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**MICHAEL BAKUNIN**

**The Paris Commune  
and the  
Idea of the State**

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# The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State

Michael Bakunin

THIS WORK, LIKE ALL THE WRITINGS which I have published until now—so far there have been few enough—is a product of events. It is the natural continuation of my *Letters to a Frenchman* (September 1870), in which I had the easy and sad privilege of foreseeing and predicting the horrible misfortunes which are today assailing France, and along with her, the whole civilised world; misfortunes against which there has been and remains only one remedy now: *the Social Revolution*.

To prove this truth—from now on indisputable—from the historical development of society and from the very events taking place before our eyes in Europe, in such a way as to make it acceptable to all men of good will, and by all sincere seekers of the truth—and then to set forth frankly without reticence or equivocation the philosophical principles as well as the practical goals which make up, so to speak, the essence of the activist spirit, the basis and the aim of what we call the Social Revolution—such is the object of the present work.

The task which I have set for myself is not easy, I know, and I might be accused of presumption if I brought into this work the least personal conceit. But there is none of that, I can assure the reader. I am neither a scholar nor a philosopher, nor even a writer by profession. I have written very little during my life and I have never done so, as it were, except in self-defence, and only when a passionate conviction compelled me to overcome the repugnance which I feel instinctively for parading my private self in public.

Who am I then, and what is it that compels me to publish this work at the present time? I am a passionate seeker of the truth, and none the less persistent an enemy to the harmful untruths which the *law and order party* (that official representative, privileged and self-seeking, of all the religious, metaphysical, political, legal, economic and social villainies, past and present) still has the arrogance to make use of today so as to brutalise and enslave the world. I am a fanatical lover of freedom, considering it as the unique environment within which the intelligence, dignity and happiness of mankind may develop and increase. I am not speaking of that freedom which is purely formal, doled out, measured, and regulated by the State, an everlasting lie which in reality never represents anything but the privilege of a few based on the enslavement of everyone else. Nor do I mean that individualistic, egotistical, malicious, and illusory freedom, extolled by

the school of J.-J. Rousseau, as by all the other schools of bourgeois liberalism, which considers the so-called rights of everyone, represented by the State as the limit of the rights of each individual, and which in fact leads of necessity and without exception to the reduction of the rights of the individual to zero. No, I mean the only freedom which is truly worthy of that name, the freedom which consists in the full development of all the material, intellectual, and moral powers which are found in the form of latent capabilities in every individual. I mean that freedom which recognises only those restrictions which are laid down for us by the laws of our own nature; so, properly speaking, there are no restrictions, since these laws are not imposed by some outside legislator situated maybe beside us or maybe above us, they are immanent in us and inherent in us and constitute the very basis of all our being, as much material as intellectual and moral. Thus, instead of trying to find a limit for them, we should consider them as the real conditions of and the real reason for our freedom.

I mean that freedom of the individual which, far from stopping as if before a boundary in face of the freedom of others, on the contrary finds in that freedom its own confirmation and extension to infinity; the unlimited freedom of each in the freedom of all, freedom in solidarity, freedom in equality; triumphant freedom, victorious over brute force and the principle of authority which was never anything but the idealised expression of brute force; freedom which, after overthrowing all the heavenly and earthly idols will establish and organise a new world, that of humanity in solidarity, built on the ruin of all Churches and all States.

I am a convinced supporter of *economic and social equality*, because I know that, outside that equality, freedom, justice, human dignity, morality, and the well-being of individuals, just as much as the prosperity of nations, will never be anything but lies. But, supporter though I may be of freedom, this first condition of humanity, I think that equality must be established in the world by the spontaneous organisation of work and of the collective ownership of producers' associations, freely organised and federated in the communes, and by the equally spontaneous federation of these communes, but not by the overriding and enslaving activity of the State.

This is the point which mainly divides the revolutionary socialists or collectivists from the authoritarian



communists who are supporters of the absolute power of the State. Their goal is the same: both one and the other faction equally desire the creation of a new social order based solely on the organisation of collective work, inevitably imposed on one and all by the very nature of things, in economic conditions which are equal for all, and upon the collective appropriation of the instruments of labour.

Only the communists imagine they will be able to attain this by the development and the organisation of the political power of the working classes, principally of the urban proletariat, with the help of bourgeois radicalism, while the revolutionary socialists, enemies of every tie and every alliance of an equivocal nature, think on the contrary that they will not be able to attain this goal except by the development and organisation, not of the political, but of the social (and, by consequence, anti-political) power of the working masses as much in the towns as in the countryside, including all the men of good will who, breaking with their past in the upper classes, might sincerely wish to join with them and wholly accept their programme.

From this two different methods are derived. The communists believe they should organise the workers' strength to take over the political power of the states. The revolutionary socialists organised with a view to the destruction, or, if one wants a more polite word, the liquidation, of the states. The communists are supporters of the principle and practice of authority; the revolutionary socialists have no faith except in freedom. Both the one and the other, equally supporters of science which is to destroy superstition and replace belief, differ in the former wishing to impose it, and the latter striving to propagate it; so that human groups, convinced of its truth, may organise and federate spontaneously, freely, from the bottom up, by their own momentum according to their real interests, but never according to any plan laid down in advance and imposed upon the *ignorant masses* by some superior intellects.

