

# Reply to “A Marxist Critique of Bakunin”

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*The following text is an answer to an article written by Louis Proyect, an American Marxist, on Bakunin. The author had intended originally to write a series on anarchism. Because of the political upheavals taking place around the September 11th events, the issues that generated this article have been superseded for the foreseeable future.*

*My answer might seem somewhat outdated but since Proyect’s article can still be found on the Net, I assumed the author still considered it as pertinent.*

*Louis Proyect’s article follows mine.*

*Le texte qui suit est une réponse à un article de Louis Proyect, un marxiste américain, sur Bakunin. L’auteur avait à l’origine l’intention de rédiger une série d’articles sur l’anarchisme en général, mais les événements consécutifs aux 11 septembre l’en ont empêché. La réponse peut sembler quelque peu tardive mais dans la mesure où l’article de Proyect est encore accessible sur le Net, j’ai pensé que l’auteur le considèrerait toujours comme pertinent.*

*L’article original de Louis Proyect se trouve à la suite de ma réponse.*

Jan. 15, 2008

Dear Mr Louis Proyect,

By mere chance I found on the Internet an article you wrote, “Marxist critique of Bakunin”<sup>1</sup>, about which I would like to make some comments. I realize however you wrote it seven years ago and my comments might seem largely outdated, but since your text can still be found on the Internet I must assume you still consider it has some relevance<sup>2</sup>.

The introduction dealing with the “Anarchist Soccer League” shows a deliberate, and useless intention of ridiculing the anarchist movement but doesn’t prove anything. Considering a historical movement such as the anarchist movement, one can always choose to describe individual cases existing on the margins of the movement and make a big laugh of them. I’m sure that in the United States, as in France where I live, you can find ultra-dogmatic brats, strutting about with Trotsky-like beards or Mao-style jackets, arrogantly airing their opinions on the “masses”, the “Glorious October Revolution”, and explaining how the “Diamat” (Dialectical materialism – concept which is absolutely absent in Marx, mind you) will help them achieve the Revolution. An anarchist with as much a polemic talent as yours could easily turn them into idiots.

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<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> The author of the reply is a French syndicalist militant.

## Factual mistakes

Certain things you say are factually wrong :

1. For instance when you mention “Hegel's tendency to idealize the Kaiser's regime”. I suppose you mention the last Roman emperor, for when Hegel died in 1831, there was no Kaiser, but only the king of Prussia. The Kaiser popped into the film 40 years later, in 1871.

2. There is another mistake, much more serious in my opinion, when you say :

“Marx eventually came to the conclusion that a critique of capitalism had to be rooted in political economy rather than ethics. Written in 1846-47, *The Poverty of Philosophy* is not only an answer to Proudhon's *Property is Theft*, it also contains some of the basic economic insights that would be more fully developed in *Capital*.”

I understand you are one of these Marxists who mention Proudhon without having read him, and who rely exclusively on what Marx says about him. A very common (and un-scientific) attitude among Marxists.

In fact, there are two mistakes in that statement.

◆ *The Poverty of Philosophy* (the French title is *Misery of Philosophy*) is not an answer to Proudhon's *Property is Theft* because Proudhon never wrote such a book. You surely are mentioning *What is Property?* (the whole title is: *What is Property? Or, an Inquiry into the Principle of Right and Government*), written in 1840.

“Property is theft” is a sentence included in that book, about which Marx said that “Not only does Proudhon write in the interest of the proletarians, he is himself a

proletarian, an *ouvrier*. His work is a scientific manifesto of the French proletariat.” (*The Holy Family*.)

♦ *The Poverty of Philosophy* is an answer to Proudhon’s *System of economic contradictions* (1846), subtitled “Philosophy of Misery” – which explains Marx’s reply : “Misery of Philosophy” – a typically left Hegelian turn of mind.

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Considering the title of Proudhon’s book – *System of economic contradictions* – one can suppose that the author intends to describe, or explain, the capitalist system in the light of its *economic*, and not *moral* contradictions ; which leads us to the conclusion that Proudhon intends to make, as you say about Marx, “a critique of capitalism (...) rooted in political economy rather than ethics”. Which is precisely the case. I must add that rooting the critique of capitalism in political economy doesn’t exclude ethical considerations. The *Communist Manifesto* is full of ethical considerations and moral indignations, and no doubt this is one of the reasons why it has had so much success.

No communist I know has ever read Proudhon’s *System of Economic Contradictions*. They simply read Marx’s critique of his book, *The Poverty of Philosophy* and to them it is enough (a very common attitude with communists). The same way that many communists will probably read your article and refrain from reading Bakunin, whom you mention abundantly.

## **The year 1846**

1846 is a very interesting year, because :

1. Marx and Engels wrote *The German Ideology* and

2. Proudhon wrote the *Systeme des contradictions economiques* (System of Economic Contradictions).

The *German Ideology* is a book in which Marx and Engels establish the great lines of their historical method, which Marx never names, but which Engels calls “historical materialism”.

The *Systeme des contradictions economiques* is a book in which Proudhon exposes his own method, to which he gives no name, but which is simply the inductive-deductive method (named also hypothetical-deductive method). This method is very commonly used in sciences. Proudhon is the very first who used it in political economy. Roughly, this method consists in testing a hypothesis and then checking if facts confirm it. If they do, you form another hypothesis, and so on.

What is it all about ? Proudhon wanted to explain how the capitalist system works. At first, he tried the historical method, and he said : where (when) do I begin ? The year 1900 ? 1600 ? 1000 ? It simply didn't work. Finally he decided to use abstract categories.

The heart of Marx's criticism of Proudhon's book, when you put aside all the details, is precisely his use of the inductive-deductive method and categories. Proudhon, says Marx, rejects the only possible method : the study of the historical movement of production relationships (“rapports de production”, in French, I'm not used to Marxist jargon in English). Proudhon, on his side, wants to show that the categories of economy are in inter-relation in a contradictory way and that all these categories work simultaneously. Therefore it is necessary to define the basic category, from which you build up a *simulation* of the system (Proudhon uses the word “scaffolding”, “echaffaudage” in French). His idea is that

the simple description of a phenomenon does not enable to understand its internal movement.

The basic category, according to Proudhon, is *value*, which is the fundamental category from which the essential structure of capitalism can be unveiled. From that, he deduces the division of labor, machinism, competition, monopoly, etc. “Value is the cornerstone of the economic building” says Proudhon in the *Systeme des contradictions economiques*. I don’t think Marx would disagree with that.

So where is the problem ? The problem is that in 1846 Marx hysterically attacked Proudhon’s method, accusing it of being idealistic, petit-bourgeois and all sorts of things, and then for more than ten years he didn’t produce anything with his *own* method. A letter he wrote to Engels (April 2, 1852) shows his despair : “All that is beginning to annoy me. Actually, that science [*political economy*], since A. Smith and D. Ricardo, has made no progress in spite of all the particular and sometimes very delicate researches that have been made. ”

These words are practically the same you can read in Proudhon’s *Systeme des contradictions economiques* : “Monographies and history books : we are saturated with them since Ad. Smith and J.-B Say, and only variations are made on their texts. ”

Obviously, Proudhon and Marx were faced with the same problem and came to the same conclusion. Unfortunately for Marx, he lost fifteen years searching the solution Proudhon had found in the *Systeme des contradictions economiques* as soon as 1846.

I’m mentioning this only to show you that in spite of what you think, Marxism and anarchism are much more interrelated than you think because they had to face the

same theoretical problems, and the smartest was not the one you think. Proudhon too, had brains.

### **About *The Capital***

In the *General introduction to the critique of political economy* (1857), Marx has still not found the way to explain the structure of the system. There is an abundant literature about the modifications in the plan of *The Capital*. On December 18, 1857, Marx writes to Engels that he is eager to “get rid of this nightmare”.

On February 22, 1858, Marx writes to Lassalle : after 15 years, “I have the feeling now (...) that I can manage to get to work”.

Good. Fifteen years after his hysterical attacks against Proudhon, he found at last something. Let’s see what it is.

