



## *Marx, Bakunin, and the question of authoritarianism* - David Adam

Historically, Bakunin's criticism of Marx's "authoritarian" aims has tended to overshadow Marx's critique of Bakunin's "authoritarian" aims. This is in large part due to the fact that mainstream anarchism and Marxism have been polarized over a myth—that of Marx's authoritarian statism—which they both share. Thus, the conflict in the First International is directly identified with a disagreement over anti-authoritarian principles, and Marx's hostility toward Bakunin is said to stem from his rejection of these principles, his vanguardism, etc. Anarchism, not without justification, posits itself as the "libertarian" alternative to the "authoritarianism" of mainstream Marxism. Because of this, nothing could be easier than to see the famous conflict between the pioneering theorists of these movements—Bakunin and Marx—as a conflict between absolute liberty and authoritarianism. This essay will bring this narrative into question. It will not do this by making grand pronouncements about Anarchism and Marxism in the abstract, but simply by assembling some often neglected evidence. Bakunin's ideas about revolutionary organization lie at the heart of this investigation.

### **Political Philosophy**

We will begin by looking at some differences in political philosophy between Marx and Bakunin that will inform our understanding of their organizational disputes. In Bakunin, Marx criticized first and foremost what he saw as a modernized version of Proudhon's doctrinaire attitude towards politics—the belief that all political power is antithetical to

freedom. Also separating Bakunin from Marx was a radical idealism similar to that of Stirner. A certain passage from Marx's critique of Stirner goes a long way towards helping us understand Marx's differences from Bakunin: "Up to now freedom has been defined by philosophers in two ways; on the one hand, as power, as domination over the circumstances and conditions in which an individual lives—by all materialists; on the other hand, as self-determination, riddance of the real world, as merely imaginary freedom of the Spirit—this definition was given by all idealists, especially the German idealists."<sup>1</sup> Despite Bakunin's professed materialism, Marx would fault him for idealism in this regard. Bakunin claimed, "Freedom is the absolute right of every human being to seek no other sanction for his actions but his own conscience, to determine these actions solely by his own will, and consequently to owe his first responsibility to himself alone."<sup>2</sup> Here the natural rights of the individual are taken as the foundation of freedom, whereas in Marx the development of freedom is identified with the creation of a new human being, no longer confronted by his alienated social powers as a hostile force. Bakunin writes that "every individual, every association, every commune, every province, every region, every nation enjoys an absolute right of self-determination, to enter or not to enter into association, to enter into alliance with whomsoever they may wish, and to break off alliances without regard to supposed historic rights or the convenience of their neighbors. . . ."<sup>3</sup> Instead of offering such philosophizing, Marx always pointed to the necessarily historically determined character of human rights, human nature, and social possibilities.<sup>4</sup> Bakunin's natural rights theory is the foundation of his federalist rejection of the bourgeois state, whereas Marx's opposition to the bourgeois state flows from his critique of human alienation under capitalism.

Understanding this philosophical approach of Bakunin helps us investigate his differences from Marx in understanding socialist revolution. It is here, in the realm of class-consciousness and political action that the Marx-Bakunin feud actually erupted. Whereas Bakunin tended to identify freedom with natural laws and spontaneity, and thus emphasized the creation of secret groupings of revolutionaries to incite the latent instincts of the masses, Marx emphasized the necessity for the emergence of communist consciousness on a mass scale, which only comes from workers exercising for themselves the creative organizing capacities denied to them in capitalist daily life. As Marx said of Germany, "Here, where the worker is regulated bureaucratically from childhood onwards,

1 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Amherst: Prometheus, 1998), 319.

2 Daniel Guerin, *Anarchism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 31.

3 Mikhail Bakunin, "The Program of the Brotherhood," in *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism*, ed. Daniel Guerin (Oakland: AK Press, 2005), 156. For Marx, understanding freedom as *freedom from* outside interference, as self-determination, is only the ideological reflection of bourgeois civil society and the Hobbesian "war of all against all." In his 1843 "On the Jewish Question" Marx had written, "The right to private property is therefore the right to enjoy and dispose of one's resources as one wills, without regard for other men and independently of society: the right of self-interest. The individual freedom mentioned above, together with this application of it, forms the foundation of civil society. It leads each man to see in other men not the *realization* but the *limitation* of his own freedom." Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage, 1975), 229-230.

4 "Every thing, every possible form of oppression had been justified by abstract right; it was high time to abandon this mode of agitation." Karl Marx, "Record of Marx's Speeches on Landed Property," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 21 (New York: International Publishers, 1985), 392.

where he believes in authority, in those set over him, the main thing is *to teach him to walk by himself*.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the wielding of *political* power by the workers has this function. The proletarians must take charge, re-organize society, and thus re-create themselves through the arduous *process* of self-emancipation. The exercise of political power is not contrasted with working class self-activity, but is rather the means by which the working class manages its own affairs. “One day,” said Marx in 1872, “the worker will have to seize political supremacy to establish the new organization of labour; he will have to overthrow the old policy which supports the old institutions if he wants to escape the fate of the early Christians who, neglecting and despising politics, never saw their kingdom on earth.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike Marx, who saw in the bourgeois state the alienated powers of the citizenry, Bakunin identified the state as such with “authority, force, the display of and fascination with force.”<sup>7</sup> If the state in the abstract is viewed as an external imposition on the natural rights of the individual, there is no need for the proletarians to take over any of its functions collectively.