The revolutionary socialists think that there is much more practical and intellectual common-sense in the instinctive aspirations and in the real needs of the mass of the people than in the profound intelligence of all these doctors and teachers of mankind who, after so many fruitless attempts to make humanity happy, still aspire to add their own efforts. The revolutionary socialists think the opposite: that mankind has allowed itself to be governed long enough, too long, and that the origin of its unhappiness does not reside in this or that form of government but in the very principle and fact of government, whatever kind it may be.

Finally this is the same, already historic, contradiction which exists between the scientific communism developed by the German school and accepted in part by the American and English socialists on the one hand, and the Proudhonism widely developed and pushed right to these, its final consequences, on the other, accepted by the proletariat of the Latin countries.<sup>1</sup> Revolutionary socialism has just attempted its first demonstration, both splendid and practical, in the

### *Paris Commune.*

I am a supporter of the Paris Commune which, because it was massacred and drowned in blood by the executioners of monarchic and clerical reaction, has therefore become all the more lively and powerful in the imagination and heart of the European proletariat. I am above all a supporter of it because it was a bold and outspoken negation of the State.

It is a tremendously significant historical fact that this negation of the State should have been manifested particularly in France, which has been until now the country par excellence of political centralisation, and that it should have been above all precisely Paris, the historic fountainhead of this great French civilisation, which should have taken the initiative. Paris, taking off its own crown and proclaiming its own downfall with enthusiasm so as to give freedom and life to France, to Europe, to the whole world! Paris, affirming once more its historic ability to take the lead, and showing to all the enslaved peoples (and which popular masses indeed are not slaves?) the unique way of emancipation and salvation! Paris, striking a mortal blow at the political traditions of bourgeois radicalism and providing a real basis for revolutionary socialism! Paris, earning once more the curses of all the reactionary gangs of France and Europe! Paris, being buried in its ruins so as to pronounce a solemn contradiction to triumphant reaction; saving by its catastrophe the honour and future of France, and proving to a comforted mankind that, if life, intelligence and moral power have disappeared from the upper classes, they have remained energetic and full of potential in the proletariat! Paris, inaugurating the new era, that of the final and complete emancipation of the masses of the people and of their solidarity, henceforth a matter of fact, across and despite state frontiers. Paris, destroying patriotism and building on its ruins the religion of humanity! Paris, proclaiming itself humanist and atheist; and replacing the fictions of religion by the great realities of social life and faith in science, replacing the lies and injustices of religious, political, and legal morality by the principles of freedom, justice, equality, and fraternity, these eternal fundamentals of all human morality! Heroic Paris, rational and faithful, confirming its energetic faith in the destinies of mankind even in its glorious downfall and destruction, and leaving that faith much more energetic and lively for the generations to come! Paris, soaked in the blood of its most generous-hearted children—there indeed is mankind crucified by the international and co-ordinated reaction of all Europe, under the immediate inspiration of all the Christian churches and that high-priest of iniquity, the Pope. But the next international and solidarist revolution of the people will be the resurrection of Paris.

Such is the true meaning, and such are the immense beneficial consequences, of the two months of the existence and the fall, forever memorable, of the Paris Commune.

The Paris Commune lasted for too short a time, and it was too much hindered in its internal development by the mortal struggle which it had to maintain against the Versailles reaction, for it to have been able, I do not say even to apply, but to elaborate its socialist programme in theory. Besides, it must be recognised

<sup>1</sup>It is equally accepted and will be accepted yet more by the essentially non-political instinct of the Slav peoples. [Bakunin's Note.]



that the majority of the members of the Commune were not strictly speaking socialists and that, if they appeared to be such, it was because they were irresistibly swept forward by the course of events, by the nature of their environment, and by the necessities of their position, and not by their own personal conviction. The socialists, at the head of whom our friend Varlin naturally takes his place, formed in the Commune only a very small minority indeed; they were at the very most only some fourteen or fifteen members. The remainder was composed of Jacobins. But, let it be understood, there are Jacobins and Jacobins. There are the lawyer and doctrinaire Jacobins, like M. Gambetta, whose *positivist* republicanism,<sup>2</sup> presumptuous, despotic, and formalistic, having repudiated the old revolutionary faith and having conserved nothing from Jacobinism except the cult of unity and authority, has surrendered popular France to the Prussians, and later to indigenous forces of reaction; and there are those Jacobins who are openly revolutionary, the heroes and last sincere representatives of the democratic faith of 1793, capable of sacrificing their well-armed unity and authority to the necessities of the Revolution, rather than bow down their consciences before the insolence of reaction. These great-hearted Jacobins, at the head of whom Delescluze naturally takes his place, a great spirit and a great character, wish for the triumph of the Revolution before all things. And since there is no revolution without the popular masses, and since these masses today have pre-eminently a socialist instinct and can no longer make any other revolution but an economic and social one, the Jacobins of good faith, allowing themselves to be led on more and more by the logic of the revolutionary movement, will end by becoming socialists in spite of themselves.

