

# Bakunin: a libertarian communist before the term was coined

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Our debt to Michael Bakunin is manifold. But it is clear which prevails above all the others. The libertarian communists of the late 20th century owe him above all, far beyond his polemics with Marx, far exceeding these, for having seen what Bolshevism would one day be in the distant future. To do this, undoubtedly, he showed himself excessive, often unfair, towards his contemporary, the founder of so-called scientific socialism. At most, certain authoritarian traits and taints of statism were detectable in Marx, although still only manifesting themselves in an embryonic state. The power grab at the Hague Congress of 1872 which expelled Bakunin from the International aggravated these inclinations. Bakunin in his polemics lashes out less at his rival than at the People's State (*Volksstaat*) of the Lassallians and Social Democrats, which Marx and Engels took too long to disown.<sup>1</sup>

But, having detected the embryo, Bakunin had the brilliant divination of its future growth. So much so that his excessive and somewhat biased bashing can be justified in hindsight when it applied to epigones who have abused Marx. Bakunin's foreknowledge of the perverse deviations, before they become monstrous, which will improperly take the name of "Marxism" therefore merits on our part great respect.

Even before arguing with the inspirer of the First International, the Russian prophet had warned against authoritarian "communism".<sup>2</sup> On July 19, 1866, in a letter to Alexander Herzen and Nicolai Ogarev, referring to his two correspondents as if they were one person, Bakunin wrote:

"You who are a sincere and devoted socialist, surely, would be ready to sacrifice your well-being, all your wealth, your very life, to contribute to the destruction of this State, whose existence is compatible neither with freedom nor with the well-being

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Guérin is being far too generous to Marx and Engels here as the paper of their main supporters in the German Socialist movement was entitled *Volksstaat* and it regularly published their works. Likewise, any criticism of the term remained private during Marx's lifetime and, as such, Bakunin's linking of the concept with Marx is perfectly understandable, not least because the notion was used in the same way as the "dictatorship of the proletariat". (*Black Flag*)

<sup>2</sup> Marx played no role in the formation of the First International but did lay a crucial role after it was formed. This, presumably, is what Guérin is referring to here. (*Black Flag*)

of the people. Or you are creating State-socialism and you are able to reconcile yourself with this vilest and most formidable lie that our century has produced: formal democracy and red bureaucracy.”<sup>3</sup>

In the condemnation of authoritarian “communism”, Bakunin resumed the imprecations of his master Proudhon. At the second congress of the League of Peace and Freedom, in Bern, at the end of September 1868, before breaking with this expression of bourgeois liberalism, he proclaimed:

“I detest (authoritarian) communism because it is the negation of freedom and I cannot conceive of anything human without freedom. I am not a communist because communism concentrates and absorbs all the forces of society into the State, because it necessarily leads to the centralisation of property into the hands of the State. (...) I want the organisation of society and collective or social property from the bottom up, by means of free association, and not from top to bottom by means of any authority whatsoever. In that sense I am a collectivist and not at all a communist.”<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless in July 1868 Bakunin became a local member of the International Workers’ Association in Geneva and he wrote to Gustave Vogt, president of the League of Peace and Freedom, in September:

“We cannot and must not ignore the immense and valuable significance of the Brussels Congress (of the First International). It is a great, it is the greatest event today and, if we ourselves are sincere democrats, we must not only desire that the International League of the workers ends up embracing all the workers’ associations of Europe and America, but we have to co-operate with all our efforts because it can constitute today the real revolutionary power which must change the face of the world.”<sup>5</sup>

In the same vein, Bakunin wrote to Marx on December 22, 1866:

“I am no longer committed to any society, to another milieu, than the world of the workers. My homeland now is the International of which you are one of the principal founders. So you see, dear friend, that I am your disciple and I take pride in being so.”<sup>6</sup>

Marx, immediately knowing it is disingenuous, remains silent.

