

## **Bakunin and Marx: An Unbridgeable Chasm?<sup>1</sup>**

Paul McLaughlin, University of Tartu

### 1. Introduction

In this paper, we will re-examine one of the great political disputes of the nineteenth century: a theoretical and practical debate between two of the major figures in socialist history; a debate that had a profound influence on the development of socialism in the twentieth century; and a debate that resonates to this day. Indeed, many key philosophical and sociological issues surrounding this dispute remain unclear. In a valuable recent (and unusually sympathetic) work on Bakunin, for example, Mark Leier informs us that Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin ‘shared many ideas, though both were [for personal and political reasons] loathe to admit it’; in fact, they really ‘differed on two important and related issues: that of reform and that of the state’.<sup>2</sup> Such a restrictive understanding – of simple *ideological* disagreement over revolutionary means and ends – is not false, but it is inadequate. The differences between Bakunin and Marx are much more fundamental and extensive than Leier acknowledges, and we will attempt to explicate them here.

The basic purpose our reassessment, then, is to clarify the intellectual relationship between Bakunin and Marx in order: (i) to improve our understanding of the history of nineteenth century socialist ideas; (ii) to help us appreciate the impact of these ideas on twentieth century history; and (iii) to determine whether these ideas remain relevant in the twenty-first century context. Thus, our approach in this paper is primarily historical. However, an intended outcome of our historical discussion is that it (a) exposes certain theoretical deficiencies of classical socialist theory and thereby (b) discloses subject matter for future theoretical work.

The sense in which the paper constitutes a *re*-assessment should be specified at this early stage. In part, what follows is a *personal* reassessment of views expressed on

---

<sup>1</sup> This is no more than a draft, in need of revision and elaboration in various places.

<sup>2</sup> *Bakunin: A Biography* (New York: Dunne Books / St Martin’s Press, 2006), p. 271.

the issue some years ago.<sup>3</sup> At any rate, it is certainly a restatement and clarification of these views: a statement involving less of the former Hegelian jargon and Bookchinian rhetoric, neither of which I regard as philosophically fruitful any longer.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the paper also constitutes a reassessment of received wisdom concerning these matters, as passed down by a number of questionable scholarly authorities.

The scholarship on the Bakunin-Marx relationship to date has largely been impaired by ideological hostility towards Bakunin in particular. This hostility is usually apparent as a simple (and often uninformed) unwillingness to take Bakunin seriously as a theoretician. Thus, many of Marx's own followers and sympathizers have (more or less uncritically) accepted his assertion that Bakunin is 'a nonentity as a theoretician'.<sup>5</sup> For Paul Thomas, then, 'Fantastic hopes, not reasoned arguments,' are the basis of Bakunin's revolutionary ideology.<sup>6</sup> However, liberal scholars have been equally hostile towards Bakunin, and their scholarship has arguably had a greater influence on received history of ideas. Most notable here is Isaiah Berlin, who makes a number of extraordinary and unsubstantiated claims about Bakunin – claims that have gained dramatic expression in Tom Stoppard's trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia* (2002), and been stretched to book-length in an influential biography by Aileen Kelly.<sup>7</sup> Berlin claims that Bakunin 'is not a serious thinker'; he 'has not bequeathed a single idea worth considering for its own sake'; and his 'thought is almost always simple, shallow, and clear'. Therefore, 'what is to be looked for in him is not social theory or political doctrine, but an outlook and a temperament'; after all, 'his positive doctrines [are] mere strings of ringing commonplaces, linked

---

<sup>3</sup> See *Mikhail Bakunin: The Philosophical Basis of His Anarchism* (New York: Algora, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> The jargon was largely a product of my early philosophical training, while the rhetoric illustrated the influence (still obvious!) of works such as Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2nd edn, ed. D. McLellan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 637.

<sup>6</sup> *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 285.

<sup>7</sup> *Mikhail Bakunin: A Study in the Psychology and Politics of Utopianism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).

together by vague emotional relevance or rhetorical afflatus rather than a coherent structure of genuine ideas'.<sup>8</sup>

Given the supposed poverty of Bakunin's thought (which Berlin does not examine in any detail), one might ask whether his intellectual relationship with Marx is worth reassessing at all. What could we possibly learn from such a theoretical 'nonentity'? Our contention here – and it should be emphasized that it is controversial – is that we can learn a great deal: (1) about Marx himself and his influence on the course of twentieth century history; (2) and also about the development of libertarian socialism as an alternative model to Marxian socialism (a model that still stands in need of development, appropriate to the needs of our time). The least that can be said for Bakunin is that he was a major early critic of the Marxist ideology. Indeed, his critique of Marxism remains relevant and instructive, as we will seek to demonstrate below. However, apart from his critical achievements, Bakunin was also an original and persuasive (if not wholly convincing, consistent, or coherent) political philosopher: he is perhaps the most important nineteenth century advocate of libertarian socialism. Neither the Marxist nor the liberal critics of Bakunin have done justice to this aspect of his thought. That he should have acted on his philosophy should not be thought to diminish it, as many academic critics are inclined to believe. And that he should have denied late in life that he was a philosopher at all should not be taken too seriously, especially when he continued to write manuscripts like *Philosophical Considerations on the Divine Phantom, on the Real World, and on Man* (1870).<sup>9</sup> In any event, Bakunin's brand of socialism developed alongside, and largely as a reaction to, Marx's socialism (indeed, it had a far from negligible impact on the latter); and it is only by investigating the relationship between these two contrasting positions that we can hope (i) to make sense of either of them, (ii) to understand their historical impact, or (iii) to appreciate their abiding appeal.