This was precisely the situation of the Jacobins who took part in the Paris Commune. Delescluze and many others with him signed programmes and proclamations of which the general line and promises were definitely socialist. But since, in spite of all their good faith and good intentions, they were only socialists more through external pressure than through internal conviction, and since they did not have the time or the capacity to overcome and suppress in themselves a mass of bourgeois prejudices which were in contradiction with their more recent socialist outlook, one can understand that, paralysed by this internal conflict, they could never escape from generalities, nor take one of those decisive steps which would break for ever their solidarity and all their connections with the bourgeois world.

This was a great misfortune for the Commune and for themselves; they were paralysed by it, and they paralysed the Commune; but it is not possible to reproach them for it, as though for a fault. Men do not change from day to day, nor do they change their own natures or habits at will. These men proved their sincerity, in letting themselves be killed for the Commune. Who will dare ask more of them?

They are all the more excusable, because the people of Paris, under whose influence they thought and acted, were themselves socialist much more by instinct than

by ideology or considered conviction. All their aspirations are to the highest degree and exclusively socialist; but their ideas, or rather the traditional representations of them, are still far from reaching that level. There are still many Jacobin prejudices, many dictatorial and governmental conceptions, among the proletariat of the large cities of France and even among that of Paris. The cult of authority, a fatal product of religious education, that historic source of all the evils, all the depravities and all the servility among the people, has not yet been entirely eradicated from their minds. It is equally true that even the most intelligent children of the people, the most convinced socialists, have not yet succeeded in entirely delivering themselves of it. Rummage in their conscience and you will still find there the Jacobin, the governmentalist, pushed back into some murky corner and, it is true, become very modest, but he is not entirely dead.

Furthermore, the situation of the small number of convinced socialists who formed part of the Commune was extremely difficult. Not feeling themselves sufficiently supported by the great mass of the Parisian population (the organisation of the International Association moreover being itself very imperfect, numbering scarcely a few thousand individuals), they had to keep up a daily struggle against the Jacobin majority. And in what circumstances indeed! They had to give bread and work to some hundreds of thousands of workers, organise them, arm them, and at the same time keep an eye on the reactionary manoeuvres going on in a huge city like Paris, under siege, threatened with starvation, and exposed to all the dirty tricks of the reactionary faction which had managed to set itself up and maintain itself at Versailles, *with the permission and by the favour of the Prussians*. They had to oppose a revolutionary government and army to the government and army of Versailles—that is, in order to combat monarchic and clerical reaction, they had to organise themselves in reactionary Jacobin fashion, forgetting or sacrificing what they themselves knew were the first conditions of revolutionary socialism.

Is it not natural that, in such circumstances, the Jacobins, who were the strongest because they constituted the majority in the Commune and who besides this possessed to an infinitely superior degree the political instinct and the tradition and practice of governmental organization, had immense advantages over the socialists? What one must surely find astounding is that they did not take more advantage than they did, that they did not give an exclusively Jacobin character to the Paris rising, and that they allowed themselves, on the contrary, to be carried on into a social revolution.

I know that many socialists, very consistent in their theoretical ideas, reproach our Paris friends for not showing themselves sufficiently socialist in their revolutionary practice, while all the loud-mouths of the bourgeois press accuse them on the contrary of having followed their socialist programme only too faithfully. Let us leave these ignominious denunciators from that section of the press on one side for the moment; I should like to make the point to the strict theoreticians of the emancipation of the proletariat that they are unjust to our Paris friends. For, between the most precise theories and putting them into practice there

<sup>2</sup>See his letter to Littré in the *Progrès de Lyon*. [Bakunin's Note.]



is an immense distance which cannot be covered in a few days. Whoever had the good fortune to know Varlin, for instance, to name only one whose death is certain, knows how much the socialist convictions in him and his friends were passionate, considered, and profound. These were men whose ardent enthusiasm, devotion, and good faith could never have been doubted by any of those who came across them. But precisely because they were men of good faith, they were full of mistrust in themselves when faced with the immense work they had devoted their life and their thought to: they counted for so little! They had moreover that conviction that, in the Social Revolution—diametrically opposed in this as in everything else to the Political Revolution—the action of individuals counted for almost nothing and the spontaneous action of the masses should count for everything. All that individuals can do is to elaborate, clarify, and propagate the ideas that correspond to the popular feeling, and, beyond this, to contribute by their ceaseless efforts to the revolutionary organisation of the natural power of the masses, but nothing beyond that. And everything else should not and could not take place except by the action of the people themselves. Otherwise one would end with political dictatorship, that is to say, the reconstruction of the State, of the privileges, injustices and all oppressions of the State, and one would arrive by a devious but logical path at the re-establishment of the political, social, and economic slavery of the popular masses.

Varlin and all his friends, like all sincere socialists, and in general like all workers born and bred among the people, shared to the highest degree this perfectly legitimate prejudice against the continual intervention of the same individuals, against the domination exerted by superior personages; and since they were fair-minded above all things, they turned this foresight, this mistrust just as much against themselves as against all the other individuals.

Contrary to that authoritarian communist type of thinking—in my opinion completely erroneous—that a Social Revolution can be decreed and organised, whether by a dictatorship or whether by a constituent assembly resulting from some political revolution, our friends, the socialists of Paris, thought that it could not be made nor brought to its full development except by the spontaneous and continuous action of the masses, the groups and the associations of the people.