In the *Introduction*, Marx asks : where should one start ? Which scientific method should be used ? Then he starts explaining the proper method : usually, he says, when you write about political economy, you start with generalities, production, population, import, export, annual production. That’s not the good method, he says. The “scientifically correct method” consists in considering that “the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought”.

He also says : “the economic categories would appear on the whole in the same order as in the logical exposition” (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political economy*). So: the logical exposition is not the historical exposition.

Well, well, Marx is now advocating the same method Proudhon used in the *Systeme des contradictions economiques* and appeals to “categories”! He now

discovers that each economic category, such as exchange value, exists only in relation with a whole, something Proudhon had discovered more than ten years earlier. Now Marx says that “it is wrong and inopportune to present the succession of economic categories in the order of their historic action”. That is precisely the idea he had attacked in Proudhon in 1847.

When the first volume of *The Capital* was published in 1867, the preface said that “abstraction is the only method to analyze economic forms”, which is precisely Proudhon’s viewpoint. And if you compare the respective plans or the first book of *The Capital* and of the *Systeme des contradictions economiques*, you can see that they are strangely identical.

The funny thing in that affair is that the masterpiece of Marx, *The Capital*, is based on a method that has nothing to do with “historical materialism” but on the inductive-deductive method, an authentically scientific method, which Proudhon used twenty years before him ; and precisely because of that method, *The Capital* is an authentically scientific work !!! Proudhon’s genius was that he was the first to apply it to political economy.

Now it is interesting to explain how Marx justified the use of this “new” method. Of course, he could not say : “Good old Proudhon was right.” Acknowledging he was wrong and someone else was right was not his style. So he said that one day, he “accidentally” fumbled through Hegel’s *Logic*, and that helped him find the proper method. The funny thing about that book, is that it had belonged to... Bakunin : “Freiligrath found some volumes of Hegel that had originally belonged to Bakunin and sent them to me as a gift”, he says in a letter (January 14, 1858). Obviously, Marx wanted to establish



a link with *German philosophy* rather than with *French socialism*.

Later, a lot of Marxist authors realized that there was something wrong about the method used in *The Capital*.

Preobrajensky for instance, is a little upset because he realizes that there is nothing to do with “historical materialism” in the book. So he says it is necessary to “rise above all the phenomena of practical capitalism which keep us from understanding this form and its movement in their purest aspect.” (*The New Economy*.) This is a pretty good definition for “simulation”. So, says Preobrajensky, you must use an “analytical-abstract method adapted to the peculiarities of the subject which is studied” (*sic*). Interesting, that. Translated, it means : “You don’t use historical materialism and you change method according to what you are studying”. A great step has been made in the understanding of “scientific socialism”...

After a somewhat confuse explanation of this method, which is obviously not “the usual materialist dialectics” (*sic*) Preobrajensky turns the difficulty baptizing the method “abstract analytical dialectics”. Whaow ! That was a narrow escape for “dialectics”.

I won’t annoy you with all the Marxists who seem obviously upset with the *The Capital* using the inductive-deductive method. Most of them are French and you probably never heard about them.

However, I will mention one : Roman Rosdolsky, a Ukrainian activist who closely examined the reasons why Marx so frequently changed the plan of the *Capital* (Cf. *The Changes of the structural plan of The Capital and its causes*, 1929.)

## **Marxism and anarchism are closely inter-related**

What's the use of all this ? Well, I only wanted to say that anarchists also have brains, good brains I would say, and don't need Marxist's brain transplanted in their skulls.

More seriously, I simply wanted to show that Marxism and anarchism, from a strictly theoretical point of view, are closely interrelated, and that if you really want a debate on "Marxism & anarchism", that is the direction you should take. But in fact your article doesn't deal with a "debate" but with categorical assertions founded on a very approximate knowledge of the problem. In other words : sterile polemics.

I don't mean that the *Systeme des contradictions economiques* is strictly equivalent to *The Capital*, nor better. Marx's book was published 20 years after Proudhon's so there is much more in it, which is natural.

Strangely, Mr. Proyect, you don't mention Bakunin's opinion on *The Capital*. You could have, if you had wanted to prove the incomparable superiority of Marxism upon anarchism. Marx had sent him the Vol. 1 when it was published. Bakunin always considered it as a necessary reference for the workers (*workers*, not peasants...). "It should have been translated into French a long time ago", he wrote, "for no other contains such a deep enlightening, scientific, decisive and if I could say, such a terribly unmasking analysis of the formation of bourgeois capital", etc. A whole page of it.

The only problem, adds Bakunin, is that its style is "too metaphysical and abstract", which makes it difficult to read for most of the workers (*workers*, not peasants). *The Capital*, says Bakunin again, "is nothing but the

death sentence, scientifically motivated” of the bourgeoisie.

Not bad, isn't it ?

The collectivists of the First International (they did not call themselves “anarchists”) agreed with Bakunin on that point : so Carlo Cafiero, a follower of Bakunin (ex-follower of Engels, so he knew what he was talking about), wrote an “Abstract” of the *Capital* so that it could be read by the workers (workers not peasants), and James Guillaume, another of Bakunin's followers, wrote a preface.

Mind you, Bakunin praised *The Capital*, not the *Système des contradictions économiques* which, by the time Marx's book was published, was somewhat outdated because even if Proudhon had “invented” some basic concepts used also by Marx twenty years later, Marx had gone further, which is normal.

So what have we got, right now ?

1. Proudhon uses a method Marx used twenty years later in *The Capital*.

2. Bakunin and the collectivists in the First International considered *The Capital* as a reference for the workers.

### **300 pages against Stirner**

Let's get back to the *German Ideology*. Those who took the trouble to read it entirely, and not only chosen abstracts as is usually the case (it is a very thick book), realized that only a very small part of it concerns the explanation of the historical method Marx and Engels are supposed to have discovered.

The main part of the book is dedicated to hysterical polemics. And 300 pages (2/3 of the book !) concern

Max Stirner. This man is considered by authorized Marxists who never read him as totally uninteresting. Now, who is this uninteresting bloke about whom Marx writes 300 pages ?

Most people (and particularly anarchists) ignore that if Stirner had been famous for a short time in the intellectual circles of Berlin, he had fallen into oblivion until the late 1880's and was literally propelled into the anarchist "Pantheon" by Engels, who wanted to kick the anarchists out of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International. In order to discredit the anarchists, Engels tried to link Bakunin and Stirner, saying that the former had been influenced by the latter, which is absolutely wrong. Bakunin, who never hesitated to praise the authors he appreciated, never refers to his thought and mentions him only once, casually, in an enumeration of "progressist Hegelians": "Were part of this group the Bauer brothers, Bruno and Edgar, Max Stirner et then, in Berlin, the first circle of German nihilists who, by their cynical logic, left the wild Russian nihilists far behind." (*Statism and Anarchy.*)

This is the *only* mention he ever makes of Stirner. As you can see, being considered as a "nihilist" was not a particularly favorable opinion to Bakunin. It is significant that the Bauer brothers and Stirner are put in the same boat: they are part of that fraction of the left Hegelians who stuck to intellectual criticism and never took action. In fact, Marx, Engels and Bakunin shared the same opinion on him and if Engels hadn't been so sectarian, he would have realized it.

I, personally, don't consider Stirner as an anarchist, but that's a strictly personal opinion. Most anarchists think he is an individualist but they are wrong. His concern is not the individual but the *individuality*. That

makes a great difference. There is nothing anarchist in him ; I would say he is more of a precursor of Freud.

The young intellectuals who, around 1840, criticized Hegel's philosophy finally split into two branches.

The first branch, influenced by Feuerbach, but mainly by a Pole called Cieskovsky – rarely mentioned –, concluded that it was necessary now to start acting. That was Bakunin, Marx, Engels, Hess.

The second branch refused to act and stuck to a strictly intellectually criticist point of view. That was Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner. During the 1848 revolution in Germany, Stirner strictly did nothing. This is, among other reasons, why I can't consider him as an anarchist.