I hereby open a parenthesis, to close it as soon as possible. On his return to Western Europe, after his long years of captivity in Russia, Bakunin had embraced anarchist ideas, borrowed from Proudhon although developed in a more revolutionary direction. But this new conviction had overlapped within him with an inveterate taste for the clandestinity of conspiracies. He had somehow garnered the legacy of Babeufism, Carbonarism, Blanquism, and even more so

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<sup>3</sup> *Correspondance de Mikhail Bakounine: lettres à Herzen et à Ogarev*, éd. Perrin, 1896; in *Archives Bakounine*.

<sup>4</sup> *La première Internationale*, Edited by Jacques Freymond, vol. 1, p. 451.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 1, p. 450.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 1, p. 451 E Kaminski, *Bakounine, la, vie d’un révolutionnaire*.

the secret revolutionary activities appropriate to the struggle against Tzarist despotism. An internationalist at heart, he had successively hatched several international “Fraternities” whose members he recruited in various Latin countries.

The last of these initiatives, the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy, was created the day after his break with the League of Peace and Freedom in 1868, an organisation, he said, “half-secret, half-public”, and which in fact served as a cover for a more restricted and secret society: the Revolutionary Organisation of International Brothers. Having done this, Bakunin, sincerely attracted by the workers’ movement, requested the membership of his Alliance into the International (IWA). The distrust of Marx and his central position in the General Council in London was not entirely groundless. Indeed, the application of the Alliance, a new version of the secret societies instigated by Bakunin, could make it appear as “destined to become an International within the International.”<sup>7</sup>

How did Bakunin manage to reconcile his fiercely anti-authoritarian options with this thinly disguised attempt at “infiltration”? Here is the justification which he made a point of expounding in the secret statutes of the Alliance, a copy of which fell into the hands of the General Council of the IWA led by Marx:

“This organisation excludes any idea of dictatorship and tutelary ruling power. But for the very establishment of this revolutionary alliance and for the triumph of the revolution over reaction, it is necessary that in the midst of the popular anarchy which will constitute the very life and all the energy of the revolution, unity of revolutionary thought and action finds an organ (...), a sort of revolutionary general staff made up of devoted, energetic, intelligent individuals, and above all sincere friends of the people, not ambitious or conceited, capable of serving as intermediaries between the revolutionary idea and popular instincts. (...) A hundred strongly and seriously allied revolutionaries are enough for the international organisation across Europe.”<sup>8</sup>

The dissonance between direct democracy and revolutionary elitism was already striking amongst the Babouvists.<sup>9</sup> We find it today in certain libertarian communist controversies.

This parenthesis closed, let us return to the Alliance’s request for membership of the IWA. The London General Council initially reacts very unfavourably. In its meeting of December 22, 1868, it considered “that the presence of a second international body operating within and outwith the International Workers’ Association would be the most infallible means of disorganisation” and, therefore, declared that the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy “is not admitted as a branch of the International Workers’ Association.” This verdict is written by the hand of Marx. But, a few months later, on March 9, 1869, from the pen of the same Marx, the General Council, correcting itself, no longer saw any obstacle to the “conversion of sections of the Alliance into sections of the International”. The Alliance accepts these conditions and is thereby admitted.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Les prétendues scissions dans l’Internationale,” in Bakounine, *oeuvres complètes*, Champ libre, vol. III, p. 271.

<sup>8</sup> “l’Alliance de la démocratie socialiste et l’Association internationale des travailleurs”, in Freymond, op. cit., pp. 474-475.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Bourgeois et bras nus, 1792-1795*, Gallimard, 1973, pp. 312-313 (épuisé) ; les Nuits rouges, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> “Procès-verbaux du Conseil général de la 1<sup>è</sup> Internationale, 1868-1870”, in Freymond, op. cit., II, pp. 262-264 and 272-273.

Bakunin attended the Basel Congress of the International in September 1869 and joined forces with Marx's supporters against Proudhon's degenerate epigones who supported individual property against collective ownership [of land].<sup>11</sup>

It will only be two years later that relations become strained; at the London Conference which opened on September 17, 1871, Marx revealed an authoritarianism incompatible with Bakunin's libertarian arguments. In short, Marx tries to increase the powers of the General Council in London, Bakunin would like to reduce them. One wants to centralise, the other to decentralise. The final outcome will be the Hague Congress, at the start of September 1872, where Marx, by dishonest methods and with the help of fictitious mandates, succeeded in expelling Bakunin and his friend James Guillaume before consigning the International's General Council to the United States.

