Slavs and Hungary conquered on the Magyars.

In the West and North-West, economic development detached the most dynamic areas from the Empire: Holland, Flanders and Switzerland, which Bakunin expresses by saying that “countries which did not wish to share the traditional slavery of the Germans, has separated from them”⁴⁵. He recalls that it was not foreign conquest, “but a great modern principle which tore away these countries from the political unity of Germany, is still distant: a great modern principle which has removed these countries from the political unity of Germany, and which still keeps them at a distance: it is the principle of liberty. In the fourteenth century, the German cities of Switzerland revolted and founded a confederation of independent republics. Between the fourteenth and fifteenth century there was an increasingly pronounced separation between the cities of the Netherlands and those of Germany, “in spite of the solidarity of the interests which the institution of the Hansa had established between them in the thirteenth century”. At the beginning of the 16th century, two Rhenish towns, Schaffhausen and Basel, separated from the Empire and joined the Swiss Confederation. In the sixteenth century the separation of Holland is definitely consummated:

“So that history books in hand, we can prove that the frontiers of the German Empire were successively determined by the birth of liberty in different countries, and that as liberty extended, this empire, the object of the patriotic dreams of the Germans, was shrinking⁴⁶.”

⁴² Bakunin, *Ibid.*, 389.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 383-393.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 383-415.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 396.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 397.

Does Bakunin fall into idealism when he attributes to the will for freedom the cause of historical evolutions, without mentioning the material bases of these evolutions? By contrasting Germany with the peripheral zones which detached themselves from the western part of the Empire, he observes that “the development of material interests which in any other country would necessarily have brought about and provoked a new intellectual development, for nearly two centuries, produced practically nothing in Germany.”⁴⁷

On the periphery of the Empire, the Netherlands “owe their birth to Protestantism, which drew them out of nothing by the first triumphant popular revolution in Europe”⁴⁸. Protestantism everywhere produced “the spirit of freedom and spontaneous initiative”, giving to the middle class and the workers' guilds of the cities a vigorous and powerful growth, in Switzerland, the Netherlands, England, “and even in France, even though Protestantism was eventually defeated.” Why, then, in Germany, where it has completely triumphed, has it produced, during two fatal centuries, only the brutal and stupid despotism of its princes, the arrogance of its crass ignorant nobility, as insolent to the world below as servile to the upper world, and the resigned and abject submission of its toiling classes”⁴⁹ ?

Protestantism provided the ideological basis on which the political and ideological development of the Netherlands was founded. The particular character of the Reformation in Germany cannot only be explained by the examination of the “obvious reaction of the political, legal and religious institutions on the economic situation” which Bakunin advocates as a method in history – a viewpoint which is shared also by Max Weber, whose book is a “contribution to the understanding of the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history”⁵⁰.

The Augsburg Confession, presented by Luther and Melanchthon to the Emperor and the Princes of Germany, had “laid the seals on all subsequent movements in the country.” It petrified the free flight of souls, denying even that liberty of individual consciousness in the name of which the Reformation had been made, imposing as an absolute and divine law a new dogmatism under the guard of Protestant princes recognized as natural protectors and leaders of religious worship”.

German Protestantism is thus constantly characterized by the actual negation of freedom of conscience, by the submission of the Church to political power, and by the passive acceptance of any political and social *status quo* by what Bakunin calls the “systematic propagation of the doctrine of slavery”, which Max Weber defines as the doctrine “which identified absolute obedience to God's will, with absolute acceptance of things as they were”⁵¹.

If Bakunin finds in the Calvinists of the Low Countries and England a “prostration of slaves” before God, they have, however, a “revolutionary and virile pride in the face of men”⁵² which does not predispose to the acceptance of political oppression. Thus, the French Huguenots of the sixteenth century understood that “the overthrow of the temporal power of royalty was the necessary consequence of the abolition of the spiritual power of the Church”⁵³.

This was a conclusion to which the Lutherans were far from subscribing.

The Russian revolutionary has the intuition of a phenomenon which could explain the difference between the political destinies of Germany and other nations converted to Protestantism, but he does not formulate it explicitly. He shows, for example, how Zwingli's action, opposed to Melanchthon's theses at the Council of Strasbourg, spared Switzerland the introduction of what he calls the “constitution of slavery” which, in the name of God, “consecrated the absolute power of princes,” that is, the submission of the Church to political

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Bakunin, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, VIII, 416.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 416.

⁵⁰ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Routledge p. 48.

⁵¹ Weber, *Ethic*, Routledge, p.44.

⁵² Bakunin, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, VIII, 389.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, VIII, 388.

power. Max Weber also mentions the relations of Luther and Zwingli, animated by a “different spirit”:

“As Luther found a different spirit at work in Zwingli than in himself, so did his spiritual successors in Calvinism. And Catholicism has to the present day looked upon Calvinism as its real opponent⁵⁴.”

In fact, Weber says that it is on the basis of the creations of Calvin, not of Lutheranism, that he studied the ethics of Protestantism, “we take as our starting-point in the investigation of the relationship between the old Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism the works of Calvin, of Calvinism...⁵⁵” Weber also says that “Calvinism was the faith over which the great political and cultural struggles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were fought in the most highly developed countries, the Netherlands, England and France⁵⁶.”