Anyway, Stirner's thought deserves being studied because, among other things, he played an important part in the constitution of Marxism. Which, of course, Marxists won't admit, and which is why they are unable to explain why Marx wrote 300 pages against him...

In 1844, Marx's thought was totally influenced by Feuerbach ; he enthusiastically mentioned the "great discoveries" of the philosopher who had "given a philosophical foundation to socialism". At that time Marx was a humanist. When he says in the *1844 Manuscripts* that "communism is not as such the aim of human development", he means that the aim is Man with a capital M. At that time he thought philosophy was the truth of religion.

Stirner vigorously criticized Feuerbach for not having destroyed the Sacred but only its surface. Philosophy has only taken away the sacred envelope of religion. Feuerbach's "generic man" is a new form of the Divine and reproduces Christian morals. The very moment Marx

wanted to show that the suppression of philosophy is the actualization of philosophy, Stirner showed that it can only accomplish itself as theology.

These ideas were developed in a book, *The Unique and its property*, published in 1845, and were a shock to Marx. Worse, Engels himself adhered to Stirner's theses, a time. (He was curtly reprimanded by his pal, believe me...)

Even worse, Stirner's critique of Feuerbach was obviously an implicit critique of Marx.

And even worse again, a number of the smartest minds in Berlin were gathering around Stirner. Marxist authors usually forget to say that.

All that, for Marx, was unbearable. Which explains why he wrote *The German Ideology*. After that, Marx gives up the idea of "generic man" and all these humanistic concepts.

So here we have another example of connection between anarchism (if you consider Stirner as an "anarchist") and Marxism, evolving into something finally positive, since without Stirner's philosophical kick in the ass, Marx would have developed a sort of flabby, spineless socialism. We can consider that Marx became truly a Marxist after that. And naturally, his attack against Stirner was proportional to his (philosophical) pain in the ass.

There are many other examples of positive connection between Marxism and anarchism.

◆ When Bakunin escaped from Siberia, he went to England and met Marx before settling down in Italy. Marx then asked Bakunin to help him in his fight against Mazzini. This is precisely what he did. Of course, he

would have fought Mazzini's influence anyway, but he was quite efficient. He personally initiated several sections of the International, although he was not yet a member, and had a decisive influence in the constitution of the Italian working class (*working class*, not peasantry). (On that question, see: *Bakunin & the Italians*, T.R. Ravindranathan, McGill-Queen's University Press, Kingston and Montreal – in English.)

◆ When Bakunin joined the International, he supported the marxists against the right-wing Proudhonians.

### **“Causes productive of effects”**

But there are two decisive points upon which anarchism and Marxism meet, but generally Marxists are not aware of it (nor anarchists, I would say):

1. One of the fundamental criticisms Bakunin made of Marxism was about the exclusiveness of economic determinations in history. Not that he denied the prominent character of these determinations, on the contrary. *But*, he said, the other determinations, political, ideological, juridical, etc. “once given, can become causes productive of effects” (Letter to *La Liberte*, November 11, 1872). Which is, may I say, a perfectly “dialectical” point of view.

In 1890 – long after Bakunin had died – Engels wrote a letter to Joseph Bloch (Sept. 21, 1890) saying: “It's Marx and myself, partially, who bear the responsibility of the fact that sometimes, the young people give more weigh than they should to the economic side. In front of our adversaries, we had to stress the main principle they denied, so we did not always find the time, the place nor

the opportunity to give their place to the other factors which participate to the action.”

So on that first point, Engels (implicitly) acknowledges that Bakunin was right.

Comment : you can find something very close to Bakunin’s objection in the *German Ideology* : “The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.”

But of course Bakunin – and the Marxists –, did not know about this book for it was never published until 1928.

2. The second important point on which Bakunin disagreed with Marx was the theory of evolution of successive forms of production. The Marxists, says he, do not so much blame us for our program as because we “fail to recognize the positive law of successive evolutions” (Letter to *La Liberte*, *loc. cit.*) Here again, he did not deny the validity of that theory in the history of Western Europe, but he denied its universal character, for reasons he explains but upon which I will not insist.

Marx will (implicitly once more) admit Bakunin was finally right. In November 1877 (Bakunin is dead) he writes to a Russian correspondent called Mikhailovski and tells him that it is a mistake to transform his “sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historic-philosophic theory of the general march fatally



imposed to all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed...”

In 1881 he writes to Vera Zassoulitch that the “historical fatality” of the genesis of capitalist production is “expressively limited to the Western European countries”.

The restrictions Engels and Marx make to their own theory are limited to their private correspondence and have no effect on “real Marxism” such as it had already begun to spread into a sort of mechanical deterministic economism. However, since anarchists are supposed to have no brains, I thought it necessary to precise these points : *Bakunin was right concerning two fundamental points regarding Marxist theory !* He was in a way a better Marxist than Marx !!!

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I don't intend to examine point by point the inconsistency of your argumentation concerning Bakunin. It is too much dominated by insincerity. But there are some other factual mistakes I would like to stress.

Bakunin has nothing to do with social Darwinism. And he does mention Herbert Spencer, to criticize him, in a text called “Science and the people” (1868). He blames the “practical duplicity” you can find in the works of “Bockel [*Henry Thomas Buckle?*], Darwin, Lewis, Herbert Spencer and Stuart Mill”. In fact he criticizes Auguste Comte's system who offered these authors the ideological ground to carry on their work without risking to be accused of atheism and materialism.

In another text (*l'Empire knouto-germanique*), recalling that Shelley had to emigrate and had his child taken away from him because he was accused of atheism, he says that men like “Buckle, Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer” had “enjoyed the possibility that positive philosophy had offered them to reconcile the freedom of their scientific investigations with the religious *cant* [*in English in the text*], despotically imposed by English opinion upon whoever intends to be part of the society”.

It is true that you rarely (but I would not say never) find “scholarly citations in his work”. But it is absolutely wrong to say that he reflects “commonplace ideas floating around in the European middle-class of his age”. To begin with, Bakunin had a strong scientific background<sup>3</sup> and his archives show that he had read

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<sup>3</sup> Here is a list of books he ordered when he was arrested in 1849 :

“1. Complement des elements d'algebre, par Lacroix. (à ne pas confondre avec les elements d'algebre que j'ai déjà).

“2. Traite complet de calcul differentiel et integral, par Lacroix. 3 vol. in-quarto.

“3. Application de l'analyse à la geometrie à l'usage de l'Ecole Polytechnique – par Monge.

“4. Analyse Algebrique, par Garnier – 1 vol. in-octavo.

“5. Leçons du calcul differentiel et integral – 2 vol. in-octavo, par Garnier.

“6. Euler – Elements d'algebre. 2 vol. in-octavo. La premiere partie contient l'analyse determinee revue et augmentee de notes par Garnier. La deuxieme partie contient l'analyse indeterminee revue et augmentee de notes par Lagrange.

“7. Lagrange. Leçons sur le calcul des fonctions....

“8. Lagrange. Traite de la resolution des equations numeriques.

“9. Lagrange. Theorie des fonctions analytiques.

“10. Lagrange. Traite de mecanique analytique. 2 vol. in-quarto.

“11. Poisson. Traite de mecanique... 2 vol. in-quinto.

“12. Pouillet. Cours de physique.

books in many fields : philosophy of course, religions, economic history, natural sciences, languages and mathematics.

## “Fomenting insurrections”

And it is absolutely wrong to say that he spent his time “fomenting insurrections”. He never fomented any insurrection, but he took an active part in one revolution and three insurrection.

**Paris 1848.** Bakunin is in Brussels. It takes him a three day walk to reach Paris because there are no trains. The armed workers control the barricades. Bakunin sleeps very little, his rifle at hand, among the milicians. The new chief of the police, Caussidiere, says : “What a man! The first day of a revolution he is a marvel, but the second day he should be shot!”