“Teach the people?” Bakunin once asked. “That would be stupid. . . . we must not teach the people, but incite them to revolt.”<sup>8</sup> Marx had always rejected this approach. In an argument with Weitling, who was an advocate of *individual* dictatorship, Marx said that to rouse the workers without offering any scientific ideas or constructive doctrine was “equivalent to vain dishonest play at preaching which assumes an inspired prophet on the one side and on the other only the gaping asses.”<sup>9</sup> Marx specifically criticized the Bakuninists in the First International in similar terms: “To them, the working class is so much raw material, a chaos which needs the breath of their Holy Spirit to give it form.”<sup>10</sup> Not only this, but Marx even criticized Bakunin in the same terms that Bakunin famously used against him: “This Russian [Bakunin] obviously wishes to become the dictator of the European worker’s movement.”<sup>11</sup>

We can learn something of Bakunin and Marx’s divergent views from a little-known essay in which Marx and Engels quote part of Bakunin’s program for his secret Association of the International Brethren.<sup>12</sup> Here is Bakunin, with Marx and Engels’ comments in parentheses: “All that a well-organized secret society can do is, first, to assist in the birth of the revolution by spreading among the masses ideas corresponding to their instincts, and to organize, not the army of the revolution—the army must always be the people (cannon

5 Karl Marx, “Marx to Johann Baptist von Schweitzer,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 43 (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 134.

6 Karl Marx, “On the Hague Congress,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 23 (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 255.

7 Mikhail Bakunin, “God and the State,” in *No Gods, No Masters*, 152. This conception of the state goes along with a voluntarist conception of creating socialism. Marx wrote of Bakunin: “Willpower, not economic conditions, is the basis of his social revolution.” Karl Marx, “Notes on Bakunin’s Book *Statehood and Anarchy*,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 24 (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 518.

8 Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Oakland: AK Press, 2005), 92.

9 Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx: A Life* (New York: Norton, 2001), 104.

10 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Alleged Splits in the International,” in *Political Writings, Volume III: The First International & After*, ed. David Fernbach (New York: Vintage, 1974), 306.

11 Karl Marx, “Marx to Engels,” in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 43, 332-333.

12 This program is available in *No Gods, No Masters*, 177-183.

fodder) [—] but *a revolutionary General Staff* composed of devoted, energetic, intelligent and above all sincere friends of the people, who are not ambitious or vain, and who are capable of serving as intermediaries between the revolutionary idea (monopolized by them) and the popular instincts.”<sup>13</sup> Marx and Engels comment further: “To say that the hundred international brethren must ‘serve as intermediaries between the revolutionary idea and the popular instincts,’ is to create an unbridgeable gulf between the Alliance’s revolutionary idea and the proletarian masses; it means proclaiming that these hundred guardsmen cannot be recruited anywhere but from among the privileged classes.”<sup>14</sup> In Marx’s view, Bakunin’s program for revolution, by treating the worker as “so much raw material,” prevented him from learning “to walk by himself.”

## The International

It is appropriate to give some relevant background on Bakunin’s presence in the International Workingmen’s Association, or First International. Bakunin did not join the International until July 1868, while Marx had been involved since its foundation in 1864. During 1867-1868, Bakunin and some of his associates were involved in the League of Peace and Freedom, a democratic reformist group. Bakunin played a prominent role in the League’s September 1867 conference, and thought that he could win the League over to his revolutionary politics. When he joined the International, Bakunin urged close affiliation between the League and the International. Arthur P. Mendel comments on Bakunin’s intentions at this time, using quotations from Bakunin: “He was not planning to ‘drown our League’ in the International, but to have them work together as complimentary organizations, with the International ‘concerning itself if not exclusively, then at least principally, with economic questions,’ while the League would handle ‘political, religious and philosophical questions,’ as well as ‘prepare the issues and, thereby, clarify the political direction.’”<sup>15</sup> As it turned out, Bakunin and his associates found themselves in the minority at the League’s September 1868 congress. Bakunin and 18 of his supporters left the League and decided to form a new organization. Mendel comments: “Compromising between Bakunin’s wish for an entirely secret organization and the other members’ preference for a public association, the founders decided to have both forms. As finally worked out, the ‘Alliance,’ as the organization as a whole came to be called, reflected several levels of secrecy and intimacy, that is, degrees of ‘family’ ties with Bakunin.”<sup>16</sup>

Mendel describes what happened next:

Acting through Marx’s friend Becker, he [Bakunin] officially applied that November (1868) for admission of the Alliance as a whole into the International, on terms that would allow the Alliance to retain its organizational integrity, hold its own Congresses, and so on. The International would gain considerably by the merger, Becker said in a letter accompanying the application, since the

13 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men’s Association,” in *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, 469.

14 *Ibid.*, 470.

