What today’s activists can learn from “the father of anarchism”

The Continuing Relevance of Michael Bakunin

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Bakunin is often credited with being the “father of anarchism.” While he rejected the title, he was the first to write extensively, systematically, and explicitly on anarchist principles. These ranged from organization from the bottom up, the rejection of the state and the vanguard party, the nature of the social, as opposed to the political, revolution, the nature of authority, and communism.

He came to anarchism late in life. Born in Russia to a relatively well-off family in the lower ranks of the aristocracy, he was sent to military school and served briefly in the Russian army. He hated military life, and soon deserted the army to study philosophy.

He left Russia for Germany to continue his studies, but the ravages of industrialization and capitalism pushed Bakunin, like others of his generation to abandon the idealist philosophy of Hegel for politics. He headed to Paris, where he met Pierre-Jospeh Proudhon, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and other activists and writers.

Bakunin’s political work ranged from writing polemics to taking part in the wave of uprisings that raged across Europe from 1847 to 1849. Bakunin fought alongside the composer Richard Wagner on the barricades in Dresden, and was imprisoned for his revolutionary activity. Handed over to the Russian government, he spent several years in prison and exile, finally escaping Siberia and returning to Europe in 1861.

It was not until the 1860s that he declared himself an anarchist. While he had a great deal of respect for the intellectual work of Marx, especially Marx’s materialist history, he differed drastically with him over questions of tactics and strategy, and means and ends, particularly on the role of the state. The two fought ferociously from about 1868 to 1872 within the International Workingmen’s Association, or the First International.

During that period, Bakunin devoted considerable thought to anarchist tactics, especially questions of who should be organized and how. Thus, re-examining his ideas may be of use to contemporary anarchists who are grappling with similar questions of organizing.

To ask whether we can learn anything from Bakunin is, in a sense, to ask whether we can learn anything from history and whether we can even know anything about the past.

History does not provide direct parallels and lessons and is written by people with perspectives and biases, so our knowledge of the past is partial, but the knowledge we do have about the past can be useful in the present.

What about Bakunin might be useful today? That question requires answering another one first: useful to whom? Liberals and conservatives make use of a Bakunin they have concocted to suit their purposes.

Their Bakunin is a man obsessed with destruction and mayhem as the result of his own tortured psyche. He is delivered as both a cautionary tale and a justification for repression: anarchism and anarchists are nuts, so they deserve what they get at the hands of the state.

In the wake of the destruction of the World Trade Center towers, journalists and pundits resurrected that Bakunin to argue that violence against the system is always wrong and thus taken up only by zealots blinded to

reality. Therefore, any measures against the perpetrators were justified and to their arguments and cause no regard need be given.

That Bakunin, however, can be easily dismissed, for he never existed. The political agenda of those who argue his anarchism flowed from neurosis is obvious. The ad hominem argument, loosely, judging ideas based on the alleged nature of the person holding them, is a logical fallacy. There is absolutely no evidence that Bakunin was neurotic or psychologically "aberrant," whatever that might mean today.

Finally, Bakunin never insisted on "destruction for the sake of destruction," as many believe. His famous quote, "the passion for destruction is a creative passion," was made many years before Bakunin became an anarchist and thirty-five years before dynamite was invented.

It was a call for political rebellion and protest. It was not a call for indiscriminate violence or revolutionary terror. While he never used the phrase, he did call for "propaganda by the deed," but by this he meant that peasants and workers needed not just words but action to inspire and educate them.

The action, the deeds he thought useful were strikes, taking over factories, popular protest, and insurrection, not assassinations and bombings. When he did talk of violence, it was always in the context of revolutionary acts by the masses. Bakunin was careful to point out that violence should be launched against "position and things," not individuals.

"Carnage," as he put it, was less effective against the ruling class because its "power resides less in individuals than in their positions," in "the organization of things." Furthermore, he warned, the reaction of the authorities against violence would outdo that of the radicals and was likely to stifle rebellion. Bakunin understood that the oppressed were angry and might well use the opportunity of revolution to take vengeance. This was, however, a "natural, distressing, inevitable fact," not a guide to action.

Is he of use then to contemporary anarchists? He does give us a good idea of what is not to be done. Bakunin's criticism of Marx and authoritarian socialism was prescient; as he anticipated the horrors of Stalinism.

Bakunin insisted that the revolution could not be led by a vanguard, that the state, even a workers' state was and would be an agent of repression, that any party or vanguard that took up the reins of state power would soon act not in the interests of "the people," but to preserve its own privilege and position.

He would not have been surprised to see Lenin's secret police, the Cheka, directed first against the anarchists, for he understood that anarchists posed a fundamental threat to the Bolsheviks. Not because they were an armed threat, but because they rejected the assumptions of power and hierarchy the Bolsheviks shared with all statists.

The Bolshevik coup (often called the October Revolution of 1917) was about controlling the state, not abolishing it and so led directly, if not inevitably, to Stalin and the horrors of his regime. But Bakunin's warnings about power and the state are as valuable today as they were in the 1860s.

Nor did Bakunin believe that people would organize themselves spontaneously, if by "spontaneous" we mean something like "arising from immediate natural impulse." By "spontaneous," he meant "free from external constraint," or "voluntary," in contrast with the notion that the revolution would be brought to "the people" by party members and intellectuals.

Education, organization, and action were absolutely necessary in his view. While people might well have an almost instinctual reaction to conditions of oppression, we also have "political and religious prejudices implanted in [our] mind."

As he put it, "workers, crushed by their daily labour," are demoralized and corrupted … by the perverse doctrines liberally dispensed by governments in concert with every privileged caste—the priests, the nobility, the bourgeoisie."

There is a role for the organizer and even the intellectual, not to lead but to use their tools and skills to help articulate needs and ideas. Organization had to be done from the bottom up, not the top down, but people rarely organized themselves "spontaneously," in the sense that revolutionary resistance sprang from nowhere as an automatic or "pure" reaction to oppression.

Who then would be organized? It was not the so-called "lumpenproletariat," the most downtrodden and disadvantaged, those utterly dependent on charity and crime, who would be the advance guard of the revolution. Like Marx and Engels, Bakunin was convinced the skilled and relatively well-paid workers, the "aristocracy of labour," were unlikely to be the first to take up the black flag, but he rarely talked about the "lumpenproletariat."

More often he speaks of workers, the “destitute proletariat,” “the mass of workers,” and peasants who did not own land, such as those in Russia, but unlike the small farmers of France. Furthermore, he believed that unions and strikes were valuable for they helped workers develop strategy, tactics, and experience.

Nor did he argue that bandits and outlaws were natural and obvious revolutionary agents. Russian Cossack brigands such as Stenka Razin and Pugachev represented a “protest against oppression by the state and by the patriarchal society,” but these were a far cry from outlaw bikers, street gangs, and the Mafia, not least because the former were created, in part, as explicitly political movements.

Even so, Bakunin warned, the brigands had “unquiet passions, misfortunes, frequently ignoble aims, feelings, and actions.” Simple anti-authoritarian sentiments were not sufficient to make one an anarchist.

Well, so what? As Bakunin pointed out, we should take nothing on authority. In his oft-quoted comment, we may accept the authority of bootmakers on the matter of boots, but only to the extent of listening to their experience and ability as we insist on making our own decision.

We might consider Bakunin through the words of the 17th century Japanese poet, Matsuo Basho: “Seek not the paths of the ancients; Seek that which the ancients sought.”

In Bakunin’s case, that is a world of peace, equality, liberty, and solidarity.

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