**The first insurrection** was in Prague in 1848. He had analyzed the situation and had concluded that it was bound to fail. But not being able to prevent it, he joined the insurgents. Strangely, at that moment the *Neue Rheinische Gazette*, run by Marx, printed on July 6 an article asserting that the French writer George Sand had documents proving that Bakunin was a Russian agent and that he had betrayed Polish insurgents. The article even said that George Sand had shown the documents to some of her friends. Of course the writer had nothing to do with that, and protested that the article of the *Neue Rheinische Gazette* was pure invention. Marx published the writer’s denial and a publisher’s note saying that they had only done their duty informing the public, adding

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“ Et encore [Cauchy/Canetry] et Ampere sur le calcul differentiel et integral.”

that after all it had given Bakunin the opportunity to dissipate the suspicions...

**The second** insurrection was in Dresden in 1849. As in Prague, the context was disastrous, but Bakunin did all he could to keep the insurrection going, of which he had taken the command. When finally the overwhelming Prussian forces took the place, he organized a strategic retreat. As you know, Bakunin was an artillery officer. Organizing a retreat is something very difficult : the objective is to reduce the losses as much as possible. Now, someone whom you heard about mentions this retreat : Engels himself. Here is what he wrote in 1852 :

“In Dresden, the street fights lasted four days. The Dresden petty bourgeois – the “National Gard” – not only did not take part in this fight, but they supported the progression of the troops against the insurgents. The latter, however, were constituted almost exclusively of workers from the surrounding industrial neighborhoods. They found a capable and self-controlled chief in the person of the Russian refugee Michael Bakunin, who was soon after made prisoner <sup>4</sup>...”

A few remarks : Bakunin did not choose to participate in the insurrection : he simply was there and assumed his responsibilities. And he probably saw more of, and lived more with German industrial workers than Marx ever did. Bakunin’s part in the Dresden insurrection was much more than “a street disturbance or sometimes even a clash with the police in some German city” : his fight for

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Arthur Lehning, in *Michel Bakounine et les autres*, UGE 10/18, p. 170.

democracy in Germany cost him eight years of jail and four years of relegation in Siberia.

Second remark : at that time, what were Marx and Engels doing ? They had swept the Communist League under the carpet, the first Communist party in history, because their analysis was that on their historical agenda time was for the *bourgeois* revolution. So they peacefully sat on their chairs writing articles in the *Neue Rheinische Gazette* encouraging bourgeois class-consciousness and protesting against the Czechs demanding their independence: It is impossible, says Engels in the *Neue Rheinische Gazette*, to give the Czechs their independence, for the East of Germany would look “like a loaf of bread that has been gnawed by rats.” (*Neue Rheinische Zeitung* No. 222, February 1849.)

In the meantime, Bakunin was arrested by the Prussians, sentenced to death, handed over to the Austrians, sentenced to death, handed over to the Russians who locked him without judgment for six years in Peter-and-Paul fortress, where he was chained to the wall. Then he was sent to Schlüsselburg fortress for two years. By that time he had lost all his teeth because of scurvy and was driven half mad through isolation. So the one whom you say was “too busy fomenting insurrections to find time to go to a library” got arrested because he had fought for German democracy.

Well, I have no objection about people who spend their time in libraries reading (and writing) books about class struggle. This is necessary. I respect that. I myself have read some books.

But, Mr. Proyect, you seem to have a sort of fascination for libraries and books. In thirty years I have read three times the three volumes of *The Capital*, so,

according to your own values, I may have a fairly good knowledge of the “laws of capitalist accumulation”. During the same period I have been an active CGT union shop steward, union official, union president in the printing industry, but I never had the notion that reading three times *The Capital* had helped me. And I have good friends in the CGT and in the Communist party who never read *The Capital*. I don’t think that is the reason why they never made the revolution. In fact your approach of the problem is that to “develop a new revolutionary movement” you must be an intellectual because you believe only intellectuals can adapt facts to a pre-existent theory.

I’m not saying that theory is useless, but that revolutionary theory should be something comprehensive, i.e. not only economic, and a permanent process of reexamination of facts through theory and theory through facts – and you’d be surprised to see what clever analysis workers who never read *The Capital* can make.

But the fact is that Marx practiced class struggle in the British Museum while Bakunin practiced it on the field, and paid a very high tribute to it. You should at least respect that.

In fact, during the 1848 revolution, Marx and Engels did not practice class struggle at all... A few weeks before the outburst of the revolution in Germany, a leaflet had been printed in Paris to be distributed in Germany. It contained the programme of the Communist League in 17 points, but their authors decided not to distribute it at all.

This is what Engels wrote about it : « If even a single copy of our 17 points were to circulate here, all would be

lost for us » he writes to Marx (25 April 1848)<sup>5</sup>. And he adds : « The workers are beginning to bestir themselves a little, still in a very crude way, but as a mass. They at once formed coalitions. But to us that can only be a hindrance. »

There is no mistake : 1. The workers bestir themselves ; 2. As a mass ; 3. And form coalitions.

But to Engels, it is a hindrance. So what is it a hindrance for ? Engels had just received the Prospectus for the Founding of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* ; he was collecting money among the radical bourgeois and didn't want to frighten them.

And what was the programme of the League ? A document directly inspired from the *Communist Manifesto* which says among other things that the communists must not conceal their opinions!!!

I wonder how you can reconcile that with your assertion that Marx and Engels “never abandoned the idea that the communists should constitute the most ‘advanced’ or ‘extreme wing’ of the ‘democratic party’ as they put it”. In 1848, they were the most advanced wing of the bourgeois liberals.

OK, Marx and Engels chose to write articles in a liberal paper while Bakunin was “fomenting” insurrections. But at least, did they say interesting things ? Bakunin's programme (he was not yet an anarchist, by far) at that time was to create an alliance between the Centre-European Slavs demanding national emancipation and the Germans demanding democracy. If both could fight hand in hand, he thought, they would be

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<sup>5</sup> Source: MECW Volume 38, p. 172, 25 April 1848. First published in *Der Briefwechsel zwischen F. Engels und K. Marx*, 1913.

invincible. That was quite a pragmatical point of view, and mere common sense.

The problem was that the Germans – Prussians and Austrians – occupied Slav territories. What opinion did Marx and Engels express in their liberal-bourgeois paper? They supported the German occupation of Slav territories, in the name of “historical materialism”: the productive forces in Germany were higher than in the Slav territories so the Slavs should remain under German domination: that’s what I call understanding the “laws of capitalist accumulation”. The Czechs who demanded their independence were very ungrateful, for the Germans had “given themselves the trouble of civilizing the stubborn Czechs and Slovenes, and introducing among them trade, industry, a tolerable degree of agriculture, and culture!” (Engels, “Democratic panslavism”, *Neue Rheinische Gazette*, Feb. 1849.)

Those Slavs who disagreed with that “scientific analysis” were “reactionaries”, and “for this cowardly, base betrayal of the revolution we shall at some time take a bloody revenge against the Slavs”, writes Engels again.

What did Engels think about the project of unity between Germans and Slavs Bakunin proposed? Engels writes on February 16, 1849:

“To the sentimental phrases about brotherhood which we are being offered here on behalf of the most counter-revolutionary nations of Europe, we reply that hatred of Russians was and still is the *primary revolutionary passion* among Germans; that since the revolution hatred of Czechs and Croats has been added, and that only by the most determined use of



terror against these Slav peoples can we, jointly with the Poles and Magyars, safeguard the revolution.”

At the end of his article, Engels calls for “a struggle, an ‘inexorable life-and-death struggle’, against those Slavs who betray the revolution; an annihilating fight and ruthless terror – not in the interests of Germany, but in the interests of the revolution!” (What kind of revolution? Obviously not the one mentioned in the *Manifesto*.) After the Prague insurrection, Engels wrote on June 18, 1848 in the *NRG* that from now on “the only possible solution now is a war of extermination between the Germans and the Czechs”.

Hatred surely is a useful concept to understand the “laws of capitalist accumulation”.

After the revolution, the German communists demanded Marx and Engels to answer for their collaborationist attitude. A very strange text shows evidence of it, called *Address of the central committee to the Communist league*. When you read the text superficially, you think that Marx criticizes the “petty bourgeois who were leaders of democratic associations”, the “publishers of democratic papers”; the Address calls the workers not to support the bourgeois democrats and claims the necessity of the “autonomous organization of the proletariat”. In fact, the one Marx is writing about is himself: *he* had been the leader of a Democratic association after he had dissolved the Communist League, *he* had published a liberal paper and *he* had dissolved the “autonomous organization of the proletariat”.