Our friends in Paris were a thousand times right. For indeed, where is that head, however brilliant it may be, or if one wishes to speak of a collective dictatorship, were it formed by many hundreds of individuals endowed with superior faculties, where are those brains powerful enough and wide ranging enough to embrace the infinite multiplicity and diversity of the real interests, aspirations, wishes, and needs whose sum total constitutes the collective will of a people, and to invent a social organisation which can satisfy everybody? This organisation will never be anything but a Procrustean bed which the more or less obvious violence of the State will be able to force unhappy society to lie down on. That is what has always happened until now, and it is precisely this old system of organisation by force that the Social Revolution must put an end to, by giving back their complete

freedom to the masses, groups, communes, associations, individuals even, and by destroying once and for all the historic cause of all the violent acts, the power, and the very existence, of the State. The State must carry away in its fall all the injustices of the juridical law with all the lies of the various religions, this law and these religions never having been anything but the enforced consecration (as much ideological as actual) of all the violence represented, guaranteed and licensed by the State.

It is clear that freedom will never be given to mankind, and that the real interests of society, of all the groups and local organisations as well as of all the individuals who make up society, will only be able to find real satisfaction when there are no more States. It is clear that all the so-called general interests of society, which the State is alleged to represent and which in reality are nothing but the constant and general negation of the positive interests of the regions, communes, associations and the largest number of individuals subjected to the State, constitute an abstraction, a fiction, a lie, and that the State is like one great slaughter-house, and like an immense graveyard where, in the shadow and under the pretext of this abstraction, there come all the real aspirations, all the living initiatives of a nation, to let themselves be generously and sanctimoniously sacrificed and buried. And since no abstraction ever exists by itself or for itself, since it has neither legs to walk on, nor arms to create with, nor stomach to digest this mass of victims which it is given to devour, it is plain that, in exactly the same way that the religious or heavenly abstraction, God, represents in reality the very positive and very real interests of a privileged caste, the clergy (its terrestrial counterpart), so the political abstraction, the State, represents the no less real and positive interests of the class which is principally if not exclusively exploiting people today and which is moreover tending to swallow up all the others, the bourgeoisie. And just as the clergy is always divided and today is tending to divide itself all the more into a very powerful and a very rich minority and a majority which is very subordinate and rather poor, so, in the same way, the bourgeoisie and its diverse social and political organisations in industry, agriculture, banking and commerce, just as in all the administrative, financial, judicial, university, police and military functions of the State, is tending to weld itself further each day into a truly dominant oligarchy and a countless mass of creatures who are more or less vainglorious and more or less fallen, living in a perpetual illusion and pushed back inevitably more and more into the proletariat by an irresistible force, that of present-day economic development, and reduced to serving as blind instruments of this all-powerful oligarchy.

The abolition of the Church and of the State must be the first and indispensable condition of the real emancipation of society; after which (and only after which) it can, and must, organise itself in a different fashion, but not from top to bottom and according to an ideal plan, dreamt up by a few wise men or scholars, or even by force of decrees put out by some dictatorial force or even by a national assembly, elected by universal suffrage. Such a system, as I have already said, would lead inevitably to the creation of a new



State, and consequently to the formation of a governmental aristocracy, that is, an entire class of people, having nothing in common with the mass of the people. Certainly, that class would begin again to exploit the people and subject them under the pretext of the common good or in order to save the State.

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

It is said that the harmony and universal solidarity of the interests of individuals and of society will never be capable of realisation in practice because society's interests, being contradictory, are not in a position to balance one another by themselves or even to come to some sort of understanding. To such an objection I will reply that, if up to the present day the interests have never anywhere been in mutual harmony, that was because of the State, which has sacrificed the interests of the majority to the profit of a privileged minority. That is why that notorious incompatibility and that struggle of personal interests with those of society is nothing less than a political deception and lie, born out of the theological lie which imagined the doctrine of original sin so as to dishonour man and destroy in him the sense of his own worth. This same false idea of the conflict of interests was also sown by the dreams of metaphysics which, as is known, is a close relative of theology. Not appreciating the sociability of human nature, metaphysics regards society as a mechanical aggregate of individuals, of a purely artificial kind, suddenly brought together in the name of some contract, either formal or secret, freely entered into or else under the influence of a higher power. Before uniting themselves in society, these individuals, endowed with a kind of immortal soul, enjoyed complete freedom.

But if the metaphysicians assert that men, above all those who believe in the immortality of the soul, are free beings outside society, we arrive inevitably then at this conclusion: that men cannot unite in society except on condition that they repudiate their freedom, their natural independence, and sacrifice their interests, first personal and then local. Such a renunciation and such a sacrifice of oneself must be, on that argument, all the more pressing as society becomes more numerous and its organisation more complex. In such a case the State is the expression of all the individual sacrifices. Existing under such an abstract form, and at the same time such a violent one, it continues, as goes without saying, to obstruct individual freedom more and more in the name of that lie which is known as the "public good", although it evidently only represents exclusively the interest of the ruling class. The State, in this way, appears to us as an inevitable negation and an annihilation of all freedom, all interest, individual as well as general.

