

Great Anarchists

3 MICHAEL BAKUNIN

**RUTH KINNA &
CLIFFORD HARPER**

Great Anarchists

MICHAEL BAKUNIN

**RUTH KINNA &
CLIFFORD HARPER**

First published in London, 2018
by Dog Section Press and Active Distribution
Printed by Što Citaš, Zagreb, Croatia

ISSN 2631-3499-02

Published under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial
4.0 International Public Licence

Graphic design by Matt Bonner at revoltdesign.org
Dog Section Press logo by Marco Bevilacqua

RUTH KINNA

Ruth Kinna is a professor of Political Theory at Loughborough University, working in the Department of Politics, History and International Relations where she specialises in political philosophy. Since 2007 she has been the editor of the journal *Anarchist Studies*.

CLIFFORD HARPER

Clifford Harper is a worker, illustrator, and militant anarchist. He has worked for many radical and alternative publications, the international anarchist movement and almost all of the UK national newspapers.



GREAT ANARCHISTS

These short introductions delve into the anarchist canon to recover some of the distinctive ideas that historical anarchists advanced to address problems relevant to their circumstances. Although these contexts were special, many of the issues the anarchists wrestled with still plague our lives. Anarchists developed a body of writing about power, domination, injustice and exploitation, education, prisons and a lot more besides. Honing in on different facets of the anarchist canon is not just an interesting archaeological exercise. The persistence, development and adaptation of anarchist traditions depends on our surveying the historical landscape of ideas and drawing on the resources it contains. The theoretical toolbox that this small assortment of anarchists helped to construct is there to use, amend and adapt.

Agitate, Educate, Organise!



MICHAEL BAKUNIN

Bakunin has probably generated more trashy literature than any other anarchist. In Victorian penny-dreadfuls he appears by turns as an unstable fanatic and a pitiable fraud. In quite a lot of the subsequent scholarly writing he is at best a naive social dreamer, usually unhinged and unaware of his dictatorial tendencies, and at worst a manipulative, hypocritical schemer. Anarchists, of course, paint a different picture. Back in the day, Bakunin was feted as a champion of libertarian socialism and he is still celebrated as Marx's most redoubtable adversary. It was a complicated relationship: recognising Marx's genius as a social theorist, Bakunin judged him a serious but insincere revolutionary.

Bakunin's acolytes disagreed about the significance of his bust-up with Marx in the First International. Some of them argued that his critique showed that

he was Marx's most reliable interpreter. Others thought that his rejection of Marx's programme for the International uncovered Marxism's fundamental theoretical flaws. However his admirers called it, the Bakunin-Marx clash had a massive organisational impact and the ripples are still felt today. The revolutionaries who wanted to distance themselves from the centralising, programmatic policy changes that Marx engineered in the International identified Bakunin as the personification of anti-authoritarian socialism or anarchism. Numbering Kropotkin, Malatesta and Reclus among his adherents, he became the towering figure of European anarchism in the late nineteenth century.

Quite a lot of ink has been spilt on Bakunin's shaky judgments, particularly his relationship with Sergei Nechaev. There's a lot to question and even to dislike in his writing, notably his cultural stereotyping and anti-Semitism. Both are evident in his critique of Marx. But having survived two death-sentences and brutal treatment at the hands of the Russia state, Bakunin remained active in the nascent international anarchist movement and

managed to produce some of the most exhilarating, inspiring prose in the anarchist back-catalogue.

A-HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Bakunin was an anti-utopian thinker in the sense that he rejected philosophical approaches to politics that relied on the deployment of pure abstract concepts to promote political goals. Naturally it was possible to conceptualise justice and right and liberty and it was empowering to imagine alternative realities; however, the use of philosophy to promote idealised social systems was wrong-headed because it typically airbrushed real inequalities and injustices from view and too often resulted in a type of ideological practice that legitimised arbitrary power and oppression. Moreover, the whole exercise placed judgments about political goals and values in the hands of rarefied elites. However clever these people were – and that was by no means guaranteed – Bakunin believed that removing the power of evaluation from ordinary people was wrong. The end result was the replacement of self-government with government.