The Address mentions also the necessity of reestablishing “the independence of the workers”, which

sounds really funny when you consider that Engels did absolutely not want the programme of the Communist League to be spread in Germany because it was too radical and would frighten the liberals.

The German communists were not fooled by the *Address of the central committee to the Communist league*.

Communist historians never give the “key” to understand the *Address*. And they are very uneasy about the dissolution of the Communist League. Their explanations are masterpieces of Jesuitism.

Members of the Communist League settled down in London. As members of the London section of the organization, Marx and Engels will be *expulsed from the first communist party in history*<sup>6</sup> ! The motives of the expulsions are interesting. The two men are accused of having “published gazettes”, of having “selected a group of half-literary hacks so as to have personal supporters and fantasize about their future political power”; “because the literary camarilla cannot be useful to the League and makes all organization impossible”; because they used the League for their personal interests, ignoring it when it is not useful to their personal needs...

Of course, communist historians take a very low profile when they deal with this period of Marx and Engel’s life.

I said Bakunin took part in three insurrections and so far I mentioned only two.

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<sup>6</sup> See : Fernando Claudin, *Marx et la revolution de 1848*, Maspero.

**The third one** was in 1870 in Lyon, a big industrial town in the South East of France. That was just before the Paris Commune.

While Marx was reading books in a British library, the Prussians had occupied France and the workers in Lyon were beginning to show some unrest. Bakunin participated in the insurrection. Here again, he didn't think it could succeed. But among other measures, he proposed to create a permanent revolutionary militia, the sequestration of all property, public and private. The communes were to choose delegates, create commissions to reorganize labor, hand over to workers' associations the money they needed. When the municipal council decided to reduce the wages, Bakunin was firmly opposed to the workers going unarmed to the protest demonstration.

Of course, Marx, who was reading books in the British Museum, couldn't help deriding Bakunin's action. Of course, the insurrection failed. But I think one viewpoint might interest you, Mr. Proyect : that of Iuri Steklov, a Bolshevik historian : Bakunin's intervention in Lyon was "a generous attempt to wake up the sleeping energy of the French proletariat and direct it towards the struggle against the capitalist system and at the same time to repel the foreign invasion."

Steklov adds that Bakunin's plan was not so ridiculous :

"In Bakunin's mind, it was necessary to use the commotion provoked by the war, the inability of the bourgeoisie, the patriotic protests of the masses, its confuse social tendencies in order to attempt a decisive intervention of the workers in the great

centres, involve the peasantry and thus start the world social revolution. Nobody, then, has proposed a better plan <sup>7</sup>.”

## **The “Confession”**

Your approach of the “Confession” of Bakunin consists mainly in distorting facts. The “Confession” was published in 1921 when the archives of the tsarist police were made public. Curiously, the Bolsheviki were not particularly shocked. Karl Radek told Fritz Brupbacher that Bakunin was “perfectly entitled to adopt the proper method to achieve his objective” : get out of the dungeon in which he was sentenced to life.

Count Orloff had asked Bakunin to write a confession, Bakunin accepted but he declared that he would confess his own “sins” but no one else’s. That meant he wouldn’t betray anybody. And he didn’t. From this point, whatever he said in this “confession” has strictly no importance. The only persons he mentions are those who are out of reach of the tsar, or who were notoriously known to be with him during the revolution.

No anarchist would write on Lenin’s deal with the German authorities who allowed him to cross their territory in March 1917 as many lines as you did on Bakunin’s “Confession”.

The real value of the “Confession” lies in the marginal notes of the tsar : “If he feels the weigh of his sins, only a sincere and thorough confession, and not a conditional one, can be considered as such.”

The technique he uses in the text is remarkable : first he shows humility, expresses his guilt, and then starts an uncompromising analysis, such as no tsar has ever read,

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted by F. Rude, in *De la Guerre à la Commune*, editions Anthropos.

of Russian society, its expansionist policy, its dominant class, the Russian bureaucracy, the degenerating of the State.

Actually, Bakunin stayed in prison and his conditions were not improved. Later, he was removed to another fortress during the Crimean war because the tsar feared he should escape or be freed, which proves he was still afraid of him. All attempts to soften his conditions were refused by the tsar. Count Dolgoroukoff, minister of the tsar, requested his deportation in Siberia: the tsar refused. Bakunin was considered as too dangerous. The new tsar Alexander II refused any change in his condition. "As long as your son lives, he will never be free", he said to his mother. Finally he was deported to Siberia in 1857. He was 44 years old and looked like an old man after eight years of total isolation. He escaped in 1861. When he arrived in London, he was informed that Marx and his friends had spread the rumor that the tsar had greeted him with open arms and that he had been spending his time with hospitable ladies drinking champagne.

But the British workers were not mistaken: a delegation of them greeted him and expressed their sympathy to the great Russian revolutionary.

### **Who is the sect leader ?**

But who is the sect leader ?

The offensive against Bakunin started after the Basle congress of the International (1869), when the motions of the General council (Marx) were outvoted by those of the collectivists (Bakunin).

It ended in 1871 at the London Conference, sept. 17, which normally had no power to take decisions. A factice majority of pro-Marx delegates had been convened with

fake mandates, delegates who were co-opted by the General council. Some federations had not been informed. Bakunin and James Guillaume, who had not been invited, were expelled.

A congress was organized in the Hague in September 1872 in order to confirm the expellings. The same assembly confirmed the decision taken in London.

When the federations were informed about the decision and realized that they had been manipulated, they condemned the decisions taken in this fake congress :

The Jura federation, Sept. 15, 1872  
The delegates of the French sections in October  
The Italian federation in December  
The Belgian federation in December  
The Spanish federation in January 1873  
The English federation in 1873

Of course, rejecting the bureaucratic practices of Marx and his pals did not mean that all these federations approved of Bakunin's views.

The marxized International collapsed. The General council was transferred to the United States – where no one could go – in the hands of German friends of Marx.

One of the first decisions of the new General council was to suspend the Jura federation of which Bakunin and James Guillaume were members. Marx and Engels were furious because the Jura federation had been *suspended* and not *expelled*. Their argument was that it had “put itself out of the organization” – an argument which will be much used after. (Marx, letter to the General council, Feb. 12, 1872.)

On May 30, 1873, according to instructions given by Engels, the New York General council decided to expel all the sections and federations that refused the decisions taken in the Hague.

So what do we have ? *Marx and a small clique of pals expelled from the First international the (almost) whole international working class of the time !*

“Almost”, because the Germans did not protest. In fact, the Germans strictly didn’t care. “There never were real members, not even of isolated persons” writes Engels to Theodore Cuno (May 7-8, 1872).

On May 22, 1872, four months before the Hague congress, Engels wrote to Liebknecht to ask him how many membership cards he had distributed : “Don’t tell me the 208 estimated by Finck are all you got !”

The excluded Spanish federation had 30.000 members...

So, strangely, in two circumstances of rising class struggle – 1848-1849 and 1871-1872 –, Marx and Engels scuttled the working class organization !

## **Conclusion**

Marxism and anarchism developed separately, but from common preoccupations and formulated different conclusions. The refusal to consider their genesis from identical conditions prevent most people – you, in particular – from perceiving the points on which they join each other, but also does not enable them to perceive their differences in their real perspective. In other words, each movement should be opposed to the other, but for the good reasons. This is why I don’t believe in such an eclectic synthesis as “libertarian Marxism” because the real gap between Marxism and anarchism lies, to a great extent, in organizational and strategic questions.

Your article never even approaches the heart of the problem.