We see here that in the metaphysical and theological systems everything is linked and explained self-consistently. This is why the logical defenders of these

systems can and indeed must, with an easy conscience, continue to exploit the popular masses by means of Church and State. Cramming their pockets and slaking all their foul desires, they can at the same time console themselves with the thought that they are taking all this trouble to the glory of God, for the victory of civilisation and for the eternal happiness of the proletariat. But we others, not believing either in God or in the immortality of the soul, nor in the individual freedom of the will, we assert that freedom must be understood in its completest and widest sense as the goal of the historic progress of mankind. By a strange, though logical, contrast, our idealist opponents of theology and metaphysics take the principle of freedom as the foundation and basis of their theories so as to conclude quite simply with the indispensability of the enslavement of men. We others, materialist in theory, we tend in practice to create and to make durable a rational and noble idealism. Our enemies, religious and transcendental idealists, come down to a practical, bloody, and vile materialism in the name of the same logic, according to which each development is the negation of the basic principle. We are convinced that all the richness of the intellectual, moral and material development of man, just like his apparent independence—that all this is the product of life in society. Outside society, man would not only not be free, but he would not be transformed into a real man at all, that is to say, into a being who has self-consciousness, who alone thinks and speaks. The combination of intelligence and collective work has alone been able to force man to leave the state of savagery and brutality which constituted his original nature or indeed his starting point for further development. We are profoundly convinced of this truth that the whole life of men—interests, trends, needs, illusions, stupidities even, just as much as the acts of violence, the injustices, and all the actions which have the appearance of being voluntary—represent only the consequence of the inevitable forces of life in society. People cannot admit the idea of interdependence, yet they cannot repudiate the reciprocal influence and the correlation between phenomena in the external world.

In nature itself, that marvellous interrelationship and network of phenomena is certainly not attained without struggle. Quite the contrary, the harmony of the forces of nature only appears as the actual result of that continual struggle which is the very condition of life and movement. In nature and also in society, order without struggle is death. If order is natural and possible in the universe, it is so solely because this universe is not governed according to some system imagined in advance and imposed by a supreme will. The theological hypothesis of a divine system of laws leads to an evident absurdity and to the negation not only of all order, but of nature itself. Natural laws are not real except in so far as they are inherent in nature, that is to say they are not fixed by any authority. These laws are only simple manifestations or else continual fluctuations of the development of things and of combinations of these very varied, transient, but real facts. Together this all constitutes what we call "nature". Human intelligence and its capability for science observed these facts, controlled



them experimentally, then re-united them in a system and called them laws. But nature itself knows no laws. It acts unconsciously, representing in itself the infinite variety of phenomena, appearing and repeating themselves in an inevitable way. That is why, thanks to this inevitability of action, universal order can and indeed does exist.

Such an order also appears in human society which apparently evolves in a supposedly non-natural manner, but actually submits to the natural and inevitable course of events. Only, the superiority of man over the other animals and the faculty of thinking brought to his development an individual characteristic—which is quite natural, let it be said in passing—in the sense that, like everything that exists, man represents the material product of the union and action of forces. This individual characteristic is the capacity for reasoning, or indeed that faculty for generalisation and abstraction, thanks to which man can project himself through thought, examining and observing himself like an alien and external object. Raising himself above his own level through the medium of ideas, just as he raises himself from the surrounding world, he arrives at the representation of perfect abstraction, absolute nothingness. And that absolute is nothing less than the faculty of abstraction, which scorns everything that exists and, arriving at complete negation, there comes to rest. It is already the final limit of the highest abstraction of thought: that absolute nothingness is God.

That is the meaning and the historic basis of every theological doctrine. Not understanding the nature and the material causes of their own thoughts, not taking account of the conditions even or of the natural laws which are peculiar to them, these first men and societies certainly could not suspect that their absolute notions were only the result of the faculty of conceiving abstract ideas. That is why they considered these ideas taken from nature as if they were real objects, before which nature itself would cease to have any reality. They took it into their heads afterwards to worship their own fictions, their impossible notions of the absolute, and to grant them all kinds of honour. But they had the need, in some fashion, to represent and make tangible the abstract idea of nothingness or of God. To this end, they inflated the concept of divinity and endowed it into the bargain with all the qualities and powers, good and evil, which they only came across in nature and in society.

Such was the origin and historic development of all religions, beginning with fetishism and ending with Christianity.

We hardly have the intention of plunging into the history of religious, theological and metaphysical absurdities and still less of speaking of the successive unfolding of all the incarnations and divine visions created by centuries of barbarism. Everybody knows that superstition always gives birth to frightful sufferings and causes the flow of streams of blood and tears. Let us say only that all these sickening aberrations of poor mankind were historical events, inevitable in the normal growth and evolution of social organisms. Such aberrations engendered in society the fatal idea, dominating the imagination of men, that the universe were supposedly governed by a supernatural force and

will. Centuries succeeded centuries, and societies became accustomed to this idea to such an extent that they finally destroyed within themselves every tendency towards a further progress, and every capacity they had to reach it.

First the ambition of a few individuals, then a few social classes, erected slavery and conquest into a vital principle, and implanted more than any other this terrible idea of the divinity. Since when all society was impossible without those two institutions as a base, the Church and the State. These two social scourges are defended by all the dogmatists.

Scarcely had these institutions appeared in the world than all of a sudden two castes were organised: that of the priests and the aristocracy, who without losing any time did the job of inculcating deeply into that enslaved people the indispensability, usefulness and sanctity of the Church and the State.