---

<sup>8</sup> See 'Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty', *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 82-113.

<sup>9</sup> This is an appendix to Bakunin's major work, *The Knouto-Germanic Empire and Social Revolution* (1870-2). Other parts of this sprawling work, to be referred to below, include *The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State* and *An Essay Against Marx*. Bakunin's best known pamphlet, *God and the State*, is an excerpt from Part Two of this work.

## 2. Context

Before specifying a number of theoretical differences between Bakunin and Marx, we should comment briefly on the history of their relationship in order to place what follows in context.

Having fallen under the spell of Hegel in the intellectual circles of 1830s Moscow, Bakunin went to Berlin in July 1840 (his journey having been funded, like many of his adventures, by his friend Herzen). He stayed there for some eighteen months, attending (what proved to be disappointing and highly conservative) university lectures by Schelling and von Ranke and crossing paths with such later luminaries as Kierkegaard and Engels. However, it was not until he arrived in Paris in the spring of 1844 (by which point he had given up on academia and become a socialist) that he met Marx. Bakunin reflected many years later on their impressions of one another:

As far as learning was concerned, Marx was, and still is, incomparably more advanced than I. I knew nothing at that time of political economy, I had not rid myself of my metaphysical observations, and my socialism was only instinctive. Although younger than I [by four years], he was already an atheist, a conscious materialist, and an informed socialist. It was precisely at this time that he was elaborating the foundations of his system as it stands today. We saw each other often, I greatly respected him for his learning and for his passionate devotion – though it was always mingled with vanity – to the cause of the proletariat. I eagerly sought his conversation, which was always instinctive and witty when it was not inspired by petty hate, which Alas! was only too often the case. There was never any frank intimacy between us – our temperaments did not permit it. He called me a sentimental idealist and he was right; I called him vain, perfidious, and cunning, and I was also right.<sup>10</sup>

It was largely character and culture that divided Bakunin and Marx at the outset; these differences would later result in a great deal of personal, nationalistic, and racist abuse that merits no further treatment here. But their dislike of one another intensified through the years as Marx spread numerous rumors about his ideological rival, while Bakunin tried to push the International Workingmen's Association in an anarchist direction in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Thus, for example, Marx was (in the wake of

---

<sup>10</sup> *Bakunin on Anarchism*, ed. S. Dolgoff (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), p. 25.

the 1848 Slav congress in Prague) to publish in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* a libelous article claiming that Bakunin was a Tsarist agent. (He was forced to retract this later.) After Bakunin's escape from Russia (where he had been imprisoned and then exiled for a decade) in 1861, he was to make temporary peace with Marx in London in 1864. On what was to be their last meeting, Bakunin even declined Marx's offer to join the First International. However, when Bakunin applied for membership of the International in 1868 (he joined the following year), relations between the two broke down completely. Marx believed that Bakunin was conspiring to take ideological and political control of an organization over which, by that stage, he held so much sway. Marx and his supporters responded by publically questioning both Bakunin's commitment to internationalism (accusing him of remaining a pan-Slavist, as he had been in the late-1840s, if not a 'Russophile' or even a Russian agent) and his commitment to social revolution (accusing of him of advocating terrorism, owing to his foolish association with Nechaev, the Russian nihilist). In spite of such politicking, Bakunin's form of anarchism was gaining supporters, not least in the southern European sections of the International. Because of such ideological divisions and hostilities, as well as prevailing political conditions after the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871, the International effectively collapsed at the Hague congress in 1872 (though it officially existed until 1876), when Marx and Engels engineered Bakunin's expulsion from the organization and had its General Council transferred from London to New York.

While Marx's resentment of Bakunin's success in an organization that he had worked so hard to develop is perhaps understandable, it was ultimately his determination to wield power in the International (or to have no International at all) that led to its demise. As Leszek Kołakowski writes, 'his policies led to a breach within the International which was a major cause, if not the main cause, of its collapse'. In general terms, he adds, 'the history of Marx's relations with Bakunin does not show the former in a favorable light. His charge that Bakunin was using the International for personal advantage was groundless, and his efforts to have Bakunin expelled were finally successful (in 1872) thanks in the main to the Nechaev letter [threatening

Bakunin's Russian publisher over a contract to translate Marx's *Capital*], for which Marx must have known that Bakunin bore no responsibility'.<sup>11</sup>

The disintegration of the First International had a significant impact on socialist history. Ever since, Marxists (those inspired by Marx's brand of so-called 'state socialism') and anarchists (those who developed Bakunin's model of 'libertarian socialism') have, for the most part, maintained hostile relations. These hostilities have not been merely theoretical or ideological, but have taken practical shape in the events of the Ukrainian revolution of 1918-1921, the Kronstadt rebellion of 1921, and the Spanish revolution of 1936-1939. However, it should be stressed that it was not a simple clash of personalities or political factions that led to this schism within the socialist movement. There are basic theoretical differences between Bakunin and Marx that ought to be clarified. Some of these differences tend to be overlooked, while it is possible to exaggerate others. We will attempt to present a balanced picture here. However, given the prevalence of certain readings of Marx as well as the aforementioned hostility towards Bakunin, such a picture will still strike many as highly unorthodox.