The regions of the German Empire which have detached themselves from the main body in order to develop a capitalist economy within the framework of an autonomous political unity all have the common feature of being Protestant but *not* Lutheran. Besides, they all developed an ideology based on the non-interference of politics over religion, unlike Germany where religion is totally under the control of princes.

Bakunin recalls, moreover, that every Lutheran minister in Prussia must sign a declaration before taking office, which “equals in servility the obligations imposed on the Russian clergy⁵⁷.” The Lutheran ministers of Prussia swore an oath to be subject to their lord the king, to inculcate obedience to their flock, to denounce to the government any enterprise contrary to the interests of the sovereign, which reflects a type of relationship between Church and State which is not particularly favorable to freedom of consciousness...

The Calvinists, on the other hand, considered the least interference of the State in the political arena as unbearable. The granting of ecclesiastical offices by the State was an insult to God. Weber writes that “Cromwell’s army upheld the liberty of conscience, and the parliament of saints even advocated the separation of Church and State”⁵⁸, which confirms the opinion of Bakunin according to whom Cromwell was the purest and most complete expression of a “profound revolution at once religious, liberal and egalitarian”⁵⁹.

Bakunin had observed and described the historical phenomenon of the Reformation as an important factor in the capitalist expansion of Europe, and he foresaw the developments that Max Weber developed fifty years later. However, the correlation between capitalism and Protestantism was not particularly original, since the King of Prussia Frederick-William I, in a very empiric manner, considered the Mennonites as indispensable to the industry of his country, despite their absolute refusal of military service. The Reformation was a pivotal event in the history of Europe, and Bakunin’s questions were aimed in particular at discovering what had gone wrong in Germany.

As a supporter of what might be called multidisciplinary research, Bakunin believes that the collective behavior of men can be deciphered, but that the interactions are so numerous that one can not grasp all the parameters involved: it would be necessary, he says, “to have knowledge of all the causes, influences, actions and reactions that determine the nature of a thing⁶⁰”, which is impossible. In this he is once more joined by Max Weber who observes “the tremendous confusion of interdependent influences between the material basis, the forms of social and political organization, and the ideas current in the time of the Reformation...”

⁵⁴ Weber, *Ethic*, Routledge, p. 46.

⁵⁵ Weber, *Ethic*, Routledge, p. 47.

⁵⁶ Weber, *Ethic*, Routledge, p. 56.

⁵⁷ Bakunin, *L’Empire knouto-germanique*, VIII, 81.

⁵⁸ Weber, *Ethic*, Routledge, p. 206.

⁵⁹ Bakunin, VIII, 387.

⁶⁰ Bakounine, *Fédéralisme, socialisme, antithéologisme*, Stock, p. 116.

German liberalism

The period from the Reformation to the mid-eighteenth century was characterized by a great political and cultural vacuum in Germany. According to Bakunin, the Reformation produced a type of state composed of many small autonomous and absolute states, very badly federated among themselves. The Empire never succeeded in recovering from the blow which Protestantism had inflicted upon it, and after the peace of Westphalia it dragged on “the existence of a paralytic for a century and a half, until it was finally annihilated and dissolved by Napoleon I, and it disappeared from the scene at the beginning of this century.” The Austrian Empire, its diminished successor, would soon suffer the same fate ⁶¹.

From the intellectual and social point of view it was a complete annihilation: before the Reformation a multitude of superior minds made the glory of Germany, says Bakunin; Erasmus, Reuchlin, Ulrich von Hutten, Zwingle, Oecolampade, Carlostadt, Franz von Sickingen, Götz von Berlichingen, Thomas Münzer, Jean de Leyde, Albert Dürer, Holbein “and many others whose names do not recall”. During the second half of the sixteenth century, nothing. Only two names for the whole of the seventeenth century: Kepler and Leibniz, “who were both foreign to the national life of Germany; so foreign that they did not even write in German”. It was not until the eighteenth century, with Frederick II, who considered that the German language was only good for talking to horses, and Lessing, “the true creator of German literature,” that this “desolating shortage of men” ceased. The second half of the eighteenth century was the Golden Age of German culture, its true title of glory, says Bakunin, with “the admirable literature sketched by Lessing and completed by Goethe, Schiller, Kant, Fichte and Hegel”⁶².

The synthesis of all the comments made by Bakunin on Hegel's work is interesting and quite unexpected. According to the Russian revolutionary,

- Hegel has laid the foundations for a demystification of the absolute, which totally contradicts the preconceptions of the Marxist current.
- Hegel contributed to the discovery of the laws of human thought.
- While for Marx Hegel's philosophy is absolutely idealistic, Bakunin considers it as ambiguous, that is to say neither completely idealistic nor completely materialistic: “not reaching heaven and not touching the earth, suspended between the one and the other”⁶³.

