Reflections on Prophecy

A Critical Appreciation
of Michael Bakunin's Thought

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Although the movement from rural and small-town life to urban industrial society in Europe and North America is by no means contained within the 19th century, that is the age, if we have to choose one, of this momentous historical change. That period also, by the way, constitutes the last century for which painting serves as the record of human life. Photography, still in its infancy, cannot do what the canvas can; soon, however, the still image will rule and applied colours retreat (or advance, depending on one's perspective) onto terrains of intellectual abstraction serving ends other than life’s record.

For a subject like ours – the thought of Michael Bakunin – painting can serve as a stimulating start. I am not thinking of depictions of overtly political themes like Romanticism’s Liberty leading the People. Rather, the oeuvre that first comes to mind is that of Vincent Van Gogh. And not any sample of the Dutchman’s work. Think specifically of those paintings from the late 1880s that depict so movingly and colourfully the intrusion of factories, smokestacks and steam engines onto scenes otherwise “natural.” Green-golden fields with, au fond, industry. Grass creeping up to the gorgeous blue Seine…with a bridge carrying a locomotive over the river. Arles: View from the wheat fields could be a snapshot of traditional European countryside, except for the two industrial stacks to the left.

What is most beautiful and notable about these paintings is that the modern presence is neither aggressive nor alien, despite my use of the term “intrusion.” Indeed, the charm depends on budding industry’s union with the plants and piled crops, ripples and clouds.
What has been and what is more recent embrace.

Next, to focus still more precisely – and jump back somewhat to the summer of 1876. We have three significant events in this season which, in the way events from an epoch can (when we are following a particular intellectual thread), remind us of each other. Renoir produces *Bal au Moulin de la Galette*, that lavish outdoor depiction of young working-class Parisians dancing, chatting and enjoying each other under a ceiling of lamps and treetops, dressed in their best. Embraces, casual and some more ardent, grab the viewer’s eye. The 21st-century observer has the impression of a social scene where the formal and informal genuinely meet, where the conventions of dress and dance coexist with a refreshing liberty on a day away from work. The Sabbath as truly a day for the human being.

The same season, 25 June in fact, half a globe away on the hot plains of the Dakotas: No more art, just life. A huge encampment of Lakota, Cheyenne and some Arapaho has gathered, possibly aware of local movements by forces of the army of the United States, but confident in the security offered by its own great mass. Young boys up early after a night of fun are watering horses in the Greasy Grass River when a relatively small group of US soldiers launches a sudden attack. One that will quickly prove foolhardy of course, shattered in the heat and dust and ending in leisurely coups de grâce administered to injured soldiers sprawled on the early summer turf. This battle, known to us as the Little Bighorn, marks the last great military success of North America’s aboriginal people over the still-young, quintessentially modern State spreading its tentacles across a continent. Decentralized networks of farmers and hunter-gatherers
will finally give way to that machine fabricated centuries before and shipped across the ocean in the minds and habits of colonizing peoples.

Then a week later, back across the Atlantic and in a Swiss hospital, on 1 July, one of the century’s eminent revolutionaries succumbs to a lifetime’s abuse, effort, joy and disappointment. A counsellor who sought to advise the present on its relationship with yesterday and tomorrow. Michael Bakunin is dead, a not-very-old-man of 62.

*Insights for a world in crisis*

This paper is no biographical sketch of the famous anarchist. While the details and events of MB’s life are exciting (who could be bored by tales of risings in multiple European towns, Tsar’s dungeons, flight from Siberia via Japan and raging disputes with Karl Marx?), these won’t take up our effort. Admirable accounts of our subject’s personal formation and existence have in any case been produced, recently by Mark Leier in his life of Bakunin.¹ Which might provoke some readers to ask, why bother with his thought? Should one devote pages entirely to a political philosophy that lost its argument with State socialism, on the one hand, and corporate capitalism on the other. The man is a historical relic, his followers relatively few, and those still around conjurers of chaos. Theoretically and practically speaking, we need the State. A discussion of Bakunin’s thought is an exercise in anachronism, akin to a serious consideration of Aristotle’s view of slavery – some

Certainly will say.

Two basic points may be made in response:

1) For a world in crisis, the Russian’s views could turn out to be astonishingly fresh. Certainly, the shortcomings of Marxism’s various manifestations and the evident struggles of State-managed capitalism (assuming a distinction between these two political categories) compel us to review the ideas of those whom these once-triumphant systems appeared to vanquish. Apart from being one more cogent critic of capitalism, Bakunin predicted in advance, in broad strokes but with great accuracy, the misery of Bolshevism. He thought long before its enactment that Stalinism was Marxism in practice, though of course the S word was not one he knew. He was thus aware of the advantages of a decentralized society and of liberalism’s strengths relative to centralized planning, while trumpeting the left’s condemnation of inequality; 2) The notion that libertarianism of the left is the advocacy of chaos has nothing to do with Bakunin’s thought. Those who argue that he sought to do away with government, understood as social organization, either never read him or lie.

Similarly, though some claim anarchy who also preach and practice a violent nihilism, it does not follow that they obtained their guidebook from Michael Bakunin. St. Paul, after all, felt compelled to write letters to the early Church reprimanding some for sexual promiscuity and criminality; the perpetrators of said actions apparently justified themselves on doctrinal grounds. But rarely, at least anymore, is Jesus of Nazareth blamed for licentiousness and revolutionary violence. Bakunin is quite clear on the matter of violence: While there is little doubt, he thinks, that social upheaval
will at least sometimes be accompanied by killings perpetrated by the oppressed against their former rulers and exploiters, he regards the latter as “evil doers but not guilty.” Killing them is neither moral nor useful (“as futile as the ravages of a storm”), for they are individuals pressed into a role by a system. Prevailing property and labour relations and the institutions that uphold them are the phenomena that require destruction. Here it must be noted that biographer Leier renders a major service in restoring Bakunin's relevance for the student of revolutionary history while debunking the myth that he was a partisan of bloodshed.

My argument will be this: In Bakunin, as in all of us, there exist apparent and real contradictions. Like other greats, he stands in one era and seeks to speak to all. He is the prophet of clashes, but not primarily those produced by ricocheting bullets and blades of steel

2 I first encountered this reference in Michael Bakunin, “The Program of the International Brotherhood,” in Sam Dolgoff, ed., Bakunin on Anarchy (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 150-151. The original French version, in the “Programme et Objet de l'organisation des Frères internationaux,” may be found at www.fondation-besnard.org/spip.php?article682. Similar comments appear elsewhere in MB's writing, as in the “Circulaire à mes amis d'Italie” where Bakunin notes that socialists will “certainly” not, in the first wave of the revolution, be able to prevent the people from ridding the world of a few hundred of their most “odious” and “dangerous” class opponents, but once the storm is passed, will oppose with all their energy executions carried out in cold blood. See Michel Bakounine, Œuvres, Tome VI (Paris: P.-V Stock, 1913), 400-401. Workers and ex-bourgeois will then become brothers and sisters in creative labour and freedom. All one can note against Bakunin on the question of violence is a certain inconsistency of view with regard to its probability: Blood might not be shed on a significant scale, he seems to think at times, or it might flow. Killing is not to be countenanced. But upheavals are not subject to anyone's strict control.
on cobbled European streets, revolutionary events from his life notwithstanding. A man of action ultimately deprived of successful action (both by prisons and quiescent workers), he developed into a theorist of note, as the eminent historian Gerald Brenan observed. And his intellectual sparks and flames are the facts of his life of which humanity, everywhere bored, divided, exploited, short of liberty and real solidarity, still has need.

I

Freedom, equality, federalism and collectivism constitute the four cardinal points of the mature Bakunin’s program. Or set of proposals, if “program” strikes one as too political for this dean of anti-Statism. What is significant about his treatment of these notions, I shall argue, is that he never seeks to resolve any in another but insists upon holding each in creative tension with the rest, their potential contradictions notwithstanding. None can be taken for granted, none discarded. Liberty cannot be reduced to a class concept, for example, reflective of a certain mode of production and set of relations and liable to become obsolete (or changed to something unrecognizable) in the new era when scientifically planned production and the universal State rule the day. For Bakunin, the free human person is irreducible...and a social objective.

With some textual support, let us examine how each of the four concepts reinforce and enhance each other while retaining their distinctive force.

The best-known feature of Bakunin's intellectual dialectic – as distinct from any historical, Hegelian/Marxist sense of the word to
which he might have subscribed – is undoubtedly that one involving freedom and equality. And it quickly comes to light in his assault upon the State. As already suggested, he denies that human beings have to choose between equality and liberty. An individual’s freedom is an absolute to be defended. In his critique of Rousseau, he asserts that where the State begins there individual liberty ceases. One in disagreement with this claim “will answer that the State, representing public safety or the common interest of all, removes a part of each person's liberty only for the sake of assuring all the remainder. But this remainder is security, if you like; it is never liberty. Liberty is indivisible: One can't remove a part without killing it entirely. The little part you are cutting is the very essence of liberty; it is all of it. Through a natural, necessary and irresistible movement, all my liberty is concentrated precisely in the part, small as it may be, that you remove."