### 3. Philosophical Differences

There are fundamental *metaphysical* differences between Bakunin and Marx: they differ significantly on their conceptions of human nature and its place in the natural world. Marx seems to identify human nature with a distinctive form of productivity. (Thus, human beings would seem to emerge as productive mediators of nature: utilizers and shapers of what, as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse* (1857-8), exists *for them*.<sup>12</sup>) A famous passage in this context is the following: 'Man can be [speculatively] distinguished from the animal by consciousness, religion, or anything else you please. He [in fact] begins to distinguish himself from the animal the moment he begins to *produce* his means of

---

<sup>11</sup> *Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P.S. Falla (New York: Dover, 2005), pp. 201, 203. It should go without saying that Kołakowski is not especially sympathetic to Bakunin, whom he (mistakenly) regards as having a naïve belief in the natural goodness of mankind [see *ibid.*, p. 210].

<sup>12</sup> See *Marx's Grundrisse*, ed. D. McLellan (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 99.

subsistence, a step required by his physical organization'.<sup>13</sup> What is evident here is that Marx is actually unwilling to do metaphysics at all: to *speculate* on what human beings are *really* like. He is only willing to identify what we supposedly *are* with what we verifiably *do* (at different stages of socio-economic history); and this is a crucial step in his move away from speculative philosophy and towards political economy. Thus, he writes (demonstrating the influence of Stirner, or, more specifically, Stirner's critique of Feuerbachian humanism), 'As individuals express their lives, so they are'.<sup>14</sup> Of course, individuals express their lives differently at different times, or under different modes of production. Therefore, there is no fixed 'human nature': 'the essence of man is no abstraction inhering in each single individual. In its actuality it is [reducible to] the ensemble of social [or historically developing socio-economic] relationships'.<sup>15</sup>

Bakunin, by marked contrast, believes in 'the identity of human nature at all times and in every climate'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, for Bakunin, human nature is (to all intents and purposes, notwithstanding biological developments) fixed. Moreover, it is amenable to rational investigation by means of 'positive science' (certainly not 'metaphysics', in the highly pejorative Comtean sense of that term). Put simply, for Bakunin, we are knowable as we really are. Feuerbach was therefore justified in speaking 'of "Man" instead of "real historical men"'.<sup>17</sup> What, in summary, does Bakunin say of 'Man'? First of all, he claims that human beings are, like all animals, a constituent part of the natural world and in no way distinct from it (as, say, either rational or productive 'mediators' of it): 'Man forms together with Nature a single entity and is the material product of an indefinite number

---

<sup>13</sup> *The German Ideology* (1845-6), *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. L.D. Easton and K.H. Guddat (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), p. 409.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* The young Marx is in fact singled out as one of Feuerbach's disciples by Stirner [see *The Ego and Its Own* (1844), ed. D. Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 158], and there is no question that the maturing Marx, for all his antipathy to Stirner (voiced in the largest section of *The German Ideology*), took the latter's critique of metaphysical essentialism very seriously.

<sup>15</sup> *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), *Writings of the Young Marx*, p. 402. Stirner's claim that 'the species is nothing... only something thought of' [*The Ego and Its Own*, p. 163] is echoed throughout Marx's writings of this period.

<sup>16</sup> *Federalism, Socialism, and Anti-Theologism* (1867), *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism*, ed. G.P. Maximoff (Glencoe: Free Press, 1953), p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, *The German Ideology*, *Writings of the Young Marx*, p. 416.

of exclusively material causes'.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, Bakunin claims (in classic Enlightenment fashion) that we are distinguished as animals by the *degree* of human intelligence, or 'reason', and by the human desire for freedom (or, consistently, the human degree thereof). Reason is 'that faculty for generalization and abstraction, thanks to which man can project himself through thought, examining and observing himself like an alien and external object'.<sup>19</sup> Freedom consists, negatively, 'in the *rebellion* of the human individual against all authority [or 'authority of right'], whether divine or human, collective or individual'; and, positively, in 'the full development and full enjoyment of all the human faculties and powers in every man'.<sup>20</sup> Of course, Bakunin is morally committed, as a socialist, to the principle of material equality; and his simultaneous belief in both freedom and equality is famously expressed in the following lines, which might well be directed at Marx: 'we are convinced that freedom without Socialism is privilege and injustice, and that Socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality'.<sup>21</sup>