15 Arthur P. Mendel, *Michael Bakunin: Roots of Apocalypse* (New York: Praeger, 1981), 305.

16 *Ibid.*, 306.

Alliance could make up for the International's lack of "idealism." The two organizations would complement each other, Bakunin later wrote, since the International could continue its fine work with the masses, representing necessarily only the "germs" of the full program, while the Alliance, at a higher level of development, would preserve the ideals of the program and thereby be in a position to give the International a "really revolutionary direction." As he later was to describe the relationship between his Alliance and the International, the Alliance was to be "a secret society formed within the International in order to provide the International a revolutionary organization, in order to transform it, together with the popular masses that were outside of it, into a force sufficiently well-organized to annihilate reaction."<sup>17</sup>

The General Council of the International flatly refused to let the Alliance into the International unless it ceased to function as a parallel international organization.<sup>18</sup> A sympathetic Bakunin-biographer has even written, "Marx's response to the Alliance's application to affiliate with the International was logical enough, and remarkably restrained given his strong feelings."<sup>19</sup> Marx was apparently not the only one who was suspicious of the Alliance's attempt at membership. The Council of the Belgian branch of the International sent a letter to the Geneva Alliance expressing the opinion that the Alliance's actions were divisive and harmful:

Do you not understand that the workers established the International precisely because they wanted no kind of patronage, whether from Social-Democrats or from anyone else; that they want to go forward on their own without advisors; and that if they accept into the Association [the International] socialists who, because of their birth and privileged situation in the present society, do not belong to the disinherited class, it is only on condition that these friends of the people do not form a group apart, a kind of intellectual protectorate or an aristocracy of intellect, in a word, *leaders*, but instead remain part of the ranks of the vast proletarian masses?<sup>20</sup>

Eventually, Bakunin's Alliance was able to enter the International. Mendel relates the conditions under which this occurred:

At a meeting in late February 1869, the [Alliance] Bureau decided to accept the conditions laid down by London, to "dissolve" the Alliance as an international network and to turn its local sections into sections of the International. The Alliance would, thus, enter the International "without any organization, bureaus, committees and congresses other than those of the International Workers' Association," or so the Bureau said in a public announcement of the

17 Ibid., 309. Marx expresses himself on these issues in his April 19, 1870 letter to Lafargue. See Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 43, 489-490. Marx's suspicions would seem to be confirmed by the way Bakunin addressed the issue privately, as in these remarks on the International from a letter to Richard: "Let us live among others and use them. But we will live with them as do parasites: nourish ourselves on their life and their blood. . . ." Mendel, *Michael Bakunin*, 349.

18 Ibid., 310.

19 Mark Leier, *Bakunin: The Creative Passion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 233.

20 Mendel, *Michael Bakunin*, 310.

dissolution. In fact, no such dissolution occurred at all. Clandestine correspondence in code, such as it was, continued to flow from Bakunin's pen to his "intimates" in other countries, discussing, among other things, tactics for strengthening the Alliance's influence within the International; and the secret Geneva Bureau continued to exist alongside what now became the Geneva Alliance section of the international.<sup>21</sup>

For example, in a May 1872 letter to A. Lorenzo (a delegate at the 1871 London conference), Bakunin wrote that "the Alliance is a secret that none of us can divulge without committing treason."<sup>22</sup> He therefore wished for Lorenzo to address him simply as a member of the International, and not the secret Alliance, so that Lorenzo's letter could be used against Marx and his supporters. Bakunin nonetheless signed off as "M. Bakunin, Alliance and Brotherhood."<sup>23</sup> Marx and Engels were even aware of one of Bakunin's references to the supposedly dissolved Alliance in an 1872 letter to Francisco Mora, and they quoted it in their pamphlet on the Alliance and the International: "You doubtless know that the International and *our dear Alliance* have progressed enormously in Italy of late. . . . It is good and it is necessary that the *Alliancists* in Spain should enter into direct relations with those in Italy."<sup>24</sup>

Let us look at an interesting episode that exemplifies Bakunin's conspiratorialism. There is a record of a conversation between Charles Perron and Bakunin around the time of the Basel Congress of the International:

Bakunin assured him that the International was an excellent institution in itself, but that there was something better which Perron should also join—the Alliance. Perron agreed. Then Bakunin said that, even in the Alliance, there might be some who were not genuine revolutionaries, and who were a drag on its activities, and it would therefore be a good thing to have at the back of the Alliance a group of "International Brothers." Perron again agreed. When next they met a few days later, Bakunin told him that the "International Brothers" were too wide an organization, and that behind them there must be a Directorate or Bureau of three—of whom he, Perron, should be one. Perron laughed, and once more agreed.<sup>25</sup>

An excellent source for better understanding Bakunin's thinking is his June 2, 1870 letter to Nechayev. There he outlines the organization of a hypothetical revolutionary society that he advises Nechayev to form. He writes of such a society:

The whole society constitute's [sic] one body and a firmly united whole, led by the C.C. [Central Committee] and engaged in unceasing underground struggle against the government and against other societies either inimical to it or even

21 Ibid., 314-315.

22 Ibid., 388.

23 Aileen Kelly, *Mikhail Bakunin: A Study in the Psychology and Politics of Utopianism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 234-235.