3 M. Bakounine, *Oeuvres, Tome I* (Paris: P.-V Stock, 1895), 143-144. All translations from the French by the author. Bakunin's comment about the indivisability of liberty, how it can't be limited for each and every one so that all of us enjoy a remaining part, closely echoes Hegel's remarks from the Introduction to his *Philosophy of History* – except that Hegel wishes to stress this indivisibility in order to maintain that freedom is wholly realized in law, morality and government and “they alone,” that is, in the State. For “the State is the Divine Idea as it exists on Earth;” it is reason objectively present and so is freedom itself. Bakunin of course does not disagree that reason is freedom; he denies that the State is or can be its actualization. See GWF Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, translation by J. Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 54.
And this point on the democratic State, echoing Alexis de Tocqueville, may as well be recorded right away:

A republican State, based upon universal suffrage, can be very despotic, even more despotic than the monarchical State, when under the pretext of representing the will of everyone, it brings down the weight of its collective power upon the will and free movement of each of its members.\(^4\)

This unambiguous take on liberty is fairly clear. I am free or I am not. But what of equality in relation to freedom? Bakunin believes that even if liberty is the primary condition of mankind, the first social good, equality is essential to freedom’s flowering. Without equality, he notes, liberty “will never amount to more than a pack of lies.” But tensions between the two exist. The very real danger remains – or rather, came to pass on notable occasions in the century after Bakunin and despite his warnings – that the masses allow their attraction to equality and security to lead them into a dependence on authoritarian, freedom-killing political movements. Yet equality of a real sort remains essential... for liberty. Undoubtedly a social good in itself is achieved when all can eat, dress well, have shelter and be educated. But also the destitute person inevitably feels coerced, less able to follow his or her will or to give consent. The hungry labourer in Andalusia agrees to work fourteen hours in the fields because he has only a few employer/landowners to appeal to and they all offer the same lousy conditions – and in a few months those bosses will have little need of him. His assent to given wages and conditions is

\(^4\) M. Bakounine, *Oeuvres, Tome I*, 145.
evidently tainted, though not fictitious. But only one who can survey genuine options feels free.

_**Spinoza’s light cast**_

At a more profound level, understanding the way equality lends real substance to liberty – and indeed grasping precisely what Bakunin understands by freedom – requires an appreciation of the importance he assigns education. It also, I am certain, is aided by an awareness of Benedict Spinoza’s enormous influence, direct or indirect, upon the Russian revolutionary.

Here we require a small but important philosophical digression.

Much has been made of GWF Hegel's impact on our subject. Some of this stems from the fact that in his youth, Bakunin was undeniably an acolyte of the Jena professor. Perhaps it is not outlandish to call him, at least once upon time, Russia's most interesting interpreter of Hegel and to place him within that elastic circle known as the left Hegelians. A tendency to see the German in Bakunin's thought also arises, I think, from an overemphasis on our subject's intellectual and programmatic proximity to Marx. Marx comes from Hegel, ergo...⁵

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⁵ Most stimulating is the discussion of Hegel and Feuerbach's influence on Bakunin in Paul McLaughlin, _Mikhail Bakunin: The Philosophical Basis of His Anarchism_ (New York: Algora, 2002). Without a doubt, the author's argument that Marx's most notable flaws – or at least one of them – stem from his movement away from Hegel in the direction of Kant is a powerful one. But it is perhaps overstated, I will maintain, in the sense that much of what is wrong with State socialism's most famous proponent stems precisely from his fidelity to GWF. Still, very telling are McLaughlin's observations about how Marxism's determination to
But this won't entirely do, for more than one reason. Most importantly, it is not the case that when one fills a bucket from some riverine course, one is drawing from the source. In this case the spring is Spinoza, GWF a stream, albeit an impressive and powerful one, nourished by the fount. Hegel admits as much in his lectures. “To be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all philosophy,” he told his classes without apparent irony. The soul of the thinker must begin by bathing “…in this ether of the one Substance.” 6 This single Substance, thought and extension (and possibly more) that contains within itself an infinite network of cause and effect, this absolutely immanent creator of a self-sustaining universe, this dynamic totality, is all Spinoza. GWF and his acolytes largely adopt and put a historicist spin on the master’s works, one might say – perfectly aware that such a statement is likely to provoke a charge of oversimplifying a monumental and original contribution to philosophy. Yet there it is, I shall suggest: In Hegel’s thought we have an idealized version of Spinoza’s system plus a God or World-Spirit on some manner of quest to know Himself, to reconcile Himself to His creation, to, over history and time’s course, seal the break between divine, abstract universal reason and particular phenomena – including human thought. God’s thought appears in
dogmatically regard phenomena through the lens of economic relations (though here we might add a Hegelian tool too: the lens of unfolding history), and hence not “in themselves,” loudly smacks of Kant. Is it then any surprise that Marx is well-regarded by those today who say truth is inaccessible and that we only deal in culturally mediated “narratives?” See Part II of McLaughlin’s fine book.
6 Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Section 2: Period of the Thinking Understanding. Chapter 1 The Metaphysics of the Understanding, A2. Spinoza, may be found at www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hp/hpspinoz.htm
history as human thought refining itself dialectically into God’s thought. Or, the abstract Absolute is finally rendered concrete in the rational State.

What does this, including our foray into Idealist jargon, matter in a discussion of the anarchist Bakunin? The answer is that the mature MB ends up markedly closer to the original, to Spinoza, than to Hegel – and is ultimately as aghast at the German’s theo-historical romp as the lens-grinder from the Netherlands would have been had he lived to know Hegel’s opus. This can fairly be stated even while recognizing that Bakunin never relinquishes the notion that human liberation, in its fullest sense, remains an undertaking of future possibility, and hence a historical project. He never completely discards aspects of Hegel’s “progressive” vision. But he ends as a (critical) disciple of the Dutch-Portuguese Jew, perhaps in part unwittingly and because of the enormous light that Spinoza casts over European thinkers in the centuries after his death. In other words, MB may have gotten some or much of his Spinoza second hand, as Daniel Colson suggests. Be this as it may, said influence has enormous ramifications for both Bakunin’s philosophy broadly understood and his final programmatic position against Marx.

Like Spinoza, Bakunin is a thorough-going philosophical determinist whose great interest in liberty appears at first glance paradoxical. So to understand this aspect of the problem we should review these thinkers’ metaphysical positions – as much as it might annoy our subject to say that he has a metaphysics. Following Spinoza, Bakunin hardly thinks of liberty as simply doing what one wants, although it might well include this. Freedom resides in understanding, assenting to and acting in accordance with natural
processes and those rules of human society (as distinct from coercive edicts of the State) in accord with Nature. These laws, Bakunin explicitly states in a fashion consistent with the older thinker, are not restrictions upon our freedom so much as the condition of liberty’s exercise. Hence, freedom has everything to do with knowledge; it grows as we grasp Nature’s truths and adapt our desires to her cause-driven system. As we turn natural laws into our own thoughts. This liberty is not a state inhabited by the egotistical individual enslaved to the passions and lunging for whatever he wants. This man might want to fly to the moon and enjoy his cousin’s wife all in the same evening; in one case, the laws of physics and in another, sound social convention rooted in natural necessity and another person’s right-to-consent stand in his way.

Consider the following argument by our subject in which he links legitimate “authority” to the exercise of liberty.

What is authority? Is it the inevitable power of the natural laws which manifest themselves in the natural linking and succession of phenomena in the physical and social worlds? In fact, against these laws revolt is not only forbidden – it is even impossible…[These laws] constitute the basis and the fundamental conditions of our existence…Yes, we are absolutely the slaves of these laws. But in such slavery there is no humiliation or rather, it is not slavery at all. For slavery supposes an external master…while these laws are not outside of us, they are inherent in us; they constitute our being, our whole being, physically, intellectually and morally. Without them we are nothing, we are not…
In his relation to natural laws, but one liberty is possible to man: that of recognizing and applying them on an ever-extending scale of conformity with the object of collective and individual emancipation...\(^7\)

There should be no mistake on this point. Bakunin, the radical left’s standard-bearer of liberty against the doctrines of Marx (and later Lenin), follows Spinoza in denying free will. Some humans imagine our choices to be undetermined, to spring *ex nihilo* from our autonomous minds, simply because we are ignorant of their causes. But Nature is a web of effect and we are no less embedded in Nature than are ants and rocks. The student of the Tao or reader of medieval Islam’s Ibn Rushd (Averroës) will not, incidentally, fail to recognize kindred spirits here.