Doubtless Bakunin's account of human beings as (a) rational animals that are (b) capable of freedom and (c) prosper in conditions of material equality is open to criticism. But the main issue to be emphasized here is that Bakunin refuses to make any qualitative distinctions between human beings and other animals, or to draw any dualistic division between the natural and social realms. Such naturalism contrasts sharply with Marx's position, whether we interpret it as a kind of 'productivism' (based on a privileged understanding of man as *homo faber*) or a kind of anti-essentialism (according to which nothing of genuine metaphysical interest can be said). The former position is broadly criticized for being factually false or metaphysically reductive or ecologically dangerous. However, interpreting Marx in the latter sense, we might claim (i) that not everything that can be said of human beings is historically contingent and (ii) that there is a genuine science of 'human nature', as Bakunin believed. Thus, the

---

<sup>18</sup> *Federalism, Socialism, and Anti-Theologism, The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 83.

<sup>19</sup> *The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State* (1871), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, ed. A. Lehning (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), p. 209.

<sup>20</sup> 'God and the State' (a lengthy footnote to the *Knouto-Germanic Empire*, not to be confused with the famous pamphlet of the same name), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, p. 149.

<sup>21</sup> *Federalism, Socialism, and Anti-Theologism, The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 269. Emphasis removed.



metaphysical dispute between Bakunin and Marx can be seen as predating contemporary disputes over postmodernism, disputes that are live within the socialist and anarchist traditions.

Bakunin and Marx also differ on the *philosophy of history*, or their general, quasi-speculative understanding of historical development. This is largely due to their differing interpretations of Hegel's dialectic. Both appreciate Hegel for his understanding of the role of contradiction in historical development. Both regard the dialectic as 'in its essence critical and revolutionary'. And both agree that Hegel's dialectic 'must be turned right side up again, if you are to discover the rational [or realistic] kernel within the mystical [or idealistic] shell'.<sup>22</sup> However, Marx is much closer to Hegel in his understanding of a semi-preservative dialectic that is based on the principle of 'sublation' (*Aufhebung*). According to Marx's logic, therefore, succeeding moments of historical development contain elements of the preceding moments which they have overcome; indeed, the former are *necessarily* premised on the latter. Hence, a society *must* pass through capitalism before it can become communist, for example.<sup>23</sup> For Bakunin, much influenced by Bruno Bauer's interpretation of Hegel, the dialectic is not semi-preservative, but wholly negative. Hence, it is 'merciless negation that constitutes [the] essence' of Hegel's system.<sup>24</sup> For Bakunin, then, social revolution requires 'a total transformation of [the] world condition' – not, for example, a 'mere' change of governing or administering class, as (allegedly) with Marx.<sup>25</sup>

Without engaging in verbose discussion of Hegel's thought, or investigating the principle of dialectic as such, what is apparent in the historical dispute between Bakunin and Marx is a distinction between Bakunin's 'revolutionism' and Marx's historicism: Bakunin recognizes the general possibility of a wholly transformative revolution based (in part, at least) on 'subjective' will; Marx, by contrast, stresses 'objective' historical conditions which must be met for revolution to be possible (and which even render it

---

<sup>22</sup> '1872 Preface' to *Capital*, Volume I, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 458.

<sup>23</sup> Admittedly, Marx's line on this softened somewhat in his final years. See, for example, his 'Letter to Vera Sassoulitch', *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, pp. 623-8.

<sup>24</sup> *Statism and Anarchy* (1873), ed. M. Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 131.

<sup>25</sup> 'The Reaction In Germany' (1842), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, p. 39.

necessary). Thus, early concern for the intricacies of the Hegelian system and post-Hegelian thought can help to explain the differing revolutionary outlooks to which we will return below. Indeed, such concern lies at the root of a general conflict between anarchists and Marxists along ‘voluntaristic’ and ‘deterministic’ lines.

A third philosophical difference between Bakunin and Marx concerns *ethics*. Marx does not object to capitalism on moral grounds. He maintains that such moralistic objections are ‘so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests’.<sup>26</sup> That is to say, he regards moral discourse as purely ideological. (Indeed, at this ideological level, one would be compelled to conclude that capitalist exploitation is ‘just’ after all, since ‘it corresponds to the mode of production, is adequate to it’.<sup>27</sup> That is to say, capitalist exploitation is just on capitalist grounds – the only relevant grounds with respect to capitalist society.) Marx himself is concerned to uncover the real and fundamental *contradictions* of capitalism, owing to which (on his interpretation of history) it *must* give way to another stage of development. Bakunin, by contrast, condemns capitalism on moral grounds: he thinks that it is *unjust* (precisely insofar as it is exploitative) and that it *ought* to be overcome, that is (in his historical terms), negated. Thus, Bakunin is content – and thinks it necessary – to make what Marx would consider ‘merely’ ideological claims; and this implies, as we will see in the next section, that he is not wholly committed to the materialist conception of history. Challenging Marx’s fatalistic outlook, and opening himself to the standard Marxist criticism of voluntarism, Bakunin writes:

... in what is properly called nature we recognize many [so-called] necessities that we are little disposed to bless, such as the necessity of dying when one is bitten by a mad dog. In the same way, in that immediate continuation of the life of nature called history, we encounter many necessities which we find much more worthy of opprobrium than benediction, and which we believe we should stigmatize with all the energy of which we are capable in the interest of our social and individual morality.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 254.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted from *Capital*, Volume III (1865) in A.W. Wood, *Karl Marx*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 133.