24 Marx and Engels: "The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men's Association" 579. Italics added by Marx and Engels. Also quoted in Mendel, *Michael Bakunin*, 388.

25 E.H. Carr, *Michael Bakunin* (New York: Vintage, 1937), 363.

those acting independently of it. Where there is war, there is politics, and there inescapably arises the necessity for violence, cunning, and deceit. *Societies whose aims are near to ours must be forced to merge with our society or, at least, must be subordinated to it without their knowledge, while harmful people must be removed from them.* Societies which are inimical or positively harmful must be dissolved, and finally the government must be destroyed. All this cannot be achieved only by propagating the truth; cunning, diplomacy, deceit are necessary.<sup>26</sup>

In this letter—which should be read in its entirety by anyone interested in these matters—Bakunin famously criticizes Nechayev, yet he does not clearly break with him. Bakunin wished, as he wrote Ogarev, to “save our erring and confused friend.”<sup>27</sup> As the above passage indicates, Bakunin continued to hold a belief system similar to Nechayev’s.

Getting back to Bakunin’s role in the International, it is well known that Marx complained of the continued existence of the secret Alliance. It is also well known that Bakunin’s main complaint was the supposed authoritarianism of Marx and the General Council. Bakunin and the anarchists would loudly denounce not only the actions of the General Council in expelling Bakunin, but also the principle of the General Council’s authority. After the London conference of 1871, where Marx succeeded in getting resolutions passed aimed at blocking the activity of the Alliance, the anarchists of the Jura Federation convened a congress, which issued the Sonvillier Circular, which was sent to all the federations of the International and which challenged the validity of the London conference’s decisions. One theoretically important aspect of this Circular is its call for the General Council to become “a simple correspondence and statistical bureau.”<sup>28</sup> The sections would thus be completely *autonomous*. When Bakunin received the Circular, he was fully supportive, explicitly echoing its call for a General Council without any authority in a letter to Ceretti.<sup>29</sup> In 1872 he even called for “the abolition of the General Council.”<sup>30</sup> For his part, Marx believed in the necessity of a General Council for the integrity of the International. As he wrote to Lafargue in March, 1872, “Thus from the moment at which the Council ceases to function as *the instrument of the general interests* of the International, it becomes wholly invalid and powerless. On the other hand, the General Council itself is one of the Association’s vital forces, being essential for the latter’s unity and for preventing the Association from being taken over by hostile elements.”<sup>31</sup> Marx and Engels were concerned with defending the idea of *democratic authority*, as opposed to the complete autonomy of national sections or even individuals in an explicitly *international* organization. In his essay “The Congress of Sonvillier and the International,” Engels mocked the reasoning of the anarchists: “If in each individual section the minority submits to the decision of the majority, it commits a crime against the principles of freedom and accepts a principle which leads to authority

26 Michael Bakunin, “M. Bakunin to Sergey Nechayev,” in Michael Confino, *Daughter of a Revolutionary: Natalie Herzen and the Bakunin-Nechayev Circle* (London: Alcove Press, 1974), 268. Emphasis added.

27 Paul Avrich, *Bakunin and Nechaev* (London: Freedom Press, 1987), 21.

28 Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 321.

29 Mendel, *Michael Bakunin*, 380.

30 *Ibid.*, 389.

31 Karl Marx, “Marx to Paul Lafargue,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 44 (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 346.

and dictatorship!”<sup>32</sup> Marx and Engels were perfectly capable of distinguishing between authority in general (which could be democratic) and individual authority or authoritarianism. In *Capital*, for instance, Marx quotes his *Poverty of Philosophy*: “It can . . . be laid down as a general rule that the less authority presides over the division of labour inside society, the more the division of labour develops inside the workshop, and the more it is subjected there to the *authority of a single person*.”<sup>33</sup> He claims that, “in the society where the capitalist mode of production prevails, anarchy in the social division of labour and despotism in the manufacturing division of labour mutually condition each other. . . .”<sup>34</sup>

Bakunin was not always a consistent opponent of the General Council’s authority. Hal Draper relates the case of the Basle Congress of the International—the only one that Bakunin attended:

The GC [General Council] had requested that the congress grant it power, subject to Congress veto, to exclude a section acting contrary to International principles, in order to defend the movement against alien elements. Bakunin not only became the most enthusiastic proponent of this proposal, but went further: *he proposed substantially greater powers for the leading body*, powers that the GC had not requested. These proposals were carried through, perhaps largely because of his advocacy. The contemporaneous press report through which we know of this episode summarized the facts as follows: “Bakunin proposes to give the General Council the right to veto the entrance of new sections into the International until the following Congress, and the right to suspend existing sections; as for National [i.e. Federal] Committees, he wants to grant them the right to expel sections from the International. . . . Hins [Belgian delegate] asks that the right of suspension belong only to the Federal Committees and not to the General Council . . . Bakunin [speaking again] puts emphasis on the international character of the Association; it is necessary for this reason that the General Council not be without authority. He points out that, if the national organizations [Federal Committees] had the right of suspension, it could happen that sections animated but the true spirit of the International might be expelled by a majority unfaithful to the principles.” What this meant—as Bakunin later admitted when he beat his breast and wailed *Mea culpa*—was that he was afraid the Swiss Federal Committee might expel his Alliance, and so he looked to the General Council to protect his rights. That is, he was ready to jettison anarchist rhetoric about federalism and anti-authority as soon as his own local power base was threatened.<sup>35</sup>

32 Friedrich Engels, “The Congress of Sonvillier and the International,” in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, 67.