It was then that Bakunin, outraged by the coup, lashes out against Marx and authoritarian "communism" in earnest. It is to this anger that we owe the curses which today seem prophetic to us since, beyond the Marxist intrigues, it challenges and denounces a whole process which, long after the death of Bakunin and Marx, takes on a remarkable relevance for us.

First of all, Bakunin foresees what the dictatorship will one day be, under the deceptive term of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party. In a letter to the Brussels newspaper *La Liberté*, written from Zurich on October 5, 1872, he thundered against the confiscation of the revolutionary movement by a clique of leaders:

"To claim that a group of individuals, even the most intelligent and the best intentioned, will be able to become the directing and unifying thought, the soul, the will of the revolutionary movement and of the economic organisation of the proletariat of all lands, this is such a heresy against common sense and against historical experience that one wonders with astonishment how a man as intelligent as Marx could have conceived of it."<sup>12</sup>

And Bakunin continues to foretell:

"We do not accept even as a revolutionary transition national conventions, constituent assemblies, provisional governments, or so-called revolutionary dictatorships; because we are convinced that revolution (...) when it is concentrated in the hands of a few ruling individuals, inevitably and immediately becomes reaction."

The disastrous experience of a powerful International scuppered by the arbitrary will of a single man led Bakunin to distrust an authoritarian internationalism such as that, much later, of the Third International under Bolshevik leadership: What can be said of a friend of the proletariat,

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<sup>11</sup> As Guérin noted elsewhere, "Proudhon is too often confused with what Bakunin called 'the little so-called Proudhonian coterie' which gathered around him in his last years. This rather reactionary group was stillborn. In the First International it tried in vain to put across private ownership of the means of production against collectivism. The chief reason this group was short-lived was that most of its adherents were all too easily convinced by Bakunin's arguments and abandoned their so-called Proudhonian ideas to support collectivism [...] this group, who called themselves *mutuellistes*, were only partly opposed to collectivism: they rejected it for agriculture because of the individualism of the French peasant, but accepted it for transport, and in matters of industrial self-management actually demanded it while rejecting its name." (*Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* [London: Monthly Review Press, 1970], 44). (*Black Flag*)

<sup>12</sup> Lettre au journal *La Liberté*, 5 octobre 1872, in Bakounine, vol. III, p. 147.

of a revolutionary, who claims to seriously want the emancipation of the masses and who, by posing as supreme director and arbiter of all the revolutionary movements that may break out in different countries, dares to dream of the subjugation of the proletariat of all these lands to a single thought, hatched in his own brain?

Bakunin could not believe it. Marx's blindness seemed inconceivable to him:

"I wonder how he fails to see that the establishment of a universal dictatorship, collective or individual, of a dictatorship that would somehow perform the task of chief engineer of the world revolution, regulating and directing the insurrectionary movement of the masses in all countries pretty much as one would run a machine, that the establishment of such a dictatorship would suffice in itself to kill the revolution, to paralyse and distort all popular movements."<sup>13</sup>

And the kind of dictatorship that Marx had exercised from the General Council in London led Bakunin to fear that such an example will grow and take on aberrant proportions:

"And what is one to think of an International Congress which, in the alleged interest of this revolution, imposes on the proletariat of the entire civilised world a government invested with dictatorial powers, with the inquisitorial and pontifical right [within the International] to suspend regional federations, ban whole nations in the name of an alleged official principle which is nothing other than the Marx's own idea, transformed by the vote of a fictitious majority into an absolute truth?"