Yet we are complex, we humans, conscious clusters of too many causal strands to track or measure.\(^8\) So that no individual is quite like another, as our subject is at pains to underline. Thus liberty, philosophically speaking, is preserved: Each of us possesses varied (and gifted) powers of intellect and action, and when we employ these thoughtfully and effectively we are in a meaningful

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8 A very thorough discussion of the sense in which humans are results in a causal web and yet so much more – brand-new “products” with real autonomy – is presented by Daniel Colson, “Lectures anarchistes de Spinoza – Réfractions, recherches et expressions anarchistes,” (printemps 1998), [www.refractions.plusloin.org/spip.php?article271](http://www.refractions.plusloin.org/spip.php?article271) Here we find, I think, the lens through which Bakunin’s love of liberty and wholehearted assent to necessity must be viewed. Colson opens his piece with the suggestion that MB may not have read Spinoza in a “direct or profound manner” but “he knows him however.”
way free – though not uncaused – agents. As importantly, when we join our reason and physical powers to those of others similarly endowed, we become freer still. Which is to say, capable of analyzing and impacting society and the world in ways unthinkable when we were merely flailing individuals out of sync with our brothers and sisters. This notion is critical to any understanding of Bakunin's defence of freedom as a social phenomenon and also has its reflection, or its root, in Spinoza's famous if uncontroversial observation about the way association increases the powers and capacities of our species.9

In sum, Bakunin’s stance on liberty has little to do with a leap-in-the-dark in favour of freedom over determinism in the absence of firm intellectual ground for either choice. He knows perfectly well that all things are caused, including ideas. For despite residual anguish flourishing amongst certain 19th(and even 21st)-century writers over the very old problem of freedom's reconciliation with necessity, the main elements of its solution have long been delivered. The mature Bakunin shows no sign of doubting this. And so we return to a main feature of equality: access to knowledge, awareness of science, educational opportunity for all – a program that widely dispenses liberty’s irreplaceable moyen.

9 “For if...two individuals of entirely the same nature are united, they form a combination twice as powerful as either of them singly. Therefore to man there is nothing more useful...than that all should so in all points agree that the minds and bodies of all should form, as it were, one single mind and one single body...and...endeavour to preserve their being, and all with one consent seek what is useful to them all.” Benedict de Spinoza, “The Ethics,” IV, Prop. XVIII, Note, The Rationalists (Garden City, New York: Anchor books, 1974).
The equality of souls

Some further observations. Gerald Brenan, the great interpreter of Spanish culture and history, suggests that Bakunin's egalitarianism is assumed or inherited from the "medieval Christian teaching" which affirms the equality of all souls before God. Thus one of the century’s most vociferous atheists builds his foundation upon the Church! There is value in this insight and I will have more to say on the Christ-Bakunin-St Paul relationship. But for now, let us stay on the track of equality’s relationship to reason and liberty. Bakunin, while never denying or downplaying the natural differences in talents among men and women, is also a strong egalitarian due to his awareness of the intellectually corrupting effects of artificial hierarchy. State power turns the moral young politician into an individual incorrectly convinced of his own superiority; deference in a class society debases reason as the desirable currency of exchange among human beings. And reason is Nature, embedded in Nature, as Spinoza insists. When we speak to others as bosses or underlings or celebrities we undermine natural intercourse and act unreasonably. Ingratiation rather than truth becomes the object of conversation. Bakunin would have us reject, in Socrates’ words to Glaucon as the two build their city in speech, that

10 Gerald Brenan, The Spanish Labyrinth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 135. Brenan is also most perceptive in recognizing the gulf between Marx and Bakunin generally and particularly the extent to which the former’s Hegelian dialectic is foreign to Bakunin’s thought. History for the Russian collectivist is the story of that “semi-gregarious animal Man,” according to Brenan, whose nature does not markedly change through the epochs, though Bakunin certainly holds that the possibility of an ever-deepening liberty grows with civilization's material and spiritual development.
“pettiest of the evils...poor men flattering rich.” 11

II

Next, equality and collectivism. These two concepts are by no means synonymous, although their relationship is perhaps more easily grasped than freedom-equality, accustomed as we are to suspect the latter terms of being at odds with each other. For Bakunin, collectivism refers to an economic system different from both the Marxist model and that of the liberals. Owing much to Proudhon, that theorist dismayed by the misery of the independent artisan at the hands of growing industrialists and financial oligopoly, it describes an economy both socialized and decentralized in which

11 The Republic of Plato, Book V, 465 b-c, translation by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968). Bakunin’s constant harping on the need for reason and the “rational organization of society” really does serve to highlight the extent to which certain analyses of his thought, like that of Paul Avrich, seriously exaggerate our subject’s rejection of “European civilization” and the Enlightenment. Avrich and others are correct to say that Bakunin regards the instinctive thirst for justice felt by the peasantry and the genuinely poor, and the not-yet-suborned vitality of the “rabble” (some from the geographical periphery) as revolutionary fuel. But by no means does he consider irrational passion and anger as organizing principles in the new society. “Our ideal for all is liberty, morality, intelligence and the welfare of each through the solidarity of all: human fraternity, in short.” Bakunin is a child of European thought seeking to redeem the civilization from which that thought sprang. See “The Program of the International Brotherhood,” in Dolgoff, p. 149, for the quote. We are nonetheless left with an essential question: To what extent can the furies of class feeling and the desire for revenge be employed as tools, as a sort of wrecking ball to open the way to the new society of peaceful reason and solidarity? Or does rage released inevitably have a life of its own, producing something quite different from the peaceful collectivist vision, when its force is finally spent?
workers control and manage the enterprises where they are employed. While Bakunin does not go into great detail regarding collectivist economics, he clearly believes that individual enterprises of whatever size can choose integration in larger networks or “go it alone” in a social market of some type. More on this below. The aspect of his thought on collectivism that concerns us most at this point is the way in which it bolsters equality but declines to make an idol or fetish of egalitarian ends. In other words, contradictions between equality and collectivist economics exist and are indeed useful.

Enterprises (leaving aside sole proprietorships and partnerships that don’t employ labour and may remain in private hands) essentially become worker cooperatives in which cleaners, like accountants, wield a voice and assume a measure of responsibility for the enterprise neither demanded nor offered in the standard capitalist firm. Workplaces become schools for “being all that one can be,” to paraphrase an old armed forces recruitment jingle. Such practice increases demands on workers even as it deepens equality, as members of all worker co-ops know, but does not ordain levelling. Indeed, collectivist strategies act in some measure as a counterweight to artificial equality, as evidenced by Bakunin’s remarks on justified differences in wealth.

*Not all differences in wealth unjust*

Economic and social equality, he notes in the *Revolutionary Catechism*, does not imply the levelling of individual fortunes – insofar as they result from “the skill, productive energy and thrift” of
each person.\textsuperscript{12}

Clearly, in the absence of all-powerful bureaucracies and planning authorities, some enterprises and industries in a collectivized economy will achieve better results than others and workers in the former will reap benefits. Within the workplace, some will assume greater responsibility or work more and be correspondingly compensated. And thrift? Some will save – hence money (or “notes”) retains its role. A central labour board that says, “This is what petroleum pipe-layers will earn” is ruled out, although in Bakunin’s scheme it seems more than feasible for a commune or a federated workers’ association to propose or declare a minimum rate. I would argue that what must determine earnings in the Bakunin-envisioned system are the forces of a social market, including: the power of unions; the success or lack thereof enjoyed by autonomous and integrated enterprises; and, as noted, the edicts of municipalities or assemblies intervening in questions like minimum incomes, housing prices, school contributions, and the like. In sum, a market

\textsuperscript{12} M. Bakounine, “Catéchisme révolutionnaire, Organisation sociale,” https://fr.wikisource.org

This remark by Bakunin is unintelligible outside the context of some sort of social market economy and draws a line, if not an impregnable one, between his economic thought and that of the anarcho-communists and others who hold that exchange may be painlessly abolished and \textit{all} goods and services supplied on the basis of need from a common store. That said, it is apparent, especially if we take Bakunin’s close associate James Guillaume at his word, that collectivists in Bakunin’s camp favoured the immediate distribution of essential goods and services on the basis of need, where possible. Guillaume certainly took the view that enhanced production would rapidly expand the gamut of products that could be so made available. See James Guillaume, “On Building the New Social Order,” in Dolgoff, ed., 361, 368.
shaped and qualified by sociopolitical decisions.

We could easily become bogged down in the details of precisely how such a market might look, how it could resemble and differ from the one functioning under State-monopoly capitalism/social democracy in the early 21st century. Let’s not. But let us say this: James Guillaume, editor of the bulk of the earliest “collected Bakunin,” released an essay in 1876 attempting to outline a vision of the post-revolutionary economic picture. Undoubtedly Guillaume is a worthwhile source inasmuch as he was a confidant of MB and participant in numerous conversations with his friend about matters economic. Probably he included ideas of his own in this essay while also attempting to highlight some of Bakunin’s concerns.

In any case, Guillaume sketches an economy in which municipalities and their “banks of exchange” purchase goods and services from producers and sell them to consumers, consumers who have themselves been compensated for their own labour with “currency” or “vouchers.”  

Not remarkably, my reaction to Guillaume’s scheme is that it is rigid and problematic insofar as it implies something of a monopoly for the municipality and its financial creatures, whereas in a free society autonomous enterprises and individuals, near to and distant from each other, engage in direct exchange, without ignoring the advantages of selling shoes wholesale to a (city-owned?) mall or wine to a marketing entity backed by a regional bank. These are details, albeit important ones. But let us leave our conversation about Guillaume’s scheme to this: It

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14 To be sure, Guillaume’s piece does not quite rule out direct exchange between producers and consumers.
may be his own or not. At the same time, it acknowledges the role of market forces and exchange – and points to the conclusion that with regard to economic issues, the writer and probably Bakunin were hovering tentatively between Proudhon, with his fairly unambiguous endorsement of the market as a tool of liberty, and Marx, with his conviction that State planning represents the actualization of economic reason – its victory over the chaos of commerce.