<sup>28</sup> *An Essay Against Marx* (1872), *Bakunin on Anarchism*, p. 311.

In the same context, Bakunin outlines his ethical ideal: the libertarian socialist ideal of freedom in equality and equality in freedom, or what could be termed 'integral justice'.

This ideal, today better understood than ever, is the triumph of humanity, the most complete conquest and establishment of personal freedom and development – material, intellectual, and moral – for every individual, through the absolutely unrestricted and spontaneous organization of economic and social solidarity.<sup>29</sup>

Once again, Bakunin's ethic is subject to criticism, notably from value pluralists (like Berlin) who claim that the attempt to 'integrate' competing values (by dialectical or other means) is little more than an attempt to have one's cake and eat it too: liberty can be chosen at the expense of equality (in liberal fashion), or equality can be chosen at the expense of liberty (in socialist fashion); but the libertarian socialist solution is really no moral solution at all. Perhaps this is so (though it is hardly as obvious as many pluralists maintain), but the real issue here is that of whether social critique requires moral foundations at all: Bakunin thinks that it does, Marx disagrees, and this disagreement is crucial to the historical dispute between Marxists (as 'scientific' socialists) and anarchists (as mere 'moralizers').

#### 4. Sociological Differences

Another difference between Bakunin and Marx has led to some confusion in the secondary literature; indeed, Bakunin's inconsistent statements on the matter account for this confusion. This difference concerns sociological *method*, or, more specifically, Marx's *materialist conception of history*, the most concise account of which is the following:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness [e.g., morality and philosophy]. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political,

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 310-1. Emphasis removed.

and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundations the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.<sup>30</sup>

Put simply, then, *relations of production* (comprising the social organization that is founded on given property relations) ‘correspond’ to *forces of production* (comprising both means of production and labor power); and together these constitute a *mode of production*, the economico-material ‘base’ of a society which determines its legal, political, and intellectual ‘superstructure’ and its *ideology*.

For Bakunin, the materialist conception of history represents a major scientific achievement on Marx’s part, and at times he seems wholly committed to this sociological approach: to the conception that ‘the whole history of humanity, intellectual and moral, political and social, is but a reflection of [and can be explained in terms of] its economic history’.<sup>31</sup> Thus, he writes that Marx has ‘advanced and proved the incontrovertible truth, confirmed by the entire past and present history of human society, nations, and states, that economic fact has always preceded legal and political right. The exposition and demonstration of that truth constitutes one of Marx’s principal contributions to science’.<sup>32</sup> However, Bakunin also expresses misgivings about historical materialism. He notes that it is ‘profoundly true when one considers it in its true light, that is to say, from the relative point of view’; but that when it is ‘envisaged and set down in an absolute manner as the only foundation and first source of all other principles, [it] becomes completely false’.<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere he attacks historical materialism in characteristically anarchist terms:

---

<sup>30</sup> ‘Preface’ to *A Critique of Political Economy* (1859), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 425.

<sup>31</sup> *God and the State* (1871), ed. P. Avrich (New York: Dover, 1970), p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Statism and Anarchy*, p. 142.

<sup>33</sup> *The Knouto-Germanic Empire, Part II* (1871), *Marxism, Freedom, and the State*, ed. K.J. Kenafick (London: Freedom Press, 1950), p. 20.

The political State in every country, [Marx] says, is always the product and faithful reflection of its economic situation; to change the former, one has only to change the latter. This is the whole secret of political evolutions, according to Herr Marx. He pays no heed to other elements in history, such as the effect – obvious though it is – of political, judicial, and religious institutions on the economic situation. He says that ‘hardship produces political slavery – the State’, but does not allow for the converse: ‘Political slavery – the State – reproduces and maintains hardship as a condition of its existence, so that in order to destroy hardship the State must be destroyed’.<sup>34</sup>

In general, Bakunin emphasizes the social significance and determining capacity of various ‘ideological’ factors: national, political, religious, ethical, educational, and so on. He also insists that human will (manifested as ‘a real passion for destruction’) is a necessary (though insufficient) condition for social revolution: ‘This negative passion is far from sufficient for achieving the ultimate aims of the revolutionary cause. Without it, however, that cause would be inconceivable, impossible’.<sup>35</sup> Emphasizing (or over-emphasizing) the insufficiency of revolutionary will, then, Bakunin writes: ‘revolutions... are not made arbitrarily either by individuals or even by the most powerful associations. They occur independently of all volition and conspiracy and are always brought about by the force of circumstances’.<sup>36</sup> Marx is therefore wrong in stating bluntly that ‘Will, not economic conditions, is the foundation of [Bakunin’s] social revolution’.<sup>37</sup>

It appears, therefore, that Bakunin believes that economics is a particularly important social factor, but that it is not the absolute or even the ultimate determining factor in each and every case. In fact, Bakunin’s rather ambivalent attitude towards historical materialism would come to characterize much of social anarchist thought. However, some contemporary anarchist theorists (especially so-called eco-anarchists) are highly and generally critical of Marxian ‘economism’ and Bakunin’s insufficiently critical attitude towards it. Thus, while Bakunin’s naturalism is broadly compatible with an ecological outlook, many argue that his (partial) economism is not.