So, Mr Proyect, I suggest that before polemizing on Bakunin or anarchism, the real facts be first established. After that, we can talk about the “tangible victories”, as you put it, of our respective movements. However, if I were a communist, I would rather avoid that question. The only “tangible victory” of the Bolsheviks is that they succeeded a “coup d’Etat” in October. You know what happened after: the dictatorship of the party on the workers and peasants and an incredible mystification about the so-called “worker’s State”. The first mystification of all being that Lenin is said to be a Marxist. What happened to him was absolutely foreseen by Engels. Here is a long quotation, but I’m sure you will see what I mean:

“The worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over a government in an epoch when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class which he represents and for the realization of the measures which that domination would imply. What he *can* do depends not upon his will but upon the sharpness of the clash of interests between the various classes, and upon the degree of development of the material means of existence, the relations of production and means of communication upon which the clash of interests of the classes is based every time. What he *ought* to do, what his party demands of him, again depends not upon him, or upon the degree of development of the class struggle and its conditions. He is bound to his doctrines and the demands hitherto propounded which do not emanate from the interrelations of the social



classes at a given moment, or from the more or less accidental level of relations of production and means of communication, but from his more or less penetrating insight into the general result of the social and political movement. Thus he necessarily finds himself in a dilemma. What he *can* do is in contrast to all his actions as hitherto practiced, to all his principles and to the present interests of his party; what he *ought* to do cannot be achieved. In a word, he is compelled to represent not his party or his class, but the class for whom conditions are ripe for domination. In the interests of the movement itself, he is compelled to defend the interests of an alien class, and to feed his own class with phrases and promises, with the assertion that the interests of that alien class are their own interests. Whoever puts himself in this awkward position is irrevocably lost.” (Frederick Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, chapter 6.)

My answer aims at showing that there are lines of confluence between anarchism and Marxism that constitute a basis for a constructive discussion. The problem is that communists<sup>8</sup> can't accept this approach

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<sup>8</sup> I am aware that I sometimes use the word “communism” where you might prefer my using “marxism”. To me, the equivalent to anarchism is communism. The equivalent to marxism is bakuninism, or proudhonism, etc.

The other reason for my using the word communism is that I have been over 30 years in a trade union, the CGT, overwhelmingly dominated by communists and believe me, it is not always easy to be an anarcho-syndicalist in these conditions. I often (but not always) disagreed with them, and I know them very well, some of them being friends. An average American might occasionally know *one* communist – probably a curiosity – but he *never* goes to places where there are hundreds, or thousands of them. To me, marxist or communist is the same thing.

because when you start talking about real facts you can't stop. It means that you have to speak about what Marx *really* said and what he *really* did. That man surely did achieve great theoretical accomplishments, no doubt about that, but he really *did* dissolve the first Communist party at the beginning of a revolution, in spite of his writing a few months before in the *Manifesto* that “the Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims »; and he really *did* expel from the first worker's International practically the whole European working class. *That* is the basis upon which a constructive discussion can take place.

A well known French historian, Georges Haupt, says that Marx's refusal to “engage in a doctrinal debate [*with Bakunin*] is above all tactical. All Marx's effort tends to minimize Bakunin, to deny his rival all theoretical consistency. He refuses to acknowledge Bakunin's system of thought, not because he denies its consistency, as he peremptorily says, but because Marx tries to discredit him and to reduce him to the dimensions of a sect leader and of an old style conspirator<sup>9</sup>.”

Well, this is *exactly* what you do, Mr Proyect.

René Berthier

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<sup>9</sup> Georges Haupt, *Bakunin combats et débats*, Institut d'etudes slaves, 1979.

# A Marxist critique of Bakunin

By Louis Proyect

With the advent of “anti-globalization” protests, a very old movement seems to be picking up steam once again. This seems to have something to do with fashion, according to an article that appeared in the Style section of the April 4, 2000 Washington Post:

“Is this the Anarchist Soccer League?” asks the girl with the pierced lip and eyebrow. She catches the eye of a guy whose black T-shirt identifies him as “Poor, Ugly, Happy.”

He informs her that, yes, this is the regular pickup game of the Anarchist Soccer League, held on Sunday afternoons amid the minivan-and-merlot enclaves of upper Northwest Washington.

She surveys the dusty field near Woodrow Wilson High School, where 30 players have amassed to kick a ball around to promote physical fitness, camaraderie and the defeat of global capitalism. They're mainly college-age men and women – energetic, fairly decent players. They know how to cross and dribble. They wear cleats and shin guards. “It looks too organized to be the Anarchist Soccer League”, the pierced girl says dismissively. She adjusts the black bra under her white tank top, wondering whether to join in.

“I need a cigarette, ” she decides, and roller-blades off to find one.

But soon she'll return to get into the game. She's a punk rocker, a supporter of an activist group called

Refuse & Resist. She wants to free Mumia Abu-Jamal, the convicted cop killer.

Her name is Barucha Peller. She wears Abercrombie & Fitch pants and carries a Nine West wallet. She's not entirely sure that she's an anarchist – “I'm 17, too young to pick any ideology” – but she definitely doesn't like The System.

It's a sunny afternoon. So, sure, she'll play some soccer.

One might legitimately question whether this will generate any long-term commitment to revolutionary politics. According to veteran left activist Walt Sheasby, a 1970 news source reported that there were an estimated 2 million U.S. citizens who considered themselves “revolutionary.” As an SDS organizer, Sheasby witnessed chapters springing up overnight like mushrooms. Many of these young radicals – Ms. Peller's forerunners – were also resistant to ideology. He confesses that, “In various political activities over the last three decades, I've met hardly a handful of those I knew in the sixties. I'm willing to bet other organizers would tell the same tale. It's as if these 'revolutionaries' never lived.”

Whether the revival of anarchism will turn out to more than just a passing fad is too soon to say. For Marxists, however, its reappearance presents something of a challenge. For Barbara Epstein, writing in the Marxist Monthly Review, it is not only a shot in the arm for the left, but offers the possibility of a kind of arranged marriage between the red and the black down the road.

“Actually existing” anarchism has changed and so has “actually existing” Marxism. Marxists who participated

in the movements of the sixties tend to have a sharper appreciation of the importance of social and cultural equality, and of living according to our values in the present, than did many members of previous generations of Marxist activists. If a new paradigm of the left emerges from the struggle against neoliberalism and the transnational corporate order, it is likely to include elements of anarchist sensibility as well as of Marxist analysis.

All of this suggests that the marriage will combine Marxist brains and anarchist heart. It is entirely possible that the anarchist targets of Professor Epstein's affections might spurn these advances. Indeed, based on my encounters with anarchists on the Internet, I am left with the impression that not only do they have their own analysis regarded as vastly superior to Marxism, but are not bashful about saying so.

This article is the first in a series that will try to come to terms with anarchist ideology. The chief purpose is not to change anarchist minds. After all, if a movement has maintained an existence for over 150 years without any tangible victories, one might have to ask whether something other than rational expectations or practical politics keeps it afloat. We instead intend to help clarify the thinking of people like the good Professor Epstein, so that the prospects of an arranged marriage might be less risky for either party. When this kind of intimacy is involved, one should minimize risks.

For many reasons, Bakunin is a good place to start in such an investigation. Not only is he a founding father of anarchism, his career developed partly as a series of ideological and organizational challenges to Marx.

Marx and Bakunin both emerge out of the radical wing of the Hegelian School of philosophy. Since most of Europe in this period was struggling to overcome the dead weight of feudal economic and social institutions, Hegel's appeal is easily understandable. His dictum that "All that is rational is real and all that is real is rational" was not only a succinct statement of the Enlightenment, his entire philosophy revolved around the notion of an uneven and dialectical process toward a more progressive society and politics.

A breach opened up between the Young Hegelians and their tutor over his belief that such progress was identifiable with the Prussian state. In many ways, *Hegel's tendency to idealize the Kaiser's regime* is reminiscent of the efforts of a modern version of Hegelianism, namely Francis Fukuyama's "End of History," which apotheosizes the modern liberal imperialist state.

In the early 1840s, as both Marx and Bakunin were struggling to transcend the Hegelian framework, they made contact with socialist and communist circles led by thinkers such as Moses Hess, Wilhelm Weitling and P.J. Proudhon. What unites these early thinkers is their tendency to see the struggle for a classless society in moral or philosophical terms. They hoped to lead European society to a better future through a kind of prophetic denunciation of contemporary ills. Proudhon's notion that "property is theft" epitomizes this approach.