Bakunin's alternative was based on the view that material conditions gave meaning to ideas of justice, right and liberty. Once this was understood, it was possible to see that the advancement of any fixed ideal was distorting. History taught that the exercise had repeatedly forced people to adopt behaviours that benefitted those who commanded the most resources: the richest, the most heavily armed, those who garnered the most respect, the silver-tongued and persuasive, the boldest, egotistically super-confident and often, sadly, the most ruthless. At the same time, the re-alignment of political philosophy to sociology revealed that the historical experience of injustice, arbitrary rule and repression concealed other sets of values and ideas. It was liberating to discover that social life generated its own orders and that the elaborate artifices that had been invented to perfect human life were redundant. Bakunin described the insight as science. Likewise he called the spontaneous patterning of social life that science detected 'natural' because it was structured by norms, values and ideals that emerged from everyday human interactions.

The critique of elitism that Bakunin took from his materialist worldview provided the impetus for social transformation. Anarchy was about restoring natural order by re-prioritising the material over the ideal. There was no pristine Lost World of Atlantis to recover. Instead the process involved the destruction of utopian idealism and the creative reconstruction of social life by the least powerful and the oppressed. Promoting the news that the uneducated, unrefined rabble was capable of organising collective actions to advance conceptions of justice, right and liberty gleaned from the historical experience of their negation was the lifeblood of anarchist change.

Though not lacking an interest in history, Bakunin was unimpressed with philosophical schema designed to show its direction of travel. Having freed himself from the lure of German metaphysics in the 1840s, soon after he first met Marx, he set about turning Hegel, the metaphysician of metaphysicians, on his head. Marx had set out to do the same but in Bakunin's book he mistakenly retained Hegel's notion that history contained a logic. Like his teacher, Marx believed that

history pointed towards the expansion of the realm of freedom. Marx replaced Hegel's idealist concept of Reason with a materialist reading of productive force. This elicited a critique of capitalism that Bakunin broadly endorsed and it injected a materialist component into a utopian-idealist worldview. Yet it left Hegel firmly on his feet: Marx's certainty that capitalism provided the preconditions for socialism, that the victory of the proletariat was assured and that temporary dictatorship needn't be dictatorial were all explained by this reading of history.

Bakunin removed the motive force from history altogether. This didn't mean that social change was reduced to a matter of will. There was always a context for struggle. The point was that there was no dynamic other than action, and contingency was all.

POLITICAL THEOLOGY

As a materialist, Bakunin was also an atheist. Famously calling for God's abolition he argued that moral sense was rooted in varying and transient

social practices, not in the universal or the Divine. This dismissal of God didn't stop Bakunin from describing himself as a man of faith. He had faith in science insofar as it elevated earthly life over otherworldly existence and he had faith in the future, even after the crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871. In fact the example of the Commune fired his irreverent belief that humans were actively engaged in struggles to release themselves from pacifying political theology.

Political theology was not identical to religion, though it was related to it. Religions were belief systems that humans invented and alienated from themselves, thus creating benchmarks to assess their own behaviours. In its purest form, political theology was the view that humanity was base, sinful and corrupt and that all that was beautiful, worthy and pure depended on revelation and obedience to God's self-appointed representatives. The story of Eden and the Fall provided the model, as it was conventionally told as a tale of wrong-doing, expulsion and punishment with the hope of redemption conditional on supplication.

Reinforced in art and literature, political theology underpinned political idealism and justified hierarchy and authority. It encapsulated the view that discipline and mastership made social life possible, so legitimising structural domination. Patriarchy was one of its symptoms. At the end of *Statism and Anarchy*, Bakunin tore into romantic cults of the Russian peasantry by launching an unrelenting attack on the traditional family. The good man – the father, the husband, the elder brother – was in fact a weaselly tyrant. Habituated to obedience he was subservient to the men of the village, a slave to the Tsar, and he measured his freedom by enjoying unlimited despotism at home.

If patriarchy was a result of the cultural diffusion of political theology, statism was the upshot of its integration into philosophy. The relationship to absolutism had been made obvious by the great eighteenth-century revolutions, but as far as Bakunin was concerned republicanism and Jacobin communism were still enmeshed in it. It was entirely possible for committed, honest revolutionaries to espouse emancipatory causes while simultaneously proposing programmes that simply changed the

terms of enslavement. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a case in point. Having advanced a brilliant critique of private property and the liberal social contract, he proposed a form of association that was every bit as despotic, obliging each to alienate themselves and their property to the state in the name of the common good and moral freedom. Anarchy was the counter and Bakunin re-worked the story of Genesis to drive the point home. In his telling, Eve's decision to eat the apple was an act of wilful disobedience and the flight from Eden was a conscious bid for liberation from domination.

