

Mikhail Bakunin's Post-Ideological Impulse

The Continuity Between Classical and New Anarchism

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ABSTRACT

This paper is lead by a particular question: does anarchist political theory present an unsolvable paradox? More specifically, is theory itself a constriction to the authentic social freedom which anarchism clearly supports? I explore these questions through a discussion of the thought of classical social anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. I use Bakunin's work to analyse the "new anarchist left," in an effort to understand the conscious attempt to distance anarchism from classical anarchism. I highlight the post-ideological character of Bakunin's work and anarchism's overarching skepticism of authority. Furthermore, I argue that contemporary activists can learn from the thought of Mikhail Bakunin, and that there is something to be said for recognizing the continuity of anarchist thought and activity.

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In recent years we have seen the emergence of what many are calling a new anarchism. This new anarchism is seen to be post-ideological in that it is anti-sectarian, gathering its influence from a variety of traditions. It doesn't accept a particular ideology because it sees any overarching structure as an authoritarian threat to human spontaneity and freedom. A prime example is what developed in Seattle in opposition to the WTO or, even more recently, some of the anarchist currents that are found in Occupy Wall Street. In contrast, classical anarchism is argued to be different in that it is sectarian, dogmatic, and ideologically strict. In effect, classical anarchism is dismissed as anachronistic, outdated, and irrelevant to our modern times.

I would like to argue against this unfortunate dismissal of classical anarchism by briefly exploring the classical social anarchist Mikhail Bakunin's post-ideological theories, which highlight his relevance to the anarchist currents in today's social movement activity. However, I would first like to spell out what I mean by post-ideological. From there, I would like to delineate the supposed difference between new anarchism and classical anarchism before moving on to what I see as Bakunin's relevance to contemporary anarchist movements as understood in this post-ideological framework.

WHAT EXACTLY IS POST-IDEOLOGICAL ANARCHISM?

David Neal, in "Anarchism: Ideology or Methodology," makes a clear distinction between two tendencies in anarchist activity, helping us understand this post-ideological inclination. In this paper, Neal attempts to make a distinction between anarchism as an ideology and anarchism as a methodology. For Neal, an ideology consists of a "consistent set of ideas based on a core principle" (Neal 1997). In this sense, an ideological anarchist, whom Neal refers to as "big A anarchists," stresses the

adherence to a strict set of principles which guide true anarchist action. He writes,

The [big A] Anarchist stresses ideological conformity as the prerequisite for social revolution—in other words, you swallow A, B, and C doctrines and THEN you are an Anarchist. Their plan of action revolves around: 1) creating a central Anarchist organization; 2) educating (e.g., indoctrinating) the working class as to the tenets of Anarchism; 3) thereby building a mass movement; 4) creating a social revolution. The Anarchist is comfortable with the idea of a manifesto, platform, or other guiding doctrine as the means of “spreading the gospel”—their emphasis is unity in thought and action, and ideological conformity as the basis for effective organization.” (Neal 1997)

For Neal, these “big A anarchists” threaten the anti-authoritarian and spontaneous elements of anarchism by basing their understanding of anarchism on a fixed set of standards. Rather than allowing anarchism to develop from voluntary association based upon common need and outside of over-arching authority, ideological anarchists promote an adherence to a particular abstract anarchist program, one that requires a certain amount of authority to maintain.

For Neal, “big A anarchism” differs from “little a anarchism” or what he calls methodological anarchism precisely because “little a anarchism” is carried out through voluntary associations based upon common needs. It doesn't adhere to fixed ideological structures or preconceptions about what anarchism is specifically, it is based upon a more open form of anarchism. In this sense, anarchism isn't a strict future theory to which we are to adhere, it is a way of embodying particular ideals of mutual aid, voluntary cooperation, and direct action. This means that we can use anarchism methodologically without even knowing or agreeing upon what anarchism really is. “Little a anarchism” rejects central anarchist

organizations as instruments of authority that squash human freedom. It sees itself as a loose conglomeration of a variety of anarchist-inspired currents, actions, and ideas. “Little a anarchism” can be said to reject abstract ideological structures that shape and guide human behavior in a particular direction. It relies upon a free humanity, which acts voluntarily according to needs. Neