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Karl Marx – Friedrich Engels – Paul Lafargue, *[Critique of Bakunin's Politics]*⁴⁷

[...]

Let us deal with [Bakunin's] programme.

[...] 'With the cry of peace for the workers, liberty for all the oppressed and death to the rulers, exploiters and guardians of all kinds, we seek to destroy all states and all churches along with all their institutions and laws, religious, political, juridical, financial, police, university, economic and social, so that all these millions of poor human beings, deceived, enslaved, tormented and exploited, delivered from all their directors and benefactors, official and officious, collective and individual, may breathe at last with complete freedom.'⁴⁸

Here indeed we have revolutionary revolutionism! The first condition for the achievement of this astounding goal is to refuse to fight the existing states and governments with the means employed by ordinary revolutionaries, but on the contrary to hurl resounding, grandiloquent phrases at

⁴⁷ Extract from a text written by Karl Marx (see note 1), Friedrich Engels and Paul Lafargue [1842–1911]. Engels [1820–95] became a member of the GC in 1870, after his move from Manchester to London. He became corresponding secretary for a number of countries, and participated in the 1871 London Conference, in addition to being a delegate to The Hague Congress (1872). Lafargue, a writer, was a member of the General Council from 1866 to 1872, Corresponding Secretary for Spain from 1866 to 1869, and Spain and Portugal from 1871 to 1872, and a delegate to the Hague Congress (1872). The text, entitled *The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men's Association*, was written between April and July 1873 and published in French as a pamphlet in late August (London: A. Darson, 1873). The full original text may be found in PI, II: 383–478, and in English translation in HAGUE: 505–639.

⁴⁸ This quotation and the others that follow are taken from Bakunin's *Programme and Objectives of the Revolutionary Organisation of the International Brethren*, which also contains the articles cited, and was included as an appendix to the published pamphlet.

‘the institution of the State and that which is both its consequence and basis — i.e., private property’.

Thus it is not the Bonapartist State, the Prussian or Russian State that has to be overthrown, but an abstract state, the state as such, a state that nowhere exists. [...]

That is why the police shows so little concern over ‘the Alliance or, to put it frankly, the conspiracy’ of Citizen B.⁴⁹ against the abstract idea of the state.

The first act of the revolution, then, must be to decree the abolition of the state, as Bakunin did on 28 September in Lyons,⁵⁰ despite the fact that this abolition of the state is of necessity an authoritarian act. By the state he means all political power, revolutionary or reactionary,

‘for it matters little to us that this authority calls itself church, monarchy, constitutional state, bourgeois republic, or even revolutionary dictatorship. We detest them and we reject them all alike as infallible sources of exploitation and despotism’.

And he goes on to declare that all the revolutionaries who, on the day after the revolution, want ‘construction of a revolutionary state’ are far more dangerous than all the existing governments put together, and that ‘we, the international brethren, are the natural enemies of these revolutionaries’ because to disorganize the revolution is the first duty of the international brethren. [...]

Let us see, however, just what the consequences of the anarchist gospel are; let us suppose the state has been abolished by decree. According to Article 6, the consequences of this act will be: the bankruptcy of the state, an end to the payment of private debts by the intervention of the state, an end to the payment of all taxes and all contributions, the dissolution of the army, the magistrature, the bureaucracy, the police and the clergy (!); the abolition of official justice, accompanied by an auto-da-fé of all title-deeds and all judicial and civil junk, the confiscation of all productive capital and instruments of labour for the benefit of the workers’ associations and an alliance of these

⁴⁹ Marx’s sarcastic reference to Bakunin in this work.

⁵⁰ The people of Lyons established their own commune in early September 1870, declaring France a Republic even before the people of Paris. Bakunin tried to conform the Commune of Lyons to his anarchist principles, but failed and left France after the defeat.

associations, which 'will form the Commune'. This Commune will give individuals thus dispossessed the strict necessities of life, while granting them freedom to earn more by their own labour.

What happened at Lyons has proved that merely decreeing the abolition of the state is far from sufficient to accomplish all these fine promises. Two companies of the bourgeois National Guards proved quite sufficient, on the other hand, to shatter this splendid dream and send Bakunin hurrying back to Geneva with the miraculous decree in his pocket. Naturally he could not imagine his supporters to be so stupid that they need not be given some sort of plan of organization that would put his decree into practical effect. Here is the plan:

'For the organisation of the Commune – a federation of permanently acting barricades and the functioning of a Council of the Revolutionary Commune by the delegation of one or two deputies from each barricade, and one per street, or per block, these deputies being invested with imperative mandates and always responsible and revocable at any time' (odd barricades, these barricades of the Alliance, where instead of fighting they spend their time writing mandates). 'The Commune Council, thus organized, will be able to elect from its membership special Executive Committees for each branch of the revolutionary administration of the Commune.'