33 Karl Marx, *Capital*: Volume I (London: Penguin, 1990), 477. Emphasis added.

34 *Ibid.*, 477.

35 Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution, Volume IV: Critique of Other Socialisms* (New York: Monthly Review, 1990), 277. The text Draper refers to, where Bakunin (literally) wails “*Mea culpa*,” is his “Lettre aux Internationaux de la Romagne,” available in Michel Bakounine, *Œuvres Complètes, Volume 2: Michel Bakounine et L’Italie 1871-1872* (Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1974).



Bakunin had advocated *more* authority for the General Council before he advocated a General Council without any authority. Marx and Engels referred to Bakunin's change of position on different occasions as evidence that "the sect [the Alliance] had not donned its anti-authoritarian mask" until its hopes of taking over the General Council were destroyed.<sup>36</sup>

### **Against All Authority?**

Let us further examine the topic of Bakunin's opposition to authority. It is well known that Bakunin's anarchism was coupled with an undying conspiratorialism. Bakunin drafted all sorts of programs and charts and vows for the various secret organizations he thought up. Most of these organizations were active only in Bakunin's imagination.<sup>37</sup> An interesting glimpse into one of Bakunin's organizational plans is provided by Arthur Mendel:

Finally, there were the vows to be taken by the "brothers" in the secret "families," national and international. Two categories of "brothers" were defined—the active and nominal brothers. The active brothers, from whom alone the leadership could be drawn, took the more stringent oaths: ". . . I swear loyalty and absolute obedience to the international organization and promise to it zealous activity, care and discretion, silence regarding all secrets, the sacrifice of my own egoism, self-love, ambition and my personal interests, and the complete and unlimited surrender to its disposition of all my strength and power, my social position, my influence, my fortune, and my life. I submit in advance to all the sacrifices and assignments that it will impose on me, certain that it will demand nothing of me that is contrary to my convictions and my honor or beyond my personal capacities. Throughout the time that I am charged with a function or mission I will unconditionally obey the orders of the immediate leader who has entrusted me with it and swear to carry out the mission with all possible speed, precision, energy and foresight, stopping only at what seems to me to be truly insurmountable obstacles. I subordinate from now on all my activities, public and private, literary, political, official, professional, and social to the supreme directives that I receive from the committees of this organization." . . . In the final vow, the candidate agreed to accept against himself "the vengeance of the society" if he betrayed his oath or even forgot it.<sup>38</sup>

To see such "vows" coming from the pen of the great paladin of individual liberty and freedom should at least raise an eyebrow. It is not the only one of Bakunin's calls for a distinctly *authoritarian* revolutionary organization.

36 Marx and Engels, "The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men's Association," 473. See also Engels, "The Congress of Sonvillier and the International," 67-68, and Friedrich Engels, "Report on the Alliance of Socialist Democracy Presented in the Name of the General Council to the Congress at the Hague," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, 233.

37 On the Alliance itself: "Although a network of his organization existed in Spain, elsewhere it consisted largely of individual cells—the tightly-knit international structure described in his programmes was sheer fantasy." Kelly, *Mikhail Bakunin*, 237.

38 Mendel, *Michael Bakunin*, 295-296.

One such organizational plan was known by Marx and Engels and criticized in their pamphlet on "The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men's Association." In the outline, Bakunin describes in some detail the international and national levels of his organization and various sub-groups. What is striking is the way the organization is described as a sort of manipulative structure *vis-à-vis* the individual members. Bakunin writes, "National Brotherhoods of each country are organized in such a way as to never be able to withdraw from the direction of the international brothers who are in the Central Committee. . . ." <sup>39</sup> Writing of the national sections of the organization, Bakunin identifies two groups existing within a "National Committee." He writes, "However, the two groups must not be under any circumstances informed of the existence of the international organization or of the seat and the composition of the international central Committee." <sup>40</sup> An interesting idea: the sections of the organization are not even aware of the existence of its executive organs. The same idea re-appears in the organizational plan Bakunin drew up for Nechayev in 1870: "All members of the *Regional Fraternity* know each other, but do not know of the existence of the *People's Fraternity*. They only know that there exists a *Central Committee* which hands down to them their orders for execution through [a] *Regional Committee* which has been set up by it, i.e. by the *Central Committee*." <sup>41</sup> Engels' report to the Hague Congress, after citing evidence that the Alliance never dissolved as it had agreed, touches upon this organizational question: "The organization of a secret society of this kind is a blatant violation, not only of the contractual obligations to the International, but also of the letter and spirit of our General Rules. Our Rules know only one kind of members of the International with equal rights and duties for all. The Alliance separates them into two castes: the initiated and the uninitiated, the aristocracy and the plebs, the latter destined to be led by the first by means of an organization whose very existence is unknown to them." <sup>42</sup> Even Paul Avrich, a sympathetic Bakunin scholar, acknowledges that Bakunin wanted to create a secret society whose members "would be subjected to the 'strictest discipline' and subordinated to a small revolutionary directorate." <sup>43</sup>