Marx eventually came to the conclusion that a critique of capitalism had to be rooted in political economy rather than ethics. Written in 1846-47, "*The Poverty of Philosophy*" is not only an answer to Proudhon's "*Property is Theft*," it also contains some of the basic

economic insights that would be more fully developed in Capital.

Lacking an analysis of the laws of capitalist accumulation, any attempt to develop a new revolutionary movement would be open to the *inconsistencies and moralizing that characterize Proudhon's socialism, Bakunin included.*

First and foremost, Bakunin's ideology is Hegelianism in reverse. Where Hegel tends to put a plus on German politics and society, Bakunin puts a minus. Instead of looking to the Prussian Junkers state as the embodiment of the impulse to freedom and self-actualization, *Bakunin looks to another nationality to lead humanity forward, namely the Slavs.*

Although you can find this theme throughout Bakunin's writings, its most concentrated form appears in "Statism and Anarchy," an uncompleted book representing his most mature thinking, to put it generously. On nearly every page, you find stereotypes about Germans and Slavs. The former have "a passion for state order and state discipline" because of "German blood, German instinct, and German tradition," while the latter "lack this passion." (Statism and Anarchy, p. 45) Furthermore, as if referring to a thoroughbred horse, Bakunin refers to Czech peasants as representing "one of the most splendid Slavic types." "Hussite blood flows in their veins, the hot blood of the Taborites, and the memory of Zizka lives within them." Since the Hussite rebellion took place in the 15th century, *the Czechs must have a very long memory.*

Lacking even the rudiments of an understanding of the contradictions of the capitalist system, Bakunin can of course not detect changes taking place beneath the surface. There is virtually no attempt to analyze German

society as a product of class contradictions. Bakunin regards the workers “as confused by their leaders – politicians, literati and Jews,” even though, as he admits, “scarcely a month or a week goes by without a street disturbance or sometimes even a clash with the police in some German city.” Bakunin can scarcely keep his frustration under wraps as he rails at working class willingness to vote for socialists rather than just going out and making a gosh-darned revolution. If he Bakunin understands how evil the system is, why can't they? While reformism was certainly a problem in the German social democracy, one might doubt whether Bakunin's petulant outbursts would have had much affect. Mostly what they boil down to is an appeal to workers to abandon their trade unions and parties, an appeal heard from the ruling class that was mixed with a generous dose of repression.

Bakunin's fixation with “blood” and “instinct” appears elsewhere. You can frequently detect an element of 19th century social Darwinism, even though Bakunin tends *not to cite anybody like Herbert Spencer*. In the most bizarre expression of this, he tries to explain patriotism as being rooted in biology:

“Those who are in agriculture or gardening know the costs of preserving their plants from the invasion of the parasitic species that join battle with them over the light and the chemical elements of the earth, without which they cannot survive. The strongest plant, which is best adapted to the particular conditions of climate and soil and which still develops with relative vigor naturally tends to stifle all others. It is a silent struggle, but one without truce. And the whole force of human intervention is required to protect the preferred plants against this deadly invasion.



“In the animal world the same struggle recurs, only with more dramatic commotion and noise. The extinction is no longer silent and insensitive. Blood flows; the devoured, tortured animal fills the air with its cries of distress. Man, the animal, that can speak, finally utters the first word in this struggle, and that word is patriotism.” (Open Letters to Swiss Comrades, 1869-1871)

Of course, this is complete nonsense. If anything, patriotism is a relatively recent phenomenon in human history, very much associated with the rise of the nation-state. Since Bakunin *lacks an analysis of the origin of the state*, it should come as no surprise that he confuses it with the garden.

One would be at a loss to determine where Bakunin came up with such hare-brained notions. Since there are *never any scholarly citations in his work*, one must assume that he was simply reflecting commonplace ideas floating around in the European middle-class of his age. One imagines that he was *too busy fomenting insurrections to find time to go to a library*. Then again, perhaps Bakunin would have not gotten much use out of a library *given anti-intellectual prejudices such as these*:

“By contrast to all metaphysicians, positivists, and scholarly or unscholarly worshippers of the goddess science, we maintain that natural and social life always precedes thought (which is merely one of its functions) but is never its result. Life develops out of its own inexhaustible depths by means of a succession of diverse facts, not a succession of abstract reflections; the latter, always produced by life but never producing it, like milestones merely indicate its direction and the different phases of its spontaneous and self-generated development.” (Statism and Anarchy, p. 135)

Allowing that this formula has a certain kind of raffish 1960s charm, it is *practically useless as a guide for the intelligent pursuit of science*. To state that social life precedes thought is a truism. But how exactly do we develop a method that can make sense out of the natural world and society? That is the real question. By all evidence of Bakunin's work, there is no indication that such a method was of any interest to him. Rather you find vulgar opinionating worthless to anybody trying to make sense of European society of the mid 19th century, let alone the world we live in today.

One of the key differences between Bakunin and Marx is over what we might call "agency," a term designating the social class capable of transforming society through revolutionary action. Despite the fact that *the industrial proletariat had not achieved the sort of numerical strength* and social power that it would later in the century, Marx staked everything on this emerging class. The reasons for this are developed extensively throughout his writings, but suffice it to say at this point that it is related to his analysis of the capitalist economy. Since the capitalist system can only survive through competition and revolutionizing the means of production, it would of necessity introduce machinery and – hence – a proletariat. In struggles over wages and working conditions – as well as a host of ancillary issues – the two classes will confront each other in revolutionary battles for power. While the post-WWII era left much of this in doubt, we are witnessing a return to the 'classic' norms of the 19th century, as modern capitalism does everything in its power to destroy the welfare state and the trade unions.

Although Bakunin was no friend of the bourgeoisie, he never seemed to be able to make up his mind on the

'agency' question. Addressing Marx's belief that the proletariat be "raised to the level of a ruling class," Bakunin pointed out that some other class, like the "peasant rabble," might end up under the working class boot. This concern is obviously related to *Bakunin's preference for the warmhearted Slavic peasant over the anal-retentive, authority-worshipping German worker*: "If we look at the question from the national point of view, then, presumably, as far as the Germans are concerned it is the Slavs who "will occupy in regard to the victorious German proletariat that the latter now occupies in relation to its own bourgeoisie." *Absent from Bakunin's discussion is the economic and social weight of the working class*, which could counter that of the ruling class. Furthermore, the peasant was far too differentiated socially to rule in its own name. Lacking any specific analysis of the agrarian question, Bakunin was content to dwell in *fantasies about the uncorrupted peasant*. (Statism and Anarchy, p. 177)

In what might be described as a bet-hedging strategy, Bakunin was not above making appeals to the royalty to carry out his program. *In 1862 Bakunin wrote* "The People's Cause: Romanov, Pugachev, or Pestel." The three figures respectively stood for various social layers: Romanov the aristocracy, Pugachev the peasant firebrand and Pestel the privileged intelligentsia. Romanov was best qualified to lead the revolution:

"We should most gladly of all follow Romanov, if Romanov could and would transform himself from a Petersburg Emperor into a National Tsar. We should gladly enroll under his standard because the Russian people still recognizes him and because his strength is concentrated, ready to act, and might become an irresistible strength if only he would give it a popular

baptism. We would follow him because he alone could carry out and complete a great, peaceful revolution without shedding one drop of Russian or Slav blood."