All that had as its goal the changing of brutal slavery into legal slavery, provided for and consecrated by the will of the Supreme Being.

But did the priests and the aristocrats really believe sincerely in these institutions, which they sustained with all strength in their own particular interest? Were they not merely liars and deceivers? No, I believe that they were at the same time both believers and imposters.

They believed too, because they took a natural and inevitable part in the aberrations of the mass, and only later, in the age of the decadence of the ancient world, did they become sceptics and shameless deceivers. Another reason allows us to consider the founders of States as sincere people. Man always believes easily in whatever he desires, and in what does not contradict his interests. Even if he is intelligent and informed, the same thing happens: through self-love and his desire to live with his neighbours and profit by their respect, he will always believe in whatever is pleasant and useful. I am convinced that, for example, Thiers and the Versailles government were forced at great cost to convince themselves that, in killing several thousand men, women, and children in Paris, they were saving France.

But if the priests, augurers, aristocrats and middle-class citizens, of ancient and modern times, were able sincerely to believe, they nevertheless remained imposters. One cannot in fact admit that they believed in every absurdity that constituted faith and politics. I am not even speaking of the age when, according to the words of Cicero, "two augurers could not look each other in the eye without laughing". Afterwards, even in the time of general ignorance and superstition, it is difficult to suppose that the inventors of daily miracles were convinced of the reality of these miracles. One can say the same thing of politics, which may be summed up in the following rule: "It is necessary to subjugate and exploit the people in such a way that they will not complain too greatly of their fate, nor forget to submit, nor have time to think of resistance and rebellion."

How then, after this, can we imagine that people who turned politics into a profession and knew its aim—that is to say injustice, violence, lies, and murder, in the mass or in isolation—might believe sincerely in the political art and the wisdom of the State as the



creator of social contentment? They cannot have arrived at such a degree of stupidity despite all their cruelty. Church and State have been the great schools of vice in every age. History bears witness to their crimes; at all places and at all times the priest and the statesman have been the conscious, systematic, implacable and bloody executioners of the people.

But how, all the same, can we reconcile two things which are apparently so incompatible: deceivers and deceived, liars and believers? Logically, this seems difficult; however, in fact—that is to say in practical life—these qualities occur together very often.

In the great majority of cases people live in contradiction with themselves, and under perpetual misapprehensions; they generally do not notice it, that is until some extraordinary event brings them back from their habitual sleep and compels them to take a look at themselves and around themselves.

In politics as in religion, men are only machines in the hands of the exploiters. But robbers and robbed, oppressors and oppressed, all live one alongside the other, governed by a handful of individuals whom it is convenient to consider as the true exploiters. These are the same people, free of all prejudices, political and religious, who consciously maltreat and oppress. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, until the explosion of the Great Revolution, as in our own day, they ruled in Europe and did pretty well as they pleased. We must believe that their domination will not prolong itself much further.

While the principal leaders deceive and lead the

people astray quite consciously, their servants, or the minions of the Church and State, apply themselves with zeal to uphold the sanctity and integrity of these odious institutions. If the Church, according to the pronouncements of the priests and of the majority of statesmen, is necessary for the salvation of the soul, the State in its turn is also necessary for the conservation of peace, of order, and of justice, and the dogmatists of all the schools must shout: "Without Church and Government there will be neither civilisation nor progress."

We need not discuss the problem of eternal salvation because we do not believe in the immortality of the soul. We are convinced that the most harmful of things for humanity, for truth and progress, is the Church. And how could it be otherwise? It is not to the Church that the care of perverting the younger generations, above all the women, falls? Is it not the Church which through its dogmas and lies, its stupidity and shame, tends to destroy logical reasoning and science? Does the Church not attack the dignity of man, in perverting in him the notion of rights and justice? Does it not give back as a corpse that which is living, does it not lose freedom, is it not the Church which preaches slavery of the masses in perpetuity for the benefit of tyrants and exploiters? Is it not the Church, this implacable Church, which tends to perpetuate the reign of darkness, ignorance, poverty and crime?

And if the progress of our century is not a deceptive dream, it must get rid of the Church.

## A biographical and bibliographical note

THE best-known single writing on the Paris Commune is of course *The Civil War in France*, the address which Karl Marx wrote for the General Council of the International Working Men's Association during April and May 1871 (while the Commune was still in existence), and which was approved by the General Council on May 30 (two days after the Commune was destroyed) and first published as a pamphlet in June 1871—since when it has appeared in innumerable editions.<sup>1</sup> Bakunin's essay on the Paris Commune, which was written during June 1871, is much less well known and has been used by very few writers on either Bakunin or the Commune.<sup>2</sup>

Bakunin's essay is inevitably compared with Marx's address, though they are very different kinds of work, just as Bakunin and Marx were very different kinds of person. The difference between the attitudes and activities of the two great rivals in the First International during the crisis of 1870-1871 is indeed both interesting and revealing. Whereas Marx both publicly and privately opposed any socialist rising first against the Second Empire of Napoleon III and then against the Third Republic which replaced it after the defeat of the Franco-Prussian War in September

1870—going so far as to describe any such rising as "desperate folly", to call on the French workers to "do their duty as citizens", and to reject the current ideas about setting up a Commune as "stupidities"<sup>3</sup>—Bakunin strongly favoured a socialist rising against either the Empire or the Republic, based on the proclamation of independent communes, the raising of a militia to fight a guerrilla war against both the Prussian army and the French state, and the establishment of the direct rule of the mass of the people.