The following year, in 1873, still smarting at the misfortune of the Hague, Bakunin write a book with the title *Statism and Anarchy* in which he deepened his reflections and clarified his vituperation.<sup>14</sup> The connecting thread of his argument is, without doubt, the pages of the *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* by his master Proudhon. With and after him, Bakunin asks the question:

"If the proletariat becomes the ruling class, it may be asked, then who will it rule? (...) Whoever says State necessarily says domination and, consequently, slavery. (...) From whatever point of view we take, we arrive at the same execrable outcome: the government of the immense majority of the popular masses by a privileged minority. But this minority, say the Marxists, will consist of workers. Yes, certainly, of former workers but who, as soon as they become rulers, will cease to be workers and will begin to look at the proletarian world from the heights of the State, will no longer represent the people but themselves and their claim to govern it."

And Bakunin wages war against the pretensions of authoritarian socialism to be "scientific". "It will be nothing but the despotic government of the proletarian masses by a new and very narrow aristocracy of real or purported scholars. The people are not learned, so they will be completely liberated from the concerns of government and completely incorporated into the governed herd."

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<sup>13</sup> As Marx wrote to Engels on September, 11 1867: "And when the next revolution comes, and that will perhaps be sooner than might appear, we (i.e., you and I) will have this mighty ENGINE at our disposal." (*Marx-Engels Collected Works* 42: 424). (Editor)

<sup>14</sup> Bakounine, *Etatisme et Anarchie*, 1873, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. IV

Elsewhere, Bakunin delights in portraying the particularly foreboding features of this future State with scientific pretensions and which so closely resembles that of the USSR today:

“there will be an extremely complex government which will not be content with governing and administering the masses politically (...) but which will also administer them economically, concentrating in its hands the production and proper distribution of wealth, the cultivation of land, the establishment and development of factories, the organisation and direction of commerce, and finally the application of capital to production by the sole banker, the State. All that will require immense knowledge and many heads bursting with brains in this government. It will be the reign of *scientific intelligence*, the most aristocratic, the most despotic, the most arrogant, and the most condescending of all regimes.”<sup>15</sup>

But will this despotism be permanent? For Bakunin:

“The Marxists console themselves with the thought that this dictatorship will be temporary and brief. According to them, this statist yoke, this dictatorship, is a transitional stage necessary to reach the total emancipation of the people: anarchy or freedom is the goal, the State or dictatorship, the means. So, in order to liberate the popular masses, one must begin by enslaving them. (...) To this we reply that no dictatorship can have any other end than to endure as long as possible.”<sup>16</sup>

One would think that this is an anticipatory libertarian refutation of *The State and Revolution* by “comrade” Lenin!

Bakunin even foresaw the reign of the apparatchiks. In a text of March 1872, even before the power grab in the Hague, he announced the birth “of a small and privileged bourgeoisie, that of the managers, representatives and functionaries of the so-called popular State.”<sup>17</sup>

Finally, in a text of November-December 1872, which will serve as a conclusion, Bakunin accused Marx of having “failed to kill the International by his criminal attempt at the Hague” and sets as a condition to be admitted into the anti-authoritarian International which survives the coup the following condition:

“Understanding that, since the proletariat, the manual worker, the toiler, is the historical representative of the last slavery on earth, his emancipation is the emancipation of everyone, his triumph is the final triumph of humanity, and that, consequently, the organisation of the power of the proletariat in every land (...) cannot have as its goal the constitution of a new privilege, a new monopoly, a new class or a new domination.”<sup>18</sup>

Bakunin was a libertarian communist before the term existed!

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<sup>15</sup> Bakounine, “Ecrits contre Marx”, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol III, p. 204.

<sup>16</sup> *Etatisme et Anarchie*, op. cit., pp. 346-347.

<sup>17</sup> “l’Allemagne et le communisme d’Etat”, in Bakounine, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. III, p. 118.

<sup>18</sup> “Ecrit contre Marx”, op. cit., pp. 182-183.

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“Bakounine, communiste libertaire avant la letter” (1983), reprinted as “Ce que les communistes libertaires doivent surtout à Bakounine” in *A la recherche d’un communisme libertaire* (Paris: Spartacus, 1984), pp.56-61. (*Black Flag*)

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