This ambiguity is the very image of German society, lagging behind in its political development, and whose bourgeoisie formulates demands which are those of the French bourgeois of 1789, but in a context in which antagonism with the nascent labor movement takes the step on the antagonism with the absolutist regime. Thus, says Bakunin, the Germans are condemned to do in the real world the opposite of what they adore in the metaphysical ideal ⁶⁴ which brought about the bankruptcy of the revolution of 1848.

The French Revolution caused a real panic in official Germany and aroused the hope of those who aspired to political reforms. A liberal movement appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and then a showdown began between those who, in Bakunin's words, wanted to Germanize Prussia and those who wanted to Prussify Germany. In seventy-five pages⁶⁵, Bakunin sums up this history of German liberalism, which he divides into six parts.

⁶¹ Marx's fierce hatred for federalism comes probably from there. An ardent supporter of German unity, he assimilated federalism to an archaic, medieval political form.

⁶² Bakunin, *Etatisme et anarchie*, IV, 287.

See Engels: “The only hope for the better was seen in the country's literature. This shameful political and social age was at the same time the great age of German literature. About 1750 all the master-spirits of Germany were born, the poets Goethe and Schiller, the philosophers Kant and Fichte, and, hardly twenty years later, the last great German metaphysician, Hegel.” (“The State of Germany”, MECW, vol. 6, p. 17.)

⁶³ Bakunin, *Etatisme et anarchie*, IV, 308.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, IV, 308.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, IV, 287-362.

1815 – 1830

In this first period, characterized by the “Galophobia of the Teutonic Romantics”, liberalism in Germany is but a branch of a movement which is spreading in Europe in the form of a struggle against “the monarchical, aristocratic, clerical reaction” who triumphs at the Restoration. The real instigator of reaction is Metternich, and Germany – understood in its broadest sense – is the “cornerstone of European reaction”. The first manifestation of the German liberal spirit was the gathering of Wartburg in 1817, when five hundred students met on the basis of demands which Bakunin judged both extremely moderate and absurd. In 1819 two events occurred: the assassination of the “Russian spy Kotzebue” by the student Sand and the attempted murder perpetrated by a young pharmacist on von Ibell, “a small dignitary of the small duchy of Nassau”. These two acts are described by Bakunin as “fundamentally inept”. A pitiless repression was to follow. Measures enacted by the German Confederation “twisted the necks of these poor German liberals”. “They were only allowed beer”, Bakunin concludes.

1830 - 1840

It is a “period of conspicuous imitation of French liberalism.” After eleven years of sleep, German liberalism awakens, not of itself, but under the impetus of the days of June in Paris. This is the end of the heroic period of the bourgeoisie. The latter asserted itself throughout Europe, except in Germany, where the nobility remained preponderant in the administration and in the army. One of the causes of the Germans' disaffection with their governments lies in the latter's refusal to unify Germany in a strong state.

In 1832 there was a new demonstration in Hambach, “if not very violent, at least extremely noisy” aroused by the “impotence of the German princes to create a Pan-German Empire”. Behind this demonstration, however, there was “neither will nor organization, and therefore no force”. The feast of Hambach was followed by the Frankfurt attack. Seventy students attacked the guard of the palace of the Germanic Confederation. This act, once again, is considered “inept” by Bakunin.

In the same year the peasants of the Palatinate rose up, claiming for themselves the land. This revolt, said Bakunin, frightened not only the conservatives but also the German liberals and democrats. To the general satisfaction, the revolt was repressed. Once again the peasantry was perceived as the main adversary. According to Bakunin, the German liberals did not want to change the nature of the state but to adapt it. The irruption of the peasantry, whose power in 1789 had served the interests of the French bourgeoisie, was perceived in Germany as a hindrance to the Liberals' excessively moderate program.

After these events, the darkest reaction broke out over all the German countries. A deadly silence succeeded, which continued without interruption until 1848. On the other hand, Bakunin observes, the movement was transposed into literature.

1840 - 1848

This is the period of economic liberalism and political radicalism, poor in events but “rich in trends, schools, ideals and concepts that developed in the most diverse forms”. This period was dominated by “the fantastic mind and incoherent writings” of King Frederick-Guillam IV, who succeeded his father in 1840. It was at this time that socialism penetrated into Germany, whose main propagandist, says Bakunin, was Karl Marx, “the central figure of the prominent circles of progressive Hegelians.” It was also the period of the expansion of neo-Catholicism, a grotesque movement, according to Bakunin, who founded in 1848. But above all, the crisis of 1847, which caused the famine of tens of thousands of weavers, arouse the interest for the social question:

“Everybody in Germany expected if not a social revolution, at least a political revolution whose hopes of resurrection and renewal of the great German fatherland were hoped for.”

We have now reached the period when Bakunin will intervene directly in the history of Germany and Central Europe. This is the fourth period in the history of German liberalism, the Revolution of 1848.

The fifth and sixth period cover the history of contemporary Germany of Bakunin, marked by the submission of the country to Russian influence (1849-1858), the defeat of liberalism before Prussian absolutism (1858-1866) the final capitulation of liberalism (1866-1870) and, after the Franco-Prussian War, the “triumph of servitude,” the victory of Prussianism in Germany.

(To be followed)