---

<sup>34</sup> *Letter to La Liberté* (1872), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, p. 256.

<sup>35</sup> *Statism and Anarchy*, p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> ‘The Policy of the International’ (1869), *The Basic Bakunin: Writings 1869-1871*, ed. R.M. Cutler (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1992), p. 109.

<sup>37</sup> ‘On Bakunin’s *Statism and Anarchy*’ (1874), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 607.

Another sociological difference here concerns *class analysis*. Both Bakunin and Marx believe that social classes exist (in some sense: perhaps as aggregations of individuals with shared interests, perhaps even as self-conscious agents). They also believe that class conflict is a real phenomenon. As Bakunin puts it, 'In vain would one try to console oneself that this antagonism is fictitious rather than real, or that it is impossible to lay down a clear line of demarcation between the possessing and the dispossessed classes'.<sup>38</sup> (Nevertheless, demarcation does remain a difficult issue for Bakunin and Marx.) Both believe, moreover, that scientifically valuable claims – claims of explanatory and predictive value with respect to social history – can be made about classes, class relations, and the (morally desirable or historically necessary) disappearance of class. Put simply, both take class analysis seriously. However, they differ significantly on the historical role of various classes. Marx attributes a leading role to the proletariat (a class principally, though not exclusively, composed of urban and industrial wage-laborers) in the 'sublation' of the capitalist mode of production. Responding to the question of which class would constitute the vehicle of revolution, Marx answered: 'a class in civil society that is not of civil society, a class that is the dissolution of all classes... [a class] that cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all the other spheres of society, thereby emancipating them; a sphere, in short, that is the *complete loss* of humanity and can only redeem itself through the *total redemption of humanity*. This dissolution of society as a particular class is the proletariat'.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike Marx, Bakunin sees revolutionary potential in classes other than the proletariat, notably the peasantry and the lumpenproletariat. Thus, he appeals, for example, to 'those millions of non-civilized, disinherited, wretched, and illiterates whom Messrs. Engels and Marx mean to subject to the paternal regime of *a very strong government*'. Unlike the 'upper layer' of the proletariat, which 'with its relative comfort and semi-bourgeois position [is] too deeply penetrated with all the political and social prejudices and all the narrow aspirations of the bourgeois', the 'riff-raff' of society is 'very nearly unpolluted by all bourgeois civilization [and] carries in its heart... all the

---

<sup>38</sup> *Federalism, Socialism, and Anti-Theologism, The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 189.

<sup>39</sup> 'Toward the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*' (1844), *Writings of the Young Marx*, p. 263.

germs of the Socialism of the future [and] alone is powerful enough today to inaugurate the Social Revolution and bring it to triumph'.<sup>40</sup> On the international scale, by extension, Bakunin saw considerable potential for revolution in 'pre-industrial' societies in southern and eastern Europe, while Marx was generally skeptical about this, at least until late in his life (when he conceded that revolution might even begin in Russia).

Whatever might be said of the general scientific merit of class analysis, Marx's predictions in this respect have proved less than reliable: the revolutionary terrain of the last hundred years or so was not industrial society; and capitalism did not prove to be a prerequisite for communism (at least, as we have come to know it). Indeed, Bakunin's predictions of revolutions in 'the East' and 'the South' – and broadly speaking among the 'dispossessed' rather than the proletariat – have proved a great deal more accurate than Marx's, even if anarchist revolutionary experiments have ultimately failed (notably in Ukraine and Spain). In more contemporary terms, anarchists continue to call Marxian class analysis into question, criticizing the hegemonic role assigned to the proletariat as out-dated if not mistaken from the start.

## 5. Ideological Differences

We arrive now at the most recognizable differences between Bakunin and Marx, the differences that distinguish their competing revolutionary ideologies. It should be said that these differences are the result of the more fundamental philosophical and sociological differences discussed above. It should also be said that these differences have often (because of theoretical ignorance or even indifference) been misunderstood. Our claim at this point is that the ideological dispute between Bakunin and Marx cannot be adequately understood at the ideological level, that is, without digging a little deeper into their intellectual relationship.