Another instructive discussion of organizational principles by Bakunin comes in his Russian text *To the Officers of the Russian Army*. In his *Statism and Anarchy*, Bakunin writes that in the world of the Russian officers, in contrast to that of the German officers, "a human heart can still be found, an instinctive capacity to love and understand mankind, and in the right conditions, under a good influence, the ability to become a fully conscious friend of the people." <sup>44</sup> What does Bakunin offer these potential friends of the people in his Russian text? He recommends to them a powerful organization that is prepared to direct a mass rising in Russia—Nechayev's organization. This organization, he assures them is "strong in discipline, passionate dedication, and the self-sacrifice of its members and unconditionally obedient to all the orders and directives of a *Single Committee* that knows

39 Michel Bakounine, *Œuvres Complètes, Volume 6: Michel Bakounine et ses relations slaves 1870-1875* (Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1978), 369.

40 Ibid., 369-370.

41 Bakunin, "M. Bakunin to Sergey Nechayev," 266.

42 Engels, "Report on the Alliance," 232.

43 Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, 24.

44 Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 78.

everything, but is known by no one.”<sup>45</sup> Bakunin explains that “Each new member joins our organization voluntarily, knowing in advance that once he has become a part of it, he ceases to belong to himself, and will from then on belong only to the organization.”<sup>46</sup> Bakunin describes the role of the individual member in the organization: “He only speaks about the cause *with those* who he is authorized to speak with, and he sticks *strictly* to what he must say; and in general he conforms absolutely and rigorously to all the orders and instructions which he receives from above, without wondering or trying to learn at what level he is located in the organization; he wishes simply and quite naturally to be entrusted with as many tasks as possible, but at the same time waits patiently to be assigned new tasks.”<sup>47</sup> Bakunin has just described what he is looking for in a member, and it basically boils down to *obedience*. He expresses opposition to “parliamentary chatter” which could lead to the forming of “opposing parties within the organization.”<sup>48</sup> Marx and Engels, aware of this essay of Bakunin’s, were hesitant to take his rhetoric about freedom and autonomy so seriously.

Bakunin’s conspiratorialism seems to be heavily influenced by French socialist traditions, particularly the revolutionary practice of Philippe Buonarroti. The Bakunin scholar Arthur Lehning has written of Buonarroti: “He too built up on an international scale, though over a much longer period, an elaborate underground network, on a freemason pattern, sometimes using Masonic institutions, to work for his egalitarian creed of 1796, for a social revolution and for the republicanisation of Europe. For forty years the principles remained the same: the leadership was secret; the existence of the higher grades was unknown to the lower; protean in character, this network took advantage of and used other societies.”<sup>49</sup> As we have seen, these principles are clearly evident in Bakunin’s writings. “Not for nothing did [Bakunin] praise Buonarroti as ‘the greatest conspirator of his age,’” observed Paul Avrich.<sup>50</sup> Marx, on the other hand, was very critical of the conspiratorial tradition in French socialism. In an 1850 book review, Marx writes the following of the “conspirators”:

It is precisely their business to anticipate the process of revolutionary development, to bring it artificially to crisis-point, to launch a revolution on the spur of the moment, without the conditions for a revolution. For them the only condition for revolution is the adequate preparation of their conspiracy. They are the alchemists of the revolution and are characterised by exactly the same

45 Michel Bakounine, *Œuvres Complètes, Volume 5: Michel Bakounine et ses relations avec Serge Nechaev 1870-1872* (Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1977), 174.

46 *Ibid.*, 175.

47 *Ibid.*, 177. Some real-world examples of this outlook: Bakunin and Nechayev at one point attempted to get Natalie Herzen to join their mysterious organization. Natalie Herzen tells of her frustration with never receiving any real explanation of what she would be getting into: “I always made the same reply: ‘I need to have a clear idea of the ends and the means!’” Mendel, *Michael Bakunin*, 339. E.H. Carr writes of an 1869 argument over Bakunin’s authority in his International Brotherhood, started in Italy. His unhappy members claimed that in his absence they had “neither information, nor addresses, nor documents,” pertaining to the organization, these presumably having been monopolized by Bakunin. Carr, *Michael Bakunin*, 367.

48 Mendel, *Michael Bakunin*, 335.

49 Arthur Lehning, “Bakunin’s Conceptions of Revolutionary Organisations and Their Role: A Study of His ‘Secret Societies’,” in *Essays in Honour of E.H. Carr*, ed. C. Abramsky (London: The Macmillan Press, 1974), 58.