*After Bakunin was imprisoned in 1851, he wrote a "Confession" to Czar Nicholas I. This self-debasing document was not wrested out of torture, but was a ploy to win early release through flattery. It contains page after page of the most embarrassing kind of toadying up to the Russian despot, among which you can find appeals for a "revolution from above" of the kind suggested in the 1862 pamphlet, when Bakunin was enjoying freedom. In the Confessions, we find the following sort of thing:*

"A strange thought was then born within me. I suddenly took it into my head to write to you, Sire, and was on the point of starting the letter. It too contained a sort of confession, more vain, more high-flown than the one I am now writing – I was then at liberty and had not yet learned from experience – but it was quite sincere and heartfelt: I confessed my sins; I prayed for forgiveness; then, having made a rather drawn-out and pompous review of the current situation of the Slav peoples, I implored you, Sire, in the name of all oppressed Slavs, to come to their aid, to take them under your mighty protection, to be their savior, their father, and, having proclaimed yourself Tsar of all the Slavs, finally to raise the Slav banner in eastern Europe to the terror of the Germans and all other oppressors and enemies of the Slav race!"

We should hasten to add that this is the same Czar who made Russia a living hell for peasant and Jews alike. According to Cecil Roth, of the legal enactments concerning the Jews published in Russia from 1649 to 1881, no less than one half, or six hundred in all, belong to Nicholas the First's reign. Roth writes:

“By the Statute Concerning the Jews of 1835, the Pale of Settlement was yet further narrowed down. Jews were excluded from all villages within fifty versts of the western frontier. Synagogues were forbidden to be erected in the vicinity of Churches, a strict censorship was established over all Hebrew books. Later, the Jews were expelled from the towns as well as the villages of the frontier area. Special taxation was imposed on meat killed according to the Jewish fashion, and even on the candles kindled on Friday night.” (*History of the Jews*)

It is entirely likely that Bakunin's anti-Semitism prevented him from worrying much over such matters. If this is the case, we can certainly explain it as *a function of his social roots in the Russian gentry*. Whether this makes him an appropriate symbol of the unquenchable struggle for freedom and social justice is another question altogether. Whatever else one might think about 19th century Enlightenment values in this postmodernist age, the commitment to the emancipation of the Jews was laudable. It is unfortunate that Bakunin's revolt against Hegel allowed him to embrace anti-Enlightenment prejudices of the worst sort.

If appeals to the Czar went unheeded, there were always tightly knit and highly secretive conspiratorial circles that could be relied on. Such pure expressions of the anarchist spirit would be immune to the blandishments of bourgeois society. This revolutionary priesthood understands the tasks of the oppressed far better than they ever could themselves:

“This revolutionary alliance excludes any idea of dictatorship and of controlling and directive power. It is, however, necessary for the establishment of this revolutionary alliance and for the Triumph of the Revolution over reaction that the unity of ideas of

revolutionary action find an organ in the midst of popular anarchy which will be the life and the energy of the Revolution. This organ should be the secret and universal association of the International Brothers.

“This association has its origin in the conviction that *revolutions are never made by individuals or even by secret societies*. They make themselves; they are produced by the force of circumstances, the movement of facts and events. They receive a long preparation in the deep, instinctive consciousness of the masses, then they burst forth, often seemingly triggered by trivial causes. All that a well-organized society can do is, first, to assist at the birth of a revolution by spreading among the masses ideas which give expression to their instincts, and to organize, not the army of the Revolution—the people alone should always be that army—but *a sort of revolutionary general staff, composed of dedicated, energetic, intelligent individuals*, sincere friends of the people above all, men neither vain nor ambitious, but capable of serving as intermediaries between the revolutionary idea and the instincts of the people.”

“There need not be a great number of these men. One hundred revolutionaries, strongly and earnestly allied, would suffice for the international organization of all of Europe. Two or three hundred revolutionaries will be enough for the organization of the largest country.” (“The Program of the International Brotherhood”, 1869)

Even the worst caricature of Leninist vanguard would pale in comparison to this kind of elitism. Nowhere is there the slightest awareness in Bakunin of the need for a working class revolutionary leadership to emerge from its participation in the mass movement. In a revolutionary situation, workers will not rally to *people who have been sitting around in the sewers hatching conspiracies by*

*candlelight*. They will gravitate to the men and women who have risked jail and beatings to win reforms that make a difference in their day-to-day lives.

For all of the misunderstandings about the Leninist concept of a vanguard, it is useful to refer to "What is to be Done" for clarification:

"Why is there not a single political event in Germany that does not add to the authority and prestige of the Social-Democracy? Because Social-Democracy is always found to be in advance of all the others in furnishing the most revolutionary appraisal of every given event and in championing every protest against tyranny...It intervenes in every sphere and in every question of social and political life; in the matter of Wilhelm's refusal to endorse a bourgeois progressive as city mayor (our Economists have not managed to educate the Germans to the understanding that such an act is, in fact, a compromise with liberalism!); in the matter of the law against 'obscene' publications and pictures; in the matter of governmental influence on the election of professors, etc., etc."

Despite the tendency of some modern anarchists to claim that they are following the Zapatistas' footsteps, there is powerful evidence that this movement has much more in common with Lenin's concept than the small conspiratorial circles favored by Bakunin. In many respects, their descent on Mexico City in March 2001, culminating in one of the largest "anti-globalizations" actions to date, was designed to win support for legislation that would improve the material, cultural and political conditions of Mayan Indians. In an article in the March 25, Los Angeles Times on March 25, Subcommandante Marcos is reported to have "slammed the failures of revolutionary movements of past decades

for not standing up for the rights of indigenous peoples and other disenfranchised groups, including homosexuals." In reality, this has been the task of the socialist movement from the days of Marx and Lenin. If particular socialist groups have been inattentive to these sorts of issues, it is to be blamed on "What is to be Done," which calls for involvement in "every sphere and in every question of social and political life."

*In reality, the biggest question dividing anarchists and Marxists is not the theory of the state. It is rather the value of political action, including action designed to win reforms of the kind that would improve the lives of Mayan Indians, for example.*

If you turn to August Nimtz's Summer 1999 article in *Science and Society* titled "Marx and Engels—Unsung Heroes of the Democratic Breakthrough," you will discover how engaged they were in struggles against despotism. Rather than philosophizing about future utopias, they committed themselves to fighting alongside working class organizations on the front lines. While the goal of these organizations was to replace feudal absolutism with political democracy, the logic of the struggle was toward social and economic democracy as well. This was the original meaning of democracy: rule by the people (demos).

As I have pointed out, they did not start out with this outlook. In the early 1840s, they gravitated to socialist circles that held disdain for political action. What changed them? It was the Chartist movement in Great Britain that taught them the need for political struggles by the working class. While the fight for the ballot was crucial, Engels emphasized in "Conditions of the Working Class in England" that political democracy was not an end in itself, but a means for social equality. He



writes, "Therein lies the difference between Chartist democracy and all previous political bourgeois democracy."

While Marx and Engels would eventually call for the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system, *they never abandoned the idea that the communists should constitute the most "advanced" or "extreme wing" of the "democratic party" as they put it.*

In the first wave of revolutions that swept Europe in 1848, Marx and Engels discovered that although democratic rights were in the interest of all classes arrayed against the feudal gentry and clergy, the only class that would fight resolutely was the working class. In Germany, the *middle-class radical democrats lost their nerve in the fight against absolutism.* This led Marx to theorize a "permanent revolution" which would combine democratic and socialist goals led by the workers.

After the suppression of the 1848 revolutions, a decade-long lull set in. What gave Marx and Engels encouragement was the emancipation of serfs in the Russia and John Brown's uprising against slavery in the USA. They saw these events as precursors of "a new era of revolution" which had opened up in 1863. The revival of a democratic movement would surely lead to an upsurge in the working class movement, as Marx indicated in a letter to Lincoln in 1864 on behalf of the International Working Man's Association (IMWA): "The working men of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so would the American Anti-Slavery War will do for the working classes."

In 1870, a big struggle opened up in the IMWA over Marx's proposal that two goals set the strategic agenda of

the organization: "To conquer political power has...become the great duty of the working classes" and "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working class themselves." In other words, the original inspiration from the Chartist movement lived on. His two main opponents were British trade union bureaucrats, who while giving lip service to the idea of working class independent politics, were aligned with the Liberal Party. The other was Bakunin.

(This article was intended to be the first in a series on anarchism. Because of the political upheavals taking place around the September 11th events, the issues that generated this article have been superseded for the foreseeable future. I may return to them in the future as dictated by political exigencies.)

Louis Project

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