Looking at the European political landscape, Bakunin observed that political theology had been effectively instrumentalised by Machiavellian diplomats and politicians: Mouravieff in Russia, Metternich in Austria, Cavour in Italy, Bismarck in Germany, Palmerston in Britain and Louis Napoleon in France. Their game was to exploit the ideological pull of political theology in order to advance the interests of the state. For as long as they played along, clerics were tolerated in the domestic realm, but statesmen now relied on finance capital not sacrament to sanction their rule.

European politics was shaped by the machinations of these great men of history but the operation of the international state system was underwritten by capitalist monopoly.

Understanding capitalism as an independent force in European affairs Bakunin argued that the systematic exploitation of labour, quickened by industrialisation and driven by selfish, bourgeois commercial interests, constituted a distinctive kind of oppression. Nonetheless capitalist monopoly was always implicated with the state and steadily increasing concentrations of capital helped explain processes of centralisation, bureaucratisation and militarisation. These shifts were driven by corporate interests. Bakunin's wager, then, was that the struggle against tyranny and state oppression was necessarily a struggle against capitalism. Yet class struggle was hidebound for as long as political theology held sway. The use of state institutions to regulate, control or abolish capitalism would only succeed in re-directing the flow of economic power into new channels of authority. Moreover, it would do nothing to eradicate the persistent tyrannies embedded in social relations.

FREEDOM STRUGGLES

Bakunin declared himself a fanatical lover of liberty who brooked no limits on freedom, and a realist who recognised that individual action was always constrained. People couldn't actually do exactly what they liked, at least not all the time. The apparent contradiction is explained by the two different ideas of liberty Bakunin stitched together. One was linked to domination and the other was associated with equal capability. Non-domination meant being regarded as a moral equal and following one's own rules. Equal capability meant being able to enjoy the same level of well-being as everyone else. Bakunin's example of Bluebeard's wife illustrates the difference. She was dominated but had greater capability than other women. With a house full of riches at her disposal, she had free reign of the house only for as long as she observed Bluebeard's command to stay out of his underground chamber: transgression spelt death.

In the capitalist state these types of unfreedom usually went hand in hand. Rural and industrial workers were treated as inferior to the educated bourgeoisie and made to obey rules that they had no part in making; because the rules were formulated to benefit the owners and employers, they were also deprived of education and crushed by forced labour, hunger and poverty. In terms of their capability they were also less free than their masters; however, the unfreedoms of the capitalist state were not always evenly balanced. In patriarchy, women experienced domination more keenly than men.

Bakunin pushed the argument in the context of patriotism, national liberation and colonial domination – the dynamic forces of his age. He made two crucial distinctions. The first was between instinctive and political patriotism and the second was between nationality and nationalism. Instinctive patriotism was the sense of exclusive solidarity. It arose between people who lived in the same area and shared common habits and ways of life. Bakunin associated it with a hatred of difference but reserved his sternest strictures for

political patriotism, the cultivation of aggressive xenophobia, typically bolstered by religious patriotism or the worship of an exclusive deity. Likewise, nationality was ‘a fact’ made manifest in the existence of local cultural practices, moral norms and linguistic diversity. Nationalism expressed certainty in the virtue and superiority of these particular traits.

Since the end of the Napoleonic wars, these social phenomena had intersected with each other in complex ways. On the one hand, instinctive patriotism had often militated against state formation. For example, relatively isolated communities in Southern Italy had resisted the republican statist drive towards national unification, preferring local solidarity. On the other hand, politicians had also politicised instinctive patriotic sentiments to whip up aggressively nationalistic campaigns.

In the context of the rise of the European state, it was often difficult to tease out the political dynamics of social movements. Appreciating the complexity, Bakunin maintained that anarchy pointed towards the rejection of patriotism and towards

internationalism. His vision was of a borderless world based on the extension of solidarity across localities and the recognition of the equal worth of local practices and diversity. Decentralised federalism provided the organisational framework, just as Proudhon had argued. In the meantime, Bakunin argued that national liberation struggles were often directed against domination and that they contained a socialistic element. European history indicated that they were easily hijacked by bourgeois capitalists and unscrupulous politicians. But the success of reactionary movements was guaranteed for as long as revolutionaries stood on the sidelines and left partisans to fight their own battles. The revolutionary alternative was to stand in solidarity and excavate the universal perspective against national domination, against capitalism, and for anarchist freedom.

Great Anarchists

**BY RUTH KINNA
& CLIFFORD HARPER**

1. Peter Kropotkin
2. Voltairine de Cleyre
3. Mikhail Bakunin
4. Louise Michel
5. Oscar Wilde
6. Max Stirner
7. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
8. Lucy Parsons
9. William Godwin
10. Errico Malatesta







£2