Bakunin envisages a society that continues to be marked by differences, or varying outcomes, provided these are justified by distinctions in talent and effort – even as disadvantages related to an individual’s starting point in life are partially addressed by such measures as educational opportunities for all, no inheritance of significant wealth and social agencies empowered to remove children from abusive parents.

More on the equality/collectivist tension. The collectively run enterprise is also, arguably (and Bakunin would likely argue it), a more verdant garden for the cultivation of accomplished individuals for the simple reason that all of the staff’s elements are nourished and encouraged by design. Specifically, men and women are less likely to emerge from mediocrity in 1) systems governed by a central plan where initiative is actively opposed and 2) hierarchical company structures where most employees are treated as means-to-ends, and those who occupy modest posts are assumed to have few ideas.

Of course, as many readers will object, it would be a reductionist error of the first order to think that only through labour in the formal economy, even labour carried out in the context of
democratized management, are happy and well-rounded individuals formed. Bakunin places great emphasis on the need for all to work precisely so that none might miss out on the leisure time necessary for the cultivation of the assorted human talents. Half a century after his death, but in an age already receding from our memory, Spain's National Confederation of Labour, an organization directly inspired by Bakunin's thought, was pushing employers for the six-hour workday. Where has that notion gone, in a world, particularly the so-called First World, where those fortunate to be employed scramble to work as much as possible, in many cases not so much to get by as to acquire the latest trinkets? But we digress.

III

Federalism and collectivism have their own dynamic relationship. Here there are two main threads: the relationship of politics to economics in the free system; and the building blocks of collectivism itself as an economic scheme.

Localities must not have a particular economic system imposed on them. The municipality or commune remains sovereign (as far as political bodies go, ignoring for the moment the individual) and has to consent to join in a collectivizing initiative embraced by its neighbour. In this sense, the supposedly anti-political theorist of the left par excellence reveals the way in which politics of a radically unconventional sort trumps economics. Or the way in which liberty (writ larger as the freedom of the commune) comes in a certain sense before socialism.
But federalism is of course also about the recognition that the local is inadequate on its own, that there are goods to be had when Toronto links up with Mississauga and New York City. The desirability of political unions is explicit in the anarchist’s scheme. Indeed, Bakunin makes a detailed sketch in the *Catechism*, noting that organization “…must proceed by way of federation from the base to the summit, from the commune to the coordinating association of the country or nation.” He adds, as a condition of libertarian political architecture, that “there must be at least one autonomous intermediate body between the commune and the country” – that is, a department, a region or a province. Otherwise, he argues, the municipality would be too weak and isolated to resist the “despotic” pressure of the centre. So political structures will be built; chaos is not the scheme. But provinces “will be nothing but free federations of autonomous communes” and a nation must be “nothing but a federation of autonomous provinces.” Nor will higher levels be hamstrung; they will have their powers. Component parts have to respect their jurisdictions on pain of expulsion. Obviously, government, if not the centralized State and the sort of government that serves its perpetuation, is desirable. 15

Meanwhile, the federalizing of economic collectivism remains essential, which is to say that single worker-run enterprises, while retaining an autonomy that Bakunin can’t negate if he is to be true to his theory, are encouraged to integrate with others so as to forge larger industrial concerns – indeed, conglomerates of production

15 The sections on national and international political organization in the “Catéchisme révolutionnaire” describe Bakunin’s federalism in some detail. Also see *Oeuvres, Tome I*, 14-21.
and distribution. The workers of JB Steel Plant Number 6 in Incheon may elect a management board that plans production there, but wouldn’t it make sense for them to integrate their plan into a larger one involving other factories in the region, or even elsewhere in the world? Here again we see the extent to which Bakunin’s thought is about possibilities and tensions rather than neat resolutions. Collectivism means workers’ control, not planning by central boards staffed by technicians. Yet there are indubitable advantages in certain sectors to size, to integration, to regional and even global planning, as corporate capitalism well knows. Decisions undertaken mean trade-offs and advantages lost and gained. Large, integrated structures can certainly undermine economic democracy. The battle to retain that democracy must be ongoing. But autarky is not the objective. Collectivism, like freedom, is subject to natural and social laws (as distinct from legal impositions) and if the logic of a complex economy at some point demands certain structures, then collectivism must either adapt or be absurd. Bakunin is explicit on a related point as well: once federalism is in place, tariffs and other restraints on commerce and communications between its components must go. The left libertarian turns out to be a free-trader. “The well-being of nations as well as individuals [is] inextricably interwoven.” Citizen-workers ignore this at their peril.16

In genuine federalism, a basic unit can withdraw from a larger whole if it chooses. A war to forcibly retain Texas or the Crimea in a larger political fold is legally and ethically out of the question. So secessions (and expulsions for not following federalism’s rules) may occur and must be respected. But mutual

16 “Catéchisme révolutionnaire, La Fédération internationale.”
interest and reason will probably draw the parts back together – though in forms different from the arrangements prevalent today. Neither the city nor the print-shop ever relinquish their options. But larger realities loom. Which might mean, in practice, that the workers of Meadowlands Printers and Design recognize that they will lose business unless they join forces with Cinco de Mayo Communications, a concern able to offer services and products that Meadowlands cannot. And Clermont-Ferrand will surely decide that partnership in a regional federation with Lyon is essential in order to improve an integrated transportation network.

Pluralism undermined?

At this point, a note on some powerful and even obvious criticisms that have been levelled against Bakunin’s economic collectivism ought to be addressed. The system requires, it is said, a consensus impossible to obtain in a complex society. Attachment to private property and intellectual pluralism militate against even decentralized collectivism; if this system is brought in it will be inaugurated and maintained through violence and force. In this connection, it is not enough for Bakunin’s defenders to argue that in the economic realm sole proprietorship will be acknowledged, though this is true. Hardware store founders will want to hire labour to develop their operations while more importantly, from an anarchist’s perspective, many workers will prefer to be simply hired, often not desirous of being co-managers of an enterprise with all the responsibility this entails. Bakunin’s injunction against the exploitation of labour, following his rival Marx, seems to rule out this libertarian option. Many of the advantages offered by a system
Based on free contract will be lost. Liberty, say critics, is a dead letter in such a scenario. This point is far from badly taken and Bakunin’s friends should consider it seriously.

The partial answer to this problem can only be a “preferential option” for choice in the realm of actual social relations, an escape hatch of sorts the revolutionary might himself have endorsed in a given context. This line of argument begins with a recognition of the limits of the labour theory of value and of value’s often undeniable, if frequently exaggerated, subjectivity. As we proceed along this path, we see that the exploitation of labour ceases to be a condition liable to precise measurement. Or we recognize, as Bakunin at least partially does, that administration and indeed marketing must be factored in when considering what makes a product or service, or renders it attractive or valuable, after its physical fashioning is complete. The spirit – and most of the letter – of Bakunin’s initiative can be retained while keeping the door open to voluntary contract labour coexisting with collective enterprise. Which is to say a workforce including workers who don’t want to be co-owners of a plant or office, who prefer to work a day and then go home mentally unencumbered by shop issues. Or don’t even want to be asked for their views on the strategic direction of the place that pays them. These men and women could certainly enjoy the benefits of membership in a union ready to bargain payment and conditions for them as they seek employment from enterprises following varied ownership patterns.

The foregoing, I think, constitutes an elaboration of Bakunin’s idea that allows the first among various virtues, freedom, to flourish. And it is certainly less extreme, or makes provision for a contractual
relationship less extreme, than the one Bakunin himself winks at when he notes that, “[Society] cannot forcibly prevent any man or woman so devoid of personal dignity [from placing him or herself] in voluntary servitude to another individual.” (Though he thinks such a person should be temporarily denied political rights as a result of their option.)¹⁷

Questions remain. Who decides if an enterprise presently owned by shareholders is to be democratized or not? Bakunin himself would hold that the workers’ act of appropriation is legitimate if they can accomplish it. In this sense, and without saying as much, he (again) draws close to Spinoza in acknowledging that in politics, might is ultimately right. Or at least that right requires might. We are at the revolutionary moment, after all. The General Strike, as the Syndicalists later envisage things, is the step, or a decisive step, that inaugurates justice. On the other side of this moment collective ownership reigns...and is additionally justified precisely because the workers already had, in the pre-revolutionary period, injected their labour into capitalist enterprises and thereby acquired a shared stake in them.

Nonetheless, there seems no reason why a Syndicalist program could not provide for contractual limitation to this revolutionary principle in given instances; workers could bargain guarantees with the owners of particular enterprises based on the desires of relevant parties. And we must recall that Bakunin categorically rejects an extended free-for-all in the new, federated society, at least once the immediate ardour of the revolution cools; his is not the vulgar anarchism of the 21st-century media pundit. He

¹⁷ “Catéchisme révolutionnaire, Droits individuels.”
acknowledges the validity of contracts freely entered into and explicitly calls for an elected judiciary that, among other activities, would undoubtedly interpret and enforce agreements (say between a workers’ association and a sole proprietor) where conciliation fails.\textsuperscript{18} The revolution matters but its general tenets need not generate absolutes.