It is of course true that Marx rallied to the Paris Commune after it rose, and wrote his brave and brilliant defence of it after it fell; but it is also true that this admirable stand represented a considerable shift in his position and indeed led to a substantial change in the theory of revolution which he and Engels had been developing for twenty-five years, ever since the *Communist Manifesto*—a change which they themselves recognised when they brought out a new edition of the *Manifesto* the following year,<sup>4</sup> and which Bakunin pointed out at the same time.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, Bakunin's support of the Paris Commune grew naturally out of his attitude throughout the crisis, and indeed during the whole

of his career over the same period of twenty-five years. Jean Maitron, the historian of the French anarchist movement, has summed up the difference between these two attitudes by saying that Bakunin "judged with his heart, Marx with his head".<sup>6</sup> But the truth is surely the exact opposite of this. Arthur Lehning, the editor of the Bakunin Archives, speaking recently at a Colloquium on "The Paris Commune and Its Place in Social Thought", argued that Bakunin's view of the Commune was part of the line he was advocating consistently throughout 1870-1871, and that this line was in fact intellectually and emotionally correct—whereas it was Marx, hostile to the Commune until it actually appeared, who was convinced by his heart and then used his head to justify his change of feeling.<sup>7</sup>

Bakunin indeed did more than merely advocate a rising in France—he took part in one. In 1870 he was living at Locarno in Italian Switzerland, but he was in close touch with his friends in France, especially in the south, and when the Empire fell at the beginning of September he quickly moved there. He left Locarno on September 9 and arrived in Lyon on September 15, playing a leading part in the socialist attempt to over-



throw the bourgeois regime which had been set up there on September 4. The socialists formed a Committee for the Safety of France, which drew up a proclamation abolishing the state on September 24, issued it on September 25, and actually managed to seize power for a day on September 28; but the governmental forces quickly drove them out and restored "order" before they could set up a revolutionary commune. Bakunin was arrested but soon released, and managed to escape to Marseille and then a month later to Genoa and so back to Locarno.<sup>8</sup> (A week after he left Marseille, the rising of October 31 established a revolutionary commune there for a few days; it is important to realise that the Paris Commune of March-May 1871 was the culmination of a movement lasting for a long time and spreading over a wide area—and after the establishment of the Paris Commune there were further risings in many places in France, including both Lyon and Marseille.)

This tragi-comic experience dashed Bakunin's hopes about the revolutionary prospects in France, and he lost the optimism expressed in his *Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis*, written during August and September 1870 and published in September 1870.<sup>9</sup> But his enthusiasm naturally returned with the appearance of the Paris Commune in March 1871. The Jura Federation of the International, which included his closest political allies, sent a messenger to Paris at the beginning of the rising, but they—like everyone else outside the besieged city—were only able to watch events from outside. Bakunin—like Marx—quickly realised the significance of what was happening there, and—like Marx again—he had some associates among the leaders of the Commune: Varlin, Malon, the Reclus brothers, and so on. In April he moved to Sonvilier in the Jura to be closer to France and among his friends. During the first half of May, while the Commune still survived, he delivered three speeches to the St. Imier workers who belonged to the central section of the Courtelary district of the Jura Federation, in which he first made public his general deductions from the Paris Commune.<sup>10</sup>

After the fall of the Commune he returned to Locarno, and there, from June 5 to June 23, he wrote the unfinished essay which is known as "The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State", and which is his main statement about the implications of the Commune. In July and August, after Mazzini's violent attacks on the Commune and the International in Italy, Bakunin wrote vigorous replies which had a remarkable effect, beginning the destruction of Mazzini's long-standing

influence in the Italian revolutionary movement and the establishment of Bakunin's influence in its place.<sup>11</sup>

Bakunin's essay on the Commune, which was found among his papers after his death, was called by him "Préambule pour la seconde livraison de *L'Empire Knouto-Germanique*"; thus it was designed to open the second part of his great attack on the Russian and German regimes, the first part of which was written at the end of 1870 and published in May 1871.<sup>12</sup> But the second part of the book, like most of his works, survived only in fragmentary form; another section of it which has frequently appeared separately is the unfinished essay well known as "God and the State", which was written at the beginning of 1871 and first published in 1882.<sup>13</sup>

The first part of the Commune essay was first published (in the original French) by Elisée Reclus in the last issue of *Le Travailleur* (Vol. 2, No. 4, April/May 1878), the "revolutionary socialist"—i.e. Bakunist—paper produced by French and

Russian exiles in Geneva from May 1877 to April 1878. Reclus gave it the title "*La Commune de Paris et la notion de l'état*", which it has retained ever since. The whole essay was first published by Bernard Lazare in *Entretiens politiques et littéraires* (Vol. 5, No. 29, 1892), and it appeared as a separate pamphlet with a preface by Peter Kropotkin in 1899.<sup>14</sup> It was included in the collection of Bakunin's works published in France,<sup>15</sup> and also in those later published in Russia, Germany, and Argentina. It has recently been reprinted in Daniel Guérin's anarchist anthology, *Ni dieu ni maître* (1965; 1969; paperback edition 1970).