Bakunin and Marx differ in their respective *critiques of existing society*. Marx concentrates on the exploitative nature of modern society, seeking to understand how it came into existence and the (internal or systemic) contradictions according to which it

---

<sup>40</sup> *An Essay Against Marx, Marxism, Freedom, and the State*, pp. 47-8.

must pass away. Ultimately, his critique of capitalism is founded on his socio-economic theory of the 'naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation' of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie<sup>41</sup> – or, to give it its proper name, the theory of surplus value. Bakunin, on the other hand, concentrates on the dominative nature of modern society, seeking to demystify it (to expose its theologico-metaphysical foundations) and to present a moral challenge to it (to question its theologico-metaphysical 'rights'). Thus, he is basically a critic of

the eminently theological, metaphysical, and political idea that the masses, *always* incapable of governing themselves, must submit at all times to the benevolent yoke of a wisdom and a justice, which in one way or another, is imposed on them from above. But imposed in the name of what and by whom? Authority recognized and respected as such by the masses can only have three possible sources – force, religion, or the action of a superior intelligence; and this superior intelligence is always represented by minorities.<sup>42</sup>

To simplify the matter somewhat, then, we can say that Bakunin, as a critic of authority (including that to which Marx, as a superior intelligence, allegedly aspired), differs from Marx, as a critic of exploitation. On the face of it, both critiques seem inadequate: Marx's being somewhat lacking as regards (moral) issues of social control, Bakunin's being somewhat lacking as regards economic and historical insight. And while Marx continually attempts to reduce political issues to economics (maintaining, for example, that the state is 'but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'<sup>43</sup>), Bakunin continually conflates exploitation and social control in a conceptually confusing way (arguing, for example, that '*to exploit and to govern* mean the same thing, one completing the other and in the long run serving as its means and end'<sup>44</sup>). Ultimately, however, Bakunin emerges as a more or less significant critic of both authority and exploitation, while Marx remains a brilliant (if partial) economic critic of exploitation alone. What Bakunin ultimately lacks in the way of coherent theory

---

<sup>41</sup> *The Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 248.

<sup>42</sup> *Federalism, Socialism, and Anti-Theologism, Marxism, Freedom, and the State*, p. 33.

<sup>43</sup> *The Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 247.

<sup>44</sup> 'God and the State', *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 132.



(explaining the complex relation of politics and economics), Marx lacks in the way of openness to non-economistic criticism of his position.

A second ideological difference between Bakunin and Marx concerns their *visions of a future socialist society*. We should emphasize here that neither of them paints a detailed picture of the way the world would or should look; neither is a utopian. Marx famously noted that he did not wish to devise 'recipes for the cook shops of the future'.<sup>45</sup> Bakunin argued that 'Even the most rational and profound science cannot divine the form social life will take in the future. It can determine only the *negative* conditions, which follow logically from a rigorous critique of existing society'.<sup>46</sup> However, within these parameters, both have something to say about the fate of the state and both propose a basic principle of distributive justice: a morally necessary principle, in Bakunin's case; a historically determined principle, in Marx's. Bakunin maintains that a genuine social revolution would require the abolition of the state and its replacement with a federated system of freely-constituted and equitable communes. He expresses this vision in rather vague syndicalist terms in the following passage:

The future social organization must be made solely from the bottom upwards, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations, and finally in a great federation, international and universal. Then alone will be realized the true and life-giving order of freedom and the common good, that order which, far from denying, on the contrary affirms and brings into harmony the interests of individuals and of society.<sup>47</sup>

Marx, by contrast, sees a transitional role for a revolutionary state (indeed, a 'revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat'<sup>48</sup>), before it ultimately 'withers away' and is replaced by a socio-economic 'administration of things' that is wholly distinct from the 'political state' or 'government of people' with which we are familiar. It is the latter that so obsesses Bakunin, and owing to this obsession 'He does not understand a thing about

---

<sup>45</sup> Quoted from *Capital*, Volume I by D. McLellan in *The Thought of Karl Marx*, 3rd edn (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 242.

<sup>46</sup> *Statism and Anarchy*, p. 198.

<sup>47</sup> *The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State, Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, p. 206.

<sup>48</sup> *Critique of the Gotha Programme (1875), Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 611.

social revolution, only the political phrases about it; its economic conditions do not exist for him'.<sup>49</sup> Bakunin is completely dismissive of Marx's vision of the future 'non-political' administration. He regards it as a state in all but name, and a potentially authoritarian one at that, one which

not content with governing and administering the masses politically, like all the governments of today, will also administer them economically... All this will require vast knowledge and a lot of heads brimful of brains. It will be the reign of the *scientific mind* [or so-called scientific socialism], the most aristocratic, despotic, arrogant, and contemptuous of all regimes. There will be a new class, a new hierarchy of real or bogus learning, and the world will be divided into a dominant, science-based minority and a vast, ignorant majority. And then let the ignorant masses beware!<sup>50</sup>

In any case, Bakunin denies that the 'transition' required to realize the 'non-political' administration could ever take place in full, since 'no dictatorship [not even the transitional dictatorship of the proletariat] can have any other objective than to perpetuate itself'.<sup>51</sup>

In terms of distributive justice, Bakunin is a collectivist, believing that goods, as social produce, should be collectively owned and distributed according to effort. Thus, he envisions a future society that 'will enable every individual to enjoy the social wealth, which in reality is produced only by collective labor, but to enjoy it only in so far as he contributes directly toward the creation of that wealth'.<sup>52</sup> Marx, on the other hand, is a communist. He believes, like Bakunin, in the collective ownership of social produce, but argues for the principle of distribution according to need as a necessary principle of the future. Thus, 'In a higher phase of communist society... society [can] inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!'<sup>53</sup> Many anarchists after Bakunin, notably Kropotkin and Malatesta, were to accept Marx's position on distributive justice, and therefore proclaimed themselves 'anarcho-communists'.