IV

An interesting aspect of the liberty/federalism dynamic is the way it frames Bakunin’s take on the individual in society. While in some sense individual freedom must be about doing what one wants regardless of the demands and preferences of others, Bakunin is convinced that the counter-posing of person to collective is nonsensical. This emerges clearly in his discussion of Rousseau and the social contract in general. The scenario under which solitary individuals once dedicated only to themselves relinquish a “part” of their liberty to the State (or some, being tricky, might say, “to society”), in order to better guarantee prosperity, security, and that portion of liberty that remains, is a fiction – as we suggested earlier. Historically it did not happen and anthropologically speaking it is inconsistent with the human essence. We are and ever have been social creatures; society is the only lake in which we swim. By which Bakunin wants to emphasize the notion that freedom is only comprehensible in relationships. Dwelling alone in the forest or a

\textsuperscript{18} The “Catéchisme révolutionnaire, Organisation politique” calls for an elected judiciary and implicitly recognizes the validity of agreements based on equality and reciprocity. Also see the section “Droits des associations.”
cave is categorically something else and profoundly unnatural. Indeed, individualism is a lie or a falsehood, in the strict sense that it is not. The tennis player at practice, smacking a ball against a wall, needs others to manufacture ball and wall. The solitary reader converses with an author, perhaps long dead; the painter cannot brush without influences; the desk-drawer writer needs the workers who assembled her computer or pen.

**Society and State not the same**

Other ideas emerge. Central to Bakunin’s view, and obviously a core idea of libertarian thought, is the denial that society and State are synonymous. One is spontaneous association and characteristic of our kind from eras before Homo Sapiens existed; the other is an apparatus of centralization erected via internal or external conquest, and is over and above society – an analysis that does not deny the blurred frontiers between the two in our own and other contexts. Consequently, Bakunin refuses to assert that all political activity is necessarily State activity – and here certainly breaks with the Spinoza who authored the Theological-Political treatise, not to mention every other theorist of radical democracy. Leaving aside strictly economic administration, another category of organization seems to potentially exist: the politics of genuine federalism, built upon those base units generally identifiable with municipalities, managed through as much direct democracy as possible and with these primary units retaining as much power as its citizens desire.

(In this vein we have to happily acknowledge that life has proven, in some ways, more fruitful than the theorizing of a Russian radical. When it comes to direct democracy, the various
manifestations of “Occupy” erupting in our millennium – particularly those in South America and Europe in response to plant closures and cuts in public services – have suggested both promising ways and dead ends. In Argentina, Greece, Spain and other places the neighbourhood, municipal and workplace-centred assembly of citizens/workers briefly became the preferred political base unit, embraced by many tired of the frayed strategy of electing promise-heavy politicians from the left. While a clear partisan of the commune’s preeminent role, Bakunin has little to say about how citizen assemblies might work. Certainly he thought that life would work that problem out.)

To return to our subject's notion of federalism: Undoubtedly, federating activity could be carried to a point where liberty is undermined. Imagine a North American parliament to which U.S. and Canadian states, provinces and cities had delegated all powers save for matters of traffic and pothole repair. What role would people have in determining the rules that guided them? In what would the meat of political liberty consist, that is, citizens’ reflection on and active assent in reasonable social regulations? The tension between the collective and the individual, between the neighbourhood and the capital, is a permanent feature of life but to the extent that local and directly democratic bodies retain fundamental powers and hence make citizens' deliberation on social questions meaningful, to that extent federalism is a net enhancer of freedom.

Quite obviously, not anything called federalism makes the grade, or rather meets those criteria that distinguish it from what the Russian anarchist regards as the State; and certainly not that
federalism that passes for such in the centralized polities crowding the globe in the early 21st century. Bakunin’s version of federalism is one in which the individual’s and city’s sovereignty – their freedom to adhere or withdraw from larger bodies – is never relinquished. Clearly, contemporary Canada, Russia and the USA cannot be seen in this mirror.

V

Bakunin’s death falls in an epoch marked by the melting of a certain old into a relative new. The events and artistic works mentioned at the beginning of this piece are about this, or so they seem to me. And he strikes me as a theorist reluctant to be simply a herald of the modern. Which is to say that he is far from being a full-blown progressive, despite his attachment to a term, progress, which I believe he equates with the growth of human knowledge and the dissemination of reason among all strata of the population. Such a suggestion is easier to grasp if one permits the possibility that political “progressives” can best be identified as those who, from roughly the 16th century onwards, trumpet ideas and processes leading to “enlightened” despotism and the centralization of governmental structures, to the detriment of the traditional liberties of Europe’s towns and regions. Bakunin disdains this long and still-unfolding trend, and is very clear that what it represents is the quashing of real, individual, and local positive interests under the heel of a weighty abstraction called the State. Significantly, he disdains this trend regardless of whether it is enacted under the banners of empire, universal suffrage or proletarian dictatorship.
Charles V, Richelieu, Napoleon, Bismarck, Lenin, Obama all stand in this line. Our subject stakes out different ground, hoping to blend enlightenment and industrialization with medieval or even antique forms of communal and provincial autonomy.

Meanwhile, that old, conservative force known as custom remains hugely important to Bakunin, that accumulated body of ethics and conscience residing in a people’s heart – even in the hearts of its children, he asserts – and often serving as an excellent substitute for the State’s laws. The force of moral censure by society as a deterrent to crime has been mentioned by all commentators on Bakunin. Indeed, it is an observation perhaps repeated at the expense of the man's quite explicit endorsement of an elected judiciary and the right of different political jurisdictions to penalize individuals for serious infractions of the law. Still, Bakunin is no proponent of legislation that “would encroach on individual liberty” in order to combat “social immorality.” In the free and equal society, public opinion becomes the warden or guardian (“garde”) of a moral order – perhaps a deliberate use of Plato’s term for the rulers of the imagined Republic. Clearly, Bakunin has no time for tradition insofar as it brings in its baggage prejudices, superstitions, and excuses for hierarchy. He is for the Enlightenment in the sense of holding that men and woman (most, many, a substantial minority?) can reason their way to the good, in the same way as is St. Paul when he notes, in the first chapter of Romans, that truth (God’s “everlasting power and deity”) has been visible to humanity’s “eye of reason” ever since the world began. He is a sort of progressive conservative or conservative radical, if you like – all in lower case, certainly. But I will expand further on that point below.
Similarities to St. Paul

Now a related development promised earlier. Bakunin’s apparent coincidence with St. Paul on one point perhaps serves as a bridge to further insights into this thinker, this son of the Russian gentry who renounced privilege in order to take to the road and bring his Good News from east to west, north to south, while living with the proletarians and radical intellectuals of Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy. For it would be an error to fail to spot other ways in which Bakunin, brandishing his paradoxes, shares tendencies with the movement developed, if not founded, by the Apostle.

Despite his sometimes vituperative treatment of the Church (not unlike Paul’s sharper comments on the Jewish hierarchy and the Law), Bakunin criticizes Christianity in the fashion of a grown son or daughter excoriating parents for not living up to their own advertised precepts – as Gerald Brenan said about Spanish anarchism generally in the context of its attacks upon Roman Catholicism. Even God, the idea of whom is railed against in the mature Bakunin's texts, is at times acknowledged in a way sharply reminiscent of Spinoza, as when the Russian writes of Nature as the supreme being, the omnipotence, who “penetrates with its irresistible action the total existence of [finite] beings,” all of whom carry in themselves “the feeling or sensation of that supreme influence and of that absolute dependence.” 19 As a matter of fact, our subject's declared atheism depends largely upon a conviction that God’s existence is ruled out in a universe of cause and effect. In this view, the only deity worth the category, so to speak, is one who

19  M. Bakounine, _Oeuvres, Tome I_, 97.
intervenes arbitrarily in the world – or might do so at any given moment. So affected is Bakunin by the behaviour of Christendom’s hierarchy, and so taken by the tide of atheism on the 19th-century left, that he abandons his intellectual progenitors Spinoza and Averroës (Ibn Rushd) on precisely this point. Somewhat perversely, he implicitly sides with the anti-rational theologian Al-Ghazali – critiqued so effectively by Rushd in the extraordinary *Incoherence of the Incoherence* – in order to discount the God of the philosophers. Bakunin can only grant Lordship to a universal magician.

Nevertheless, there glimmers in our subject’s thought a quite Pauline interpretation of liberty. Freedom for Bakunin is a good that is also a means – to virtue. We are not free to be libertines; we are liberated to assent to what is right and true and to perform good works. Or: We must employ our reason for good, which amounts to the same thing. “He who loves his neighbour has satisfied every claim of the law… the whole law is summed up in love,” notes Paul, freeing followers of Jesus from the burden of the Jewish regulations.20 “To respect the freedom of your fellow is duty; to love, help and serve him is virtue,” writes the Russian.21 Can we imagine Marx reading this remark without releasing a moan of derision?

To be sure, Bakunin differs from the Apostle in method. While peace is preferred by both and indeed the state to which we aspire, justice requires, for the former, that the oppressed defend themselves when pushed beyond a certain limit. Those expelled from their jobs and homes must not sit meekly by. In this regard, our subject’s resemblance to another communicant with the divine – the

21 M. Bakounine, “Catéchisme révolutionnaire, Principes généraux.”

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prophet of Mecca and Medina – becomes more striking. Yet is it any wonder that Bakunin so attracted 20th-century Christianity’s greatest radical conservative, or conservative radical, Jacques Ellul, despite that French Protestant’s early flirtation with Marx? How far from his faith was the young Ellul, ultimately a great critic of technique’s rule, consumerism and humans’ dependence on the State, when communing with the founder of “scientific socialism!” How much closer he’d come when drawn to the grave of a Russian atheist at Bremgarten in Bern!