50 Avrich, *Bakunin and Nechaev*, 22.

chaotic thinking and blinkered obsessions as the alchemists of old. They leap at inventions which are supposed to work revolutionary miracles: incendiary bombs, destructive devices of magic effect, revolts which are expected to be all the more miraculous and astonishing in effect as their basis is less rational. Occupied with such scheming, they have no other purpose than the most immediate one of overthrowing the existing government and have the profoundest contempt for the more theoretical enlightenment of the proletariat about their class interests.<sup>51</sup>

## Criticizing Marx

It is fairly well-known that Bakunin harbored some racist beliefs, and his anti-Semitic and anti-German ideas came out in his feud with Marx. This obviously does not reveal some fatal flaw of anarchism, but a look at Bakunin's racial diatribes helps us understand the particular way in which Bakunin mixed racism and politics. While one can easily agree with Bakunin's "politics" and clearly reject the "racism," Bakunin *himself* had a deeply racial understanding of political tendencies. Even more importantly, Bakunin's racial remarks with regard to Marx reveal how much of an incorrigible fantasist Bakunin was.<sup>52</sup> Key points in his critique of Marx are based on pure fantasy. Bakunin saw himself as engaged in an epic racial battle against pan-Germanism, of which Marx was a representative. In *Statism and Anarchy*, Bakunin cautions, "Do not think that Bismarck is as ferocious an enemy of this party [the Social-Democrats] as he pretends. He is too clever not to see that it serves him as a pioneer, disseminating the German concept of the state in Austria, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Holland, and Switzerland. The propagation of this Germanic idea is now the chief aspiration of Marx, who, as we have already noted, tried to resume within the International, to his own advantage, the exploits and victories of Prince Bismarck."<sup>53</sup>

When the battle raged in the International, Bakunin identified Marx with Bismarck's plans for German domination of Europe: "It is this plan to destroy liberty, a plan that has posed a mortal danger to the Latin race and the Slavic race, that is now trying to win absolute control of the International. Against this monstrous claim of pan-Germanism, we must oppose an alliance of the Latin and Slavic races. . . ."<sup>54</sup> Racial agitation played an important role in Bakunin's campaign against Marx preceding the 1872 Hague Congress. During this period, Bakunin wrote a series of circular letters addressed to his supporters, at times

51 Karl Marx, "Review: *Les Conspirateurs*, par A. Chenu," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 10 (New York: International Publishers, 1978), 318.

52 Bakunin is an intriguing figure in this regard. For example, In August 1862, Bakunin went to Paris and offered his services to a Polish general, Mieroslawski, showing support for a Polish rising. According to the General, Bakunin presented himself as the "plenipotentiary delegate of a powerful Russian secret conspiratorial organization who was in a position to strengthen our uprising on the Vistula by some 70,000 Russian troops, to surrender Modlin into our hands, etc. It seems that he [Bakunin] had just been wondering himself at the time how he might use those 70,000 Tsarist soldiers. So, he promised to form them into a Russian legion in order to start a revolution in [the Ukraine] and then in Russia." Mendel, *Michael Bakunin*, 278.

53 Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, 194.

54 Mendel, *Michael Bakunin*, 383.

specifically encouraging opposition to the “Marxists” through anti-Semitic rhetoric.<sup>55</sup> An example of one of these circular letters is Bakunin’s December 1871 *Letter to the Bologne Members of the International*. Here is an extract from this circular:

Well now, this whole Jewish world which constitutes a single exploiting sect, a sort of bloodsucker people, a collective parasite, voracious, organized in itself, not only across the frontiers of states but even across all the differences of political opinion—this world is presently, at least in great part, at the disposal of Marx on the one hand and of the Rothschilds on the other. I know that the Rothschilds, reactionaries as they are and should be, highly appreciate the merits of the communist Marx; and that in his turn the communist Marx feels irresistibly drawn, by instinctive attraction and respectful admiration, to the financial genius of Rothschild. Jewish solidarity, that powerful solidarity that has maintained itself through all history, united them.<sup>56</sup>

Since Marx can be “united” with the Rothschild banking dynasty, Bakunin has no problem at all identifying Marx with someone like Lassalle, who had very different politics from Marx. For example, Bakunin writes, “Conforming strictly to the political program Marx and Engels had set forth in the *Communist Manifesto*, Lassalle demanded only one thing of Bismarck: that state credit be made available to the workers’ producer associations.”<sup>57</sup> As it turns out, in Marx’s mind there was a clear distinction between what Bismarck could do for the workers, and what the workers could do *for themselves*. Marx was quite hostile to Lassalle’s socialism-from-above. As he wrote in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, criticizing Lassallean influence on the Gotha Programme,

Instead of the revolutionary process of transformation of society, the ‘socialist organization of the total labour’ ‘arises’ from the ‘state aid’ that the state gives to the producers’ co-operative societies and which the state, not the worker, ‘calls into being.’ This is worthy of Lassalle’s imagination that one can build a new society by state loans just as well as a new railway! . . . That the workers desire to establish the conditions of co-operative production on a social, and first of all on a national, scale in their own country, only means that they are working to revolutionize the present conditions of production, and has nothing in common

55 Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution, Volume IV*, 295.