---

<sup>49</sup> 'On Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy*', *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 607.

<sup>50</sup> *An Essay Against Marx, Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, p. 266.

<sup>51</sup> *Statism and Anarchy*, p. 179.

<sup>52</sup> *Federalism, Socialism, and Anti-Theologism, The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 295.

<sup>53</sup> *Critique of the Gotha Programme, Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 615.

A final ideological difference between Bakunin and Marx concerns the *means of achieving a socialist society*. As we have seen, Bakunin rejects the notion of a transitional revolutionary state. The required transition (beyond dictatorship) would be impossible, and its hypothetical outcome (the 'non-political' state of the future) would be undesirable in any case. In general, he is opposed to any form of dictatorship (indeed, any form of state) and all 'government of science' (including the socialist variety). Bakunin is also critical of the involvement of Marxists in parliamentary politics, and is disdainful of statements like the following: 'If in England or the United States, for example, the working class were to gain a majority in Parliament or Congress, then it could by legal means set aside the laws and structures that stood in its way'.<sup>54</sup> Bakunin believes parliamentary politics to be ineffective (from a revolutionary perspective) and corrupting (of even the well-intentioned). Therefore, he condemns 'all compromise with bourgeois politics, in however Radical and Socialist a guise it might do itself up', and advocates 'the exclusively *negative* policy of the demolition of political power, of government in general, of the State, and as a necessary consequence the international organization of the scattered forces of the proletariat [broadly conceived] into a revolutionary power directed against all the established powers of the bourgeoisie'.<sup>55</sup>

This position left Bakunin open to two main criticisms: firstly, that his anarchism was 'apolitical'; and, secondly, that he was committed to revolutionary violence. If the first criticism implies that Bakunin is opposed to organization in the revolutionary struggle, then it is certainly misplaced. He states explicitly that 'the first condition of victory by the people is *agreement among the people* or *organization* of the people's forces'.<sup>56</sup> However, it is true to say that Bakunin (in anarcho-syndicalist mode) saw the people organizing themselves around 'non-political' institutions, such as unions, and acting in 'anti-political' ways, such as general strikes. He believed that a general strike could 'lead to a general cataclysm, which will regenerate society'.<sup>57</sup> With respect to the second criticism, Bakunin does see the (unfortunate) need for revolutionary violence:

---

<sup>54</sup> Marx quoted by D. McLellan in *The Thought of Karl Marx*, p. 227.

<sup>55</sup> *An Essay Against Marx, Marxism, Freedom, and the State*, p. 60.

<sup>56</sup> *Science and the Urgent Revolutionary Task* (1870), *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 367.

<sup>57</sup> *Organization and the General Strike* (1869), *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 383.

'Revolution means war, and that implies the destruction of men and things'. He notes, however, that revolutionary violence is of far less historical significance than state violence: 'reaction can hardly reproach revolution on this point; it has always shed more blood than the latter'.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, Bakunin stresses that 'The revolution need not be vindictive nor bloodthirsty. It need not resort to killings, mass banishment, or deportation of individuals'.<sup>59</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we offered an overview of the historical, intellectual, and ideological relationship between Bakunin and Marx. Eight differences between them were outlined in three categories: philosophically, then, we saw that they differ on metaphysics, the philosophy of history, and ethics; sociologically, we saw that they differ on method and class analysis; and ideologically, we saw that they differ on the critique of existing society, their visions of socialist society, and the means required to realize such a society. As a final word on this last point, paying particular attention to Bakunin, we might say that, whether we find his means agreeable in principle or not, they seem largely outdated: feasible, perhaps, in the nineteenth century, but hopeless in the twenty-first, when unions are no longer as powerful or radical as they once were and violence against a strengthened state is relatively ineffective. Thus, contemporary anarchists must continue to grapple with the issue of revolutionary means, even if they share Bakunin's critique of existing society and his vision of an alternative libertarian socialist society. In any event, it is these two aspects of Bakunin's thought (for all its inconsistencies and obscurities) that retain their appeal and that demonstrate the abiding appeal of his non-Marxist brand of socialism in a seemingly 'post-Marxist' world. As Paul Avrich writes: 'Above all Bakunin remains attractive to radicals and intellectuals because his libertarian brand of socialism provides an alternative vision to the bankrupt authoritarian socialism of the twentieth century'.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> *The Bear of Berne and the Bear of St Petersburg* (1870), *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 372.

<sup>59</sup> *Philosophical Considerations, Bakunin on Anarchism*, p. 421.

<sup>60</sup> *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 15.