Pursuing this path we see why Bakunin is untroubled by apparent pitfalls revealed by liberty, by confusion between doing what one wants and doing right. For the second must be accomplished through the first. Desiring to act in a fashion that harms others is, objectively speaking, an error, insofar as it reveals a failure to understand that freedom is only enacted in society, a place in which all depend upon each other. One is free to get things wrong, to be an egoist, but this is a flawed use of freedom and an inferior grade of liberty. The individual can act in a way that serves others and take pleasure in such because this is truth.

Note how this conception of ethical behaviour owes relatively little to any concept of historical stages. More pointedly, consider how it resembles a precept that can indicate both a manner of being now and a rule of the just society to be founded later. In this respect, we further elucidate the faith or conscience-inspired roots of the left libertarian ethic. Indeed, we hear the mystical message of the Kingdom, a reign that is both at our fingertips and potentially experienced this afternoon among friends or opponents, and a future
arrangement to renew the whole world. Hence the importance serious libertarians have always placed (if not always lived) on the way to the just society. How one acts foreshadows and even produces, though in a mysterious fashion, what one ultimately seeks; this recalls Paul’s hints at a causal or coincidental link between persons’ transformation in the present and the universe’s coming deliverance. But Nature or God, as you wish, will ultimately be responsible for the decisive historical moment – for there is no question that Bakunin also denies human beings’ capacity to will in the new epoch. Radicals need to inform, to agitate, to preach, educate and warn, certainly join in an uprising, but they have no capacity to declare the new world or fully grasp the workings of the great forces that coalesce in momentous change.

Here it is perhaps not enough to assert such a view, if only because of the calumnies heaped on Bakunin by the Marxists to the effect that he is a voluntarist extraordinaire – a charge that has gained bulk through sheer repetition. Hence consider this passage:

But revolutions aren't improvised. They aren't arbitrarily made either by individuals or by the most powerful associations. Independent of all will and of all conspiracy, they are always carried by the force of things. One can predict them, sense their approach sometimes, [but] never accelerate their explosion.²²

We can never know more than a portion of the truth, Bakunin notes in another context, one in which he warns against a tyranny of

²² M. Bakounine, Oeuvres, Tome V, 197.
the scientists, types who tend to think they grasp more than they do. And in an explicitly economic context, he maintains that no human brain or program can take into account the great multiplicity of interests – individual, local, regional – that characterize society. Inevitably, centralization is hubris and exploitation. In short, neither the break nor the new society can be projects of the genii.

A further point on a certain sub-class of the scientists. There are certainly grains of truth in the Marxists’ critique of the movement inspired by Bakunin. That it is a “petit-bourgeois,” emotional radicalism, a longing for the better things of the past by producers swamped by modernity’s tidal wave, nostalgic for the individual and local autonomy that graced our pre-industrial age. Don Quijotes, as it were, losers to realities imposed by moving times. Specks of truth, but little more. For Bakunin, ultimately unimpressed with doctrines that confidently identify history’s upward spiral or resolution (for history has no purpose, literally understood, only logical patterns, although humans may set strategic objectives within it), begins with a consideration of what a desirable human life in a feasible society might look like. Not accepting the behemoth State as a given, he looks with hope to a revived, modified and associated polis. As Murray Bookchin, a notable 20th-century friend of Bakunin argued, the manageable unit that Aristotle considered essential for self-rule is not an anachronism but critical for humanity right now.

Just how much ’negation’?

Here we might pick up a thread dropped previously in order to more fully explore the relationship of our subject’s thought with that of Hegel and Marx, particularly in regard to “historical
dialectics.” It has been argued that MB is the apostle of negation, that he adopts but truncates the Hegelian three-piece dialectic of abstract-negative-concrete by erasing the triad’s third panel. That which is, is simply negated by its “other,” its contrary, which becomes a new, positive phenomenon. I would argue that this conception of Bakunin’s thought, while not without foundation, is ultimately misleading in that it fails to fully describe how he practically conceives of history – at least in that final decade or so of his life as an anarchist in full flower.

Bakunin does, without doubt, attach great importance to “negation.” Like all of us, he knows that truths often emerge from the denial of prevailing opinions and positions. His sociopolitical preferences are calls for the abolition of such institutions as the State and (certain forms of) private property. Materialist philosophy or science is itself a negation of metaphysics and of the magical God, in his view. Bakunin surely sees Socrates, for example, as a negator par excellence, dismantling the theories and prejudices of his interlocutors, leaving only an investigative method and an awareness that nothing – or very little – is ultimately certain. Of interest in this same vein are his hints about the process of negation in the field of ethics. I am thinking of his account of Christian morality and how its idealism or first-position elevation of the spiritual over the material sentences it, according to Bakunin, to the crassest and most blatant materialism in practice, while the collectivist materialists begin on the ground, so to speak, and end up in the skies of sublime spirituality. By which MB probably means to suggest two things:

23 See Part I of McLaughlin, Mikhail Bakunin.
1) That the Church establishment’s tendency to deem the spiritual realm more important than the material simply has had the effect of endorsing great social inequality and injustice, by default as it were, while the materialists’ emphasis on equal access to goods and services turns them into apostles of fairness and hence justice; and 2) that society and history tend to function this way, that a sort of underlying law is at work according to which first positions end up being flipped in the course of things. What once was ends up denied.

But we mustn’t overstate this “negativity.” Bakunin’s proposals for the future in no way forgo the employment of old (if modified) institutions, as our observations on the associated polis or commune and on Bakunin’s regard for social custom/opinion make clear. His desired negation of bourgeois democracy does not entail an utter rejection of some of its central features, like universal suffrage. He trumpets the interests of pre-State entities such as regions and provinces, jurisdictions that regain an eminent role in his envisaged future. Workers’ Associations, tracing their origins to pre-capitalist societies become, in modified form, central to the collectivist society. Certainly, Bakunin’s agenda is not printed on a tabula rasa. Cambodia’s Pol Pot would be regarded as a lunatic by the Russian anarchist. And he is explicit about the extent to which revolutionary change requires positive content24; the revolution itself might be negation, but the workers will only manage our complex society effectively if they avail themselves of science – a general method which they do not invent but (largely) inherit. In this sense Hegel is certainly correct that the process of negation in history is a qualified one, that negation is mediated, that what seemingly has

been left behind is carried forward “in the depths” or even on the surface of the present. Here we carefully but firmly part company with Paul McLaughlin, or at least with his exaggerated depiction of Bakunin’s negative agenda and shyness in regard to programmatic proposals. As his Catechesis and other writings make abundantly clear – and as I think this essay has shown – MB is more than vigorous in generating guidelines to which he thinks the future society should adhere. What is true is that he feels a certain reticence about doing so. He is like the man bursting with ideas who believes that all must participate and so doesn't want to dominate a meeting – but can only partially restrain himself.

*Progress?*

But back to visions of history. Perhaps more fruitful than either orthodox or modified Hegelianism for considering the past – and the mature Bakunin’s sense of it – is what I would call a theory of civilizing and liberatory “bursts.” In this scheme, we regard history as marked by great or tentative flowerings of insight and freedom – often separated by deserts of desolation. Knowledge theoretical and practical coalesces at, say, Mohenjo-Daro, and then is largely lost. Magnificent China ebbs and flows, periodically bursting in popular uprisings, such as the Yellow Scarves rebellion in the Han period. Here recurs an incident played out on every populated continent throughout the epochs. Rural and sometimes urban dwellers, crushed by taxes and hunger and enraged by a corrupt State, organize and rise in arms. A radical interpretation of the Tao, in this case, informs and gives philosophical/spiritual shape to their struggle. And we witness another engagement in the war that will
(re)explode in the German lands in 1525 – similar issues, sentiments, land redistribution demands, 1300 years apart. The quest is crushed; the aspirations it expresses are universal and have been since...whenever marked inequity emerged. Yet it is doubtful that each epoch in which these events occur is a spiral carrying us to a higher plane.

To go on a bit: Classical Greece sees the flourishing of liberty, art, considerable equality and philosophy, with all these elements’ creative tensions. Then brute Rome quashes the city states, inaugurating a so-called historical stage that, as Leier observes, Bakunin bemoans while acknowledging its inevitability – precisely in the sense that he understands Rome’s success to be caused but not good.25

Next comes a medieval, farm-based society of lord, serf and Christendom, at least in Europe. Or does it really? Hasn’t rural life predominated everywhere throughout history? And the “Eternal City” continues in the form of Byzantium for almost a millennium while Muslim Spain maintains a glittering urban life over hundreds of years.