56 Quoted from *Ibid.*, 296. The circular letter is available as “Lettre aux Internationaux de Bologne (décembre 1871),” in Bakounine, *Œuvres Complètes, Volume 2*. For more of Bakunin’s anti-Semitic rhetoric, see his “Aux Compagnons de la Fédération des Sections Internationales du Jura (février-mars 1872),” in Michel Bakounine, *Œuvres Complètes, Volume 3: Michel Bakounine et les Conflits Dans L’Internationale 1872* (Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1975). In Bakunin’s reply to Marx and Engels’ “The Alleged Splits in the International,” he denounced the lies of “German and Russian Jews.” See “Réponse à la Circulaire Privée du Conseil Général: *Les Prétendues Scissions dans L’Internationale*,” in Bakounine, *Œuvres Complètes, Volume 3*, 121. Bakunin’s reply was published in the Jura Federation’s Bulletin of June 15, 1872. In July, Engels commented on Bakunin’s reply in a letter to Cuno: “Bakunin has issued a furious, but very weak, abusive letter in reply to the *Scissions*. That fat elephant is beside himself with rage because he has finally been dragged from his Locarno lair out into the light, where neither scheming nor intrigues are of any more use. Now he declares that he is the victim of a conspiracy of all the European—*Jews!*” Friedrich Engels, “Engels to Theodor Cuno,” in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* Vol. 44, 408.

57 Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, 184.

with the foundation of co-operative societies with state aid. But as far as the present co-operative societies are concerned they are of value *only* in so far as they are the independent creations of the workers and not protégés either of the government or of the bourgeoisie.<sup>58</sup>

While Marx's critique of Bakunin's authoritarianism is often ignored, Bakunin's critique of Marx is often praised for its prescience, despite its complete distortion of Marx's ideas.

Some of Bakunin's criticisms of Marx are truly bizarre. Bakunin believed that "doctrinaire revolutionaries" like Marx and Engels think "that thought precedes life, that abstract theory precedes social practice, that sociology must therefore be the point of departure for social upheavals and reconstructions," and therefore come to the conclusion "that since thought, theory, and science, at least for the present, are the property of a very few individuals, those few must be the directors of social life."<sup>59</sup> After quoting at length Bakunin's charges that Marx was using the First International to impose on the world a "government invested with dictatorial powers," Daniel Guerin comments, "No doubt Bakunin was distorting the thoughts of Marx quite severely in attributing to him such a universally authoritarian concept, but the experience of the Third International has since shown that the danger of which he warned did eventually materialize."<sup>60</sup> This is a curious justification for Bakunin's criticism: because people have done authoritarian things in Marx's name, Bakunin's elaborate straw-man argument becomes retroactively vindicated. Another commentator writes, "Bakunin's conception of the Marxist state he saw waiting in the wings of history was disturbing but correct. . . . history seems to have been on Bakunin's, not Marx's, side. . . ."<sup>61</sup> Praise for Bakunin's prophetic powers has served to gloss over the inaccuracy of his portrayal of Marx's ideas.

## Conclusion

Marx characterized the International as "a bond of union rather than a controlling force"<sup>62</sup> and considered it "the business of the International Working Men's Association to combine and generalize the *spontaneous movements* of the working classes, but not to dictate or impose any doctrinary system whatever."<sup>63</sup> On the basis of this vision, Marx opposed secret groupings in the International and held that this type of organization "is opposed to the development of the proletarian movement because, instead of instructing the workers, these societies subject them to authoritarian, mystical laws which cramp their

58 Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 16-17.

59 Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, 136. As Marx explained repeatedly, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." Karl Marx, "Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 389.

60 Guerin, *Anarchism*, 24-25.

61 Alvin W. Gouldner, "Marx's Last Battle: Bakunin and the First International," *Theory and Society* 11, no. 6 (1982), 866.

62 Karl Marx, "The Curtain Raised: Interview with Karl Marx, the Head of L'Internationale," *New Politics* 2, no. 1 (1962), 130.

63 Karl Marx, "Instructions for Delegates to the Geneva Congress," in *Political Writings, Volume III*, 90.

independence and distort their powers of reason.”<sup>64</sup> This perspective bears little in common with the caricature of Marxian authoritarianism that has become so widespread. Writing to Blos in 1877, Marx asserted that when he and Engels first joined the Communist League, they “did so only on condition that anything conducive to a superstitious belief in authority be eliminated from the Rules.”<sup>65</sup> Marx’s opposition to authoritarian methods of organization reflects his long-standing belief in the importance of workers’ democracy. This was thus the basis for his rejection of Bakunin’s brand of vanguardism. As we have seen, Marx considered Bakunin’s emphasis on a tightly knit revolutionary general staff to be misguided. Far from being a consistent critic of authoritarianism, Bakunin mixed his elaborate praise for abstract liberty with an authoritarian organizational outlook.

*(Revised December 2010)*

64 Karl Marx, “Record of Marx’s Speech on Secret Societies,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* Vol. 22 (New York: International Publishers, 1986), 621.

65 Karl Marx, “Marx to Blos,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 45 (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 288.