The insurgent capital, thus constituted as a Commune, then proclaims to the other communes of the country that it renounces all claim to govern them; it invites them to reorganize themselves in a revolutionary way and then to send their responsible and recallable deputies, vested with their imperative mandates, to an agreed place where they will set up a federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces and organize a revolutionary force capable of triumphing over reaction. This organization will not be confined to the communes of the insurgent country; other provinces or countries will be able to take part in it, while 'the provinces, communes, associations and individuals that side with the reaction shall be debarred from it'.

So the abolition of frontiers goes hand in hand with the most benevolent tolerance towards the reactionary provinces, which would not hesitate to resume the civil war.

Thus in this anarchistic organization of the tribune-barricades we have first the Commune Council, then the executive committees which, to be able to be anything at all, must be vested with some power and supported by a public force; this is to be followed by nothing short of a federal parliament, whose principal object will be to organize this public force. Like the Commune Council, this parliament will have to assign executive power to one or more committees which by this act alone will be given an authoritarian character that the demands of the struggle will increasingly accentuate. We are thus confronted with a perfect reconstruction of all the elements of the 'authoritarian State'; and the fact that we call this machine a 'revolutionary Commune organised from bottom to top,' makes little difference. The name changes nothing of the substance; organization from bottom to top exists in any bourgeois republic and imperative mandates date from the Middle Ages. Indeed Bakunin himself admits as much when (in Article 8) he describes his organization as a 'new revolutionary State'. [...]

Now we shall reveal the secret of all the Alliance's double and triple-bottomed boxes. To make sure that the orthodox programme is adhered to and that anarchy behaves itself properly,

'it is necessary that in the midst of popular anarchy, which will constitute the very life and energy of the revolution, unity of revolutionary idea and action should find an organ. This organ must be the secret and world association of the international brethren. This association proceeds from the conviction that revolutions are never made either by individuals or by secret societies. They come about, as it were, of their own accord, produced by the force of things, by the course of events and facts. They are prepared over a long time deep in the instinctive consciousness of the popular masses, and then they flare up.... All that a well-organised secret society can do is, first, to assist in the birth of the revolution by spreading among the masses ideas corresponding to their instincts, and to organise, not the army of the revolution – the army must always be the people' (cannon fodder), 'but a revolutionary General Staff composed of devoted, energetic, intelligent and above all sincere friends of the people, who are not ambitious or vain, and who are capable of serving as intermediaries between the revolutionary idea' (monopolised by them) 'and the popular instincts. The number of these individuals should not, therefore, be too large. For the international

organisation in the whole of Europe a hundred firmly and seriously united revolutionaries would be sufficient. Two or three hundred revolutionaries would be enough for the organisation of the biggest country.'

So everything changes. Anarchy, the 'unleashing of popular life', of 'evil passions' and all the rest is no longer enough. To assure the success of the revolution one must have unity of thought and action. The members of the International are trying to create this unity by propaganda, by discussion and the public organization of the proletariat. But all Bakunin needs is a secret organization of 100 people, the privileged representatives of the revolutionary idea, the general staff in the background, self-appointed and commanded by the permanent 'Citizen B'. Unity of thought and action means nothing but orthodoxy and blind obedience. *Perinde ac cadaver*.⁵¹ We are indeed confronted with a veritable Society of Jesus.

To say that the hundred international brethren must 'serve as intermediaries between the revolutionary idea and the popular instincts', is to create an unbridgeable gulf between the Alliance's revolutionary idea and the proletarian masses; it means proclaiming that these hundred guardsmen cannot be recruited anywhere but from among the privileged classes.

[...] The revolutionary movement in Lyons was just flaring up. [...] On 28 September, the day of his arrival, the people had occupied the Town Hall. Bakunin installed himself there. And then came the critical moment, moment anticipated for many years, when Bakunin could at last accomplish the most revolutionary act that the world had ever seen: he decreed the *Abolition of the State*. But the state, in the shape and form of two companies of bourgeois National Guards, made an entry through a door which had inadvertently been left unguarded, cleared the hall, and forced Bakunin to beat a hasty retreat to Geneva.

⁵¹ 'Be like unto a corpse,' used by the Jesuits to describe the unquestioning obedience required of junior members.