Contradictory currents ebb and flow. By the midpoint of the 7th-century Islam has exploded upon a world dominated by empires – Christian Byzantium and the latest of the Persians – with a promise of justice, charity and freedom, not to mention a burning contempt

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25 Leier, Bakunin, 283-284. In a similar vein, Bakunin will bemoan the human cost of economic progress by contrasting death by hunger in those countries where “economic liberty is most developed” with the state of the “happier” agricultural worker. See M. Bakounine, Oeuvres, Tome I, 27.
for those who live for wealth, while not appreciably springing from either feudalism or the classical world. From out of nowhere this current seems to rush, from particular causes we can't quite decipher: frustration and inspiration that are the fruits of a Judaism and Christianity that lost their way; the pent-up energies of a commercial people conscious of a world beyond their arid lands; or perhaps the desires of huge swathes of populations in neighbouring States fed up with exploitation and the hypocrisy of their decadent overlords, ready to embrace a humane invader. It is a burst from the periphery promising a new world...that soon degenerates into State, empire, and dogmatism itself.

History: inclines and declines. The French Revolution bestows more or less liberal government and equality before the law on Europe in one century... and can do nothing to impede the rise of an empire of slavery, murder and conquest in the 20th. More ups and downs. Still, flares of hope from a light above and beneath the opaque surface on which we tread are always there, flickering brightly or weakly. We see our opportunities for liberty and goodness. But it is hard to honestly discern, if we really watch, World-Spirit turning its liberating plans to reality in a story called progress.

Perhaps one event or example stands out especially in all this, illuminating the panorama and presenting itself as a reference: a life lived in Palestine marked by a “complete” self-emptying, a voluntary renunciation of selfishness in favour of others and of the Whole, and its inauguration of a community heretofore dreamed of but possibly never witnessed. And conceivably another, complementary development, in the same spirit but more explicitly political: the
federalist charter of Medina drawn up 600 years after and the short-lived polis of liberty in diversity that it inaugurates.

This I think is essentially how the post-Hegelian, libertarian Bakunin imagines history and moreover, how it actually is. To what extent does he settle on a historicist position at all, a faith in our ascent? Perhaps in this and this only: that the Enlightenment, the fortunate possibility of reason's full dissemination among the masses, remains a necessary but insufficient condition for the universal victory of freedom. Couple this with social revolution and humans have a chance – a point of view which is less historicist than a pragmatic or hopeful take on a particular conjunction of forces and trends.

Plato and the masses

Let us return briefly to some older political thought. Bakunin knows that Plato is far from spouting mere prejudice when the latter criticizes democracy, insofar as the “many” can be a mob who lend their support to those willing to flatter and delight them. Consider Bakunin here, in a reflection upon the contemporary liberal republics:

The only advantage they [the masses] obtain from this situation, in Switzerland as in the United States, is that the ambitious minorities, the political classes, cannot attain power except by courting the people, by pandering to their fleeting and sometimes evil passions, and most often by tricking them.  

26 M. Bakounine, Oeuvres, Tome I, 173.
Plato says that democracy can lead to tyranny, when the demagogue plays off the mob’s feelings, resentments and desires in order to set himself up in power. Marx, Lenin, the Fabians and all their heirs address this tremendous issue by pushing to the fore their own versions of Socrates’ Guardians: the social science graduates who shall rule disinterestedly on behalf of the masses, the Party elites and the scientific planners, their armies in tow. Bakunin, horrified by such a prospect, gambles on the idea that a sufficient number of the workers themselves can be akin to philosophers – without ceasing to be workers. At the very least, they can be leaders, co-managers of enterprises and federations and members of assemblies able to consider the general good. In this gamble resides his great strength and weakness, and in this sense we must understand his oft-criticized attraction to secret brotherhoods, his cabal of revolutionaries who seek to influence the workers’ movements. They are, as it were, his Guardians who shall not rule – an absolutely unprivileged aristocracy whose role is solely educational and propagandist. Who must instruct, must shape the instincts of the bricklayers, cleaners, architects and office workers and channel them to action for the good society, while refusing power. In this respect he is more realistic than romantic, frankly recognizing that a great many human beings are not moved purely or easily by rational argument but by tides and feelings. They require guidance and sometimes slogans from those who are more profound thinkers, but guidance that does not slip into trickery.

This sober take on democracy cries out for some further reflection in the light cast by Alexis de Tocqueville, another great
defender of an egalitarian politics so keenly cognisant of its defects. Early-to-mid 19th-century America, about which Tocqueville writes, is a dangerously atomized society of private individuals fervently devoted to their own material well-being. In post-aristocratic Europe too the organic ties linking families and assigning men and women meaningful (if sometimes degrading) places in a stable world are for all intents and purposes lost, or in the process of being lost. In short, the new system endangers society as a collective enterprise with a notion of the good beyond assorted private goods, as the French theorist sees it. Yet Tocqueville also affirms that the young American republic has at least partially addressed this challenge precisely through self-government. So many are compelled to leave their private concerns for at least part of the time and participate in democratic rule, at various levels of government and through voluntary associations, that a public interest emerges – as does a desire to protect it. “At first one busies oneself with the general good out of necessity, but then by choice,” he writes.27 Tocqueville also sees self-government as at least a partial cure for another ailment of the egalitarian mind – the tendency to embrace broad, abstract theories (some of which are liable to be extremist) at the expense of detailed, particular knowledge. Governing one’s own town inevitably instills pragmatism and moderation, a respect for detail and a concomitant scepticism toward ideology – a term that entered our vocabulary after the great French convulsion.

We ought to remember that Tocqueville’s study is of a

27 Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique II*, 105. 
http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/De_tocqueville_alexis/democratie_2/democratie_t2_1.pdf
republic characterized by small producers. How much more does Bakunin’s scheme seek to reinforce 19th-century America’s strengths through cooperative industrial management! Once the “anecdote” of the revolution is accomplished, as the Spanish Syndicalist and theorist Valeriano Orobón Fernández puts it,28 collectivism in the Bakuninist sense forces the minds of working people precisely onto the details of economic and social life, away from a sweeping, rhetorical view of society. Towards the interests of real colleagues in networks of productive and voluntary activity, colleagues whose well-being conditions one’s own.

Perhaps where Bakunin’s plan does not so readily answer Tocqueville is in the latter’s concern for the excesses of liberty itself. If political liberty understood as the right of all to share in governance is salutary, unfettered philosophical liberty might not be, suspects the Frenchman. Most men and women, he thinks, need ethical bases derived dogmatically. Few of us can reason our way to all our positions. Some beliefs must just be accepted...or ignored at our peril. We are back to the question of God. Tocqueville goes so far as to say that absolute liberty in all ideas provokes the malaise of utter uncertainty. What is true anymore? wonders the typical citizen

in the democratic country where the deity is dead or gravely ill. Pining for security in realms basic and transcendent, the citizen is then easy pickings for the tyrant who can at least promise stability in the polity and economy while brandishing some new faith such as nationalism. Does Tocqueville not prove sharply prescient to the student of Weimar's tumble into Nazism? Does too much liberty of an intellectual kind not potentially spell death for political freedom?

The God-denying Russian anarchist does not explicitly tackle this challenge. He is, at least after his long stay in Tsarist captivity and Siberia, theoretically unconcerned with the need for cosmological bases for the Good. Human reasons are good enough for him. Obedience to irrationally founded Lords in the sky just prepares the way for the worship of lords terrestrial, Bakunin thinks. Yet he does ground his program in his analysis of our nature. We should be free collectivists because that system flows from our sociobiology. And he responds to Tocqueville's warning that egalitarian society must set itself long-term goals lest it sink in the day-to-day scramble for petty, carnal satisfaction. For he proposes 1) the great transition for which which working people and others of goodwill must plan and struggle today, that is, the revolution, and 2) the new world where the full flowering of all must be sought and realized, gradually, together. As for Tocqueville, it is true that he considers God to represent the long view, but he also asserts that a dedication to long-term social objectives can itself reacquaint us with God. Might a re-engagement with a plan along the lines of Bakunin's point us, in this age of consumerist, atomistic nihilism, toward the sublime? The discovery of ourselves in others and in Nature? This problem obviously remains key for those who insist that the quest

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for justice cannot ultimately and effectively be separated from a contemplation of the One, or the Unity, immanent and transcendent.

*Reflection for its own sake?*

A final point should probably be considered regarding Bakunin’s relationship to the classical thinkers and others not in thrall to recent trends. Following the lead of Leo Strauss, it would surely seem an error to not identify the Russian as a modern, certain affinities with older theorists notwithstanding. Why? Because we have in Bakunin a writer who seeks, or appears to seek, to put philosophy in the service of world change rather than reflection, the end of which is itself. Obviously, the mere contemplation of the Good or the True is for him, in at least some contexts, laughably inadequate. So the danger to philosophy he represents, from this perspective, is that of turning it into mere ideology, into a program geared to action and power – as do other Enlightenment minds whose notion of philosophy is instrumental.

What can be said about this? Bakunin would certainly make various claims. His insistence upon individual liberty secures a large space for thinkers devoted to reflection for reflection’s sake – in the “new world” and before it. Moreover, his analysis and social proposals, he clearly thinks, are really a laying bare of what is; that is to say, less an imposed scheme than a portrayal of how human beings are and can be, and hence less ideological (not a class or race-informed take on things, in other words) than certain of his critics might think. Which leads us to a further response, one springing directly from Bakunin’s conception of our nature and his quite Socratic sense of the *ultimately* meaningful life: Our very humanity
compels us to know, to penetrate with our thought the entire visible world.²⁹ To understand things is to be free, and this striving is our true employment. It is wonderful in and of itself. Bakunin knows this to be the case.