The essay has never been published in a full English translation until the present edition, which is part of a project organised by the Centre International de Recherches sur l'Anarchisme, involving a new edition of the essay published simultaneously in Switzerland, Belgium, and France.<sup>16</sup> The essay has been translated by Geoff Charlton, and edited by Nicolas Walter.

<sup>1</sup>*The Civil War in France* is included in all collections and (at least in part) in most selections of Marx's works. It is also available separately, the most useful English-language editions being those which include the two previous addresses on the Franco-Prussian War and the two drafts of the final address—*The Civil War in France* (Peking, 1966); *On the Paris Commune* (Moscow, 1971).

<sup>2</sup>Bakunin's essay plays no part in either of the two standard English-language studies of Bakunin—E. H. Carr: *Michael Bakunin* (1937) and Eugene Pyziur: *The Doctrine of Anarchism of Michael A. Bakunin* (1955)—or in either of the two standard English-language studies of anarchism in general—George Woodcock: *Anarchism* (1962) and James Joll: *The Anarchists* (1964)—though it is taken into account in Daniel Guérin: *Anarchism* (English translation, 1970) and George Lichtheim: *A Short History of Socialism* (1970); the only English-language book on the Paris Commune which takes it at all seriously is E. S. Mason: *The Paris Commune* (1930).

<sup>3</sup>*Second Address . . . on the Franco-Prussian War*, dated September 9, 1870; and letter to Engels, dated September 6, 1870.

<sup>4</sup>Preface, dated June 24, 1872, for the Leipzig edition of 1872: "In view of the practical experience gained . . . in the Paris Commune . . . this programme has in some details become antiquated . . . etc."

<sup>5</sup>Letter, dated October 5, 1872 (first published by Max Nettlau in *La Société Nouvelle* in July/August 1894): "Even the Marxians, all of whose ideas were contradicted by this revolution, were obliged to take off their hats to it. They went further: in opposition to their own real feelings, they proclaimed that its programme and its aims were

their own. This was a truly clownish travesty . . . etc."

<sup>6</sup>Jean Maitron: *Histoire du mouvement anarchiste en France, 1880-1914* (1951; 1955).

<sup>7</sup>The Colloquium was held at the University of Sussex on March 26-28, 1971, and the proceedings are to be published in book form later this year.

<sup>8</sup>Bakunin's activity in Lyon and Marseille is described in Max Nettlau: *Michael Bakunin* Vol. 3, Part 1 (1899) and James Guillaume: *L'Internationale* Vol. 2 (1907); the version given by E. H. Carr is a caricature.

<sup>9</sup>*Lettre à un Français sur la crise actuelle* (Geneva, 1871).

<sup>10</sup>"Trois conférences aux ouvriers du Val de Saint-Imier", first published by Max Nettlau in *La Société Nouvelle* in March and April 1895, and included in *Oeuvres* Vol. 3 (1908); relevant extracts appear in the new CIRA edition of *La Commune de Paris et la notion de l'état*.

<sup>11</sup>Bakunin's writings against Mazzini are included in *Oeuvres* Vol. 6 (1913), and have recently been collected by Arthur Lehning in *Archives Bakounine* Vol. 1, Parts 1 and 2, "Michel Bakounine et l'Italie" (1961-1963).

<sup>12</sup>*L'Empire Knouto-Germanique et la révolution sociale* Première Livraison (Geneva, 1871).

<sup>13</sup>*Dieu et l'état* (Geneva, 1882); the most useful English-language edition is that published by Dover Publications with an introduction by Paul Avrich—*God and the State* (New York, 1970).

<sup>14</sup>*La Commune de Paris et la notion de l'état* (Paris, 1899).

<sup>15</sup>*Oeuvres* Vol. 4, pp. 245-275 (Paris, 1910).

<sup>16</sup>*La Commune de Paris et la notion de l'état, suivi de Trois conférences aux ouvriers du Val de Saint-Imier* (Lausanne, Paris and Brussels, 1971).



## Centre International de Recherches sur l'Anarchisme (International Centre for Research into Anarchism)

CIRA was founded in Geneva in 1957, and has been located in Lausanne since 1964. Its aims are to collect archives and documents of the anarchist movement; to provide information to interested people, historians, and students; and to encourage research into anarchism.

CIRA's main activity is running a public lending library made up by gifts and bequests from militants and organisations, complimentary copies from publishers, purchases, etc. The collections contain several thousand books and pamphlets (mainly in French, Italian, Spanish, German, English, Portuguese, and Swedish), and a large quantity of papers and magazines, leaflets, posters, manuscripts, and archives.

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CIRA publishes a biannual bulletin containing bio-bibliographical articles, book reviews, lists of recent acquisitions, and reports of activities. The cost of the bulletin is included in the membership subscription; single copies may be obtained for 4 Swiss francs; a specimen copy will be sent on request. CIRA also publishes occasional pamphlets.

CIRA's address is Avenue de Beaumont 24, 1012 Lausanne, Switzerland (telephone 32 35 43, CCP Lausanne 10-250 69). The annual membership subscription is 10 Swiss francs (£1 sterling). There are CIRA representatives in several other West European countries. The British representative is Nicolas Walter, c/o Freedom Press, 84B Whitechapel High Street, London, E.1.

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