But do these points fully address the practical danger presented by all revolutionary plans? Specifically, the risk posed when we seek to make reality, the behaviour of flesh and blood humans, conform to schema intellectually constructed, even schema that leave many of the details out? Certainly all plans that only rhetorically respect peoples' liberty have unintended consequences. Experience teaches us that the metaphorical potter(s), when working with clay as tricky as the political community, very often produces a structure only partially resembling the dreamed-for result. Or the new thing soon shatters into sharp-edged, cutting shards. Which is to say that those inspired by Bakunin must also be reminded that wisdom, to be wise, has to include modesty. A humble spirit open to correction, adaptability and to the preferences of others.

For those who think social revolution along the lines envisaged by the Russian might still and indeed should occur, solace can perhaps be taken in Tocqueville's observations on the moderating effects of self-management and voluntary association – the golden core of Bakunin's agenda. But then we must return one last time to that most fundamental point mentioned by the French theorist and broached several times previously in this essay: God. For the theological question has profound implications for the political agenda(s) under examination in these pages.

VI

A critique of the anthropomorphic God, the one who desires, wills, grows angry, plans (in the correct sense of advancing intentions that may or may not be realized), is jealous – in short, the one upon whom human beings project all our qualities and shortcomings, permits thinkers such as Hegel, Feuerbach and Bakunin to debunk the deity. Or more correctly, it allows them to deny a particular version of the divine being. This would seem to me to be as true of Hegel as of Feuerbach, although only the latter is explicit in his atheism, consciously seeking to carry Hegel’s guarded insights into God’s nature to their logical conclusion.

But this does not finish the matter, for neither of the three men mentioned above is quite done with God. And here resides, I would maintain, the source of the chief philosophical difference that is to emerge later between Bakunin and Marx.

For the God that Hegel retains is of course Reason becoming objective, or real, in history, in States founded on law and identified by professors of philosophy possessing the interpretative key – even in Hegel himself. Divine and human reason, at least by the 19th century, appear to merge. Feuerbach’s notion that in theology the human being “is the truth and reality of God” is merely a bald formulation of this position. The Deity, such as He is, is no longer greater than a system of thought thought by at least one genius. He is humanity deified.

Bakunin adopts a quite different stance. With the anthropomorphic God debunked (and indeed debunked a long time ago by philosophers before Hegel), MB in effect adopts the God of Spinoza. What is the difference between this conception and that of
the Hegelians? It is, to repeat myself, the gulf that separates God as Nature, on the one hand, and God as Reason/human reason on the other. In the one, the Absolute is the totality of Being, the infinite web of cause and effect, the ideal and the material. Nature. A Nature, by the way, in which the material is never subordinate to the ideal. In the Hegelian scheme, the divine and the thoughts of an enlightened human brain enter into a relationship of equality. And our dependence on the Totality mysteriously vanishes.

There is no need for this Hegelian hubris. Spinoza, following Plato, understands that human thought participates in divine thought – there is no substantial difference between them – but he never equates them. *We can know “parts” of the truth but never all the truth.* The universe is too vast for that. Modesty is inherent in the approach.

There is no such check on Hegel and his son Marx. God, qualified and then dismissed, reappears next as the thinker understanding history’s script as the tale of humanity forged through economic relations. And often, in a side-script, as a thinker understanding Nature refashioned – which is as good as made – through our labour and thought. Then the savant becomes the Party which becomes the Leader who brooks no contradiction. Or the technocrat graduated from Harvard or the École Nationale d’Administration. We soon enjoy no shortage of those who know the (secularized) divine truth, even if they are intimidated by Kant and the post-modernists into not flaunting their credentials so boldly. For what is truth, after all? asks the debonair servant of empire, all the while confidant that he has a handle on a suitable and useful version.

Where does this leave Bakunin? Is he forgotten in our less
than original but justified mockery of his great rival?  

Bakunin’s naturalistic ontology, as McLaughlin puts it, assures his modesty. Humans remain elements of Nature, subordinate to it (call it God if you like), and caused by a Whole which contains within it that which we call society. We cannot mentally grasp all that is. We assume limits. This is Aristotle, Ibn Rushd, Spinoza and Bakunin. MB insists on differences with Spinoza, to be sure. Thought is caused by matter, he will say, rather than thought and extension being parallel attributes of Substance. He trumpets his atheism while Spinoza vigorously and with horror rejects the charge. Bakunin abhors philosophical study that proceeds from the infinite to the finite, as do the Ethics. But the common ground is huge, its implications considerable, and the most significant teacher-pupil relationship behind the thought of the left libertarian alternative is revealed.

VII

There can be no conclusion to a paper on Michael Bakunin’s thought that does not include or recapitulate an explicit verdict on his political rupture with Marx and that break’s implications for today. Here I think we must avoid platitudes about unity on the left and simply consider the direction indicated by the collectivist. Is he correct or not? His argument in this regard is unequivocal. Regimes prior to the State-socialist experiment were content to administer the

30 Others, notably Eric Voegelin with his theory of modern “gnosticism,” have not been shy in attributing to Hegel and to his most influential offspring the pretension of having effectively occupied the mind of God. This charge strikes me as telling. More doubtful is the notion that all those who follow reason to certain types of revolutionary action are necessarily “gnostics.”
masses politically. Marx’s People’s State will in contrast, Bakunin predicts, take the whole of life into its hands, running all facets of the economy. It will be the sole banker, the founder of factories, the arranger of commerce, the farmer extraordinaire, the educator. It will know best. “All this will require an immense amount of science and many heads overflowing with brains...It will be the reign of scientific intelligence, the most aristocratic, the most despotic, the most arrogant and the most disdainful of all regimes.” 31

The punch is not pulled. Marx’s enormous work as an analyst of capitalism and organizer of radical workers notwithstanding, the State models inspired by him will be worse, or more unpleasant, than the 19th century bourgeois-democratic or older, aristocratic republics – in MB’s estimation. On this question there is no need to quibble over the rivals’ arguments at the time. That would be unscientific. Subsequent history supplies us with all the data necessary for evaluating “Mr. Marx’s People’s State.” We have seen Mao’s China, Deng’s China and the German Democratic Republic, not to mention the Americans’ civilian-bombing Great Society and its successors – an increasingly centralized, interventionist, and technocratic republic governed formally through universal suffrage, and hence not too far removed from the master’s influence, some might say. These regimes tell us much of what we need to know about the temptations and dangers of adding Marxist ingredients to some compromise confection, some attractive synthesis designed to

31 M. Bakounine, *Oeuvres, Tome IV*, 476-477. Essentially the same might be said, I would argue, of the contemporary social democratic or liberal State that declines to own but seeks to manage or supervise the entire economic apparatus and indeed most aspects of life, rhetoric about its attachment to liberty notwithstanding.
heal the rift amongst those who, from quite different perspectives, claim to find fault with corporate capitalism. Between, for example, left libertarians and followers of Lenin.

With regard to those explicitly State-socialist entities that persist in our century, such as Viet Nam, Cuba, China and the DPRK, the chief Bakuninist recommendations, solicited or not, are obvious: decentralization in a context of democratized social ownership and civic self-management. Also, clearly, the decriminalization of regime criticism.

It is of course unclear whether, or in what forms, such regimes could survive even the initial stages of a genuine transformation along these lines. They would no longer be what they were. Yet more urgent is this point: In order to bring about such change, activists in those countries that still proclaim Marx face an overarching cultural challenge that confronts their fellows everywhere.

*The reign of fashion*

Our world is more complex and more trivial than the one in which Marx and Bakunin argued. Today, in a real sense, the weapons undermining solidarity, participation and social initiative are non-arguments. They are styles, modes of being, post-rational constructs, if you like, affecting all social strata; advertisement-driven beings inclined to seek satisfaction in new phones, infinite wardrobes, raunchy music and pornography – all so readily available (if often on credit). In New York, Johannesburg and Beijing, those with a serious, liberating vision of human life are confronted not so much with a debate as with a seduction. State-monopoly capitalism, while
certainly far from relinquishing force and argument, is now most effectively a lover. Demonic to be sure, but a lover. Accept my version of things and enjoy its many charms or be spurned, it croons. Be a poor nobody. Only reason, leading to a consensus on a truer love, can combat this.

Michael Bakunin tentatively fashions a city, utilizing materials old and new, structures from his epoch and from older ones, preparing a rough model he thinks the future can unveil from mist. He understands that we inevitably work in the present but that the present bears the past within it and all of history's still-burning potential. All of which ought to be turned, to the extent we control things, to the good of that being who is less a repeatedly refurbished product of clashing historical phases and systems of production than a given: social, cooperative, competitive, desirous of liberty and a follower, a dreamer and seeker of immediate satisfaction, good but also evil, adaptable, radical and traditional. What arrangement best suits this being? Anarchy, argues the Russian thinker. Not chaos, but a system of radical decentralization knotted together by strings of solidarity. With rules but ones you and I may choose not to assent to – provided we accept the consequences of our choice. Freedom with some security, along with freedom’s risks and responsibilities.

All our philosophy starts from a false base. It begins always by considering man as an individual, and not as he should be considered— as a being belonging to a collectivity. Most of the philosophical (and mistaken) views stemming from this false premise [lead] to a conception of a happiness in the clouds… or pessimism…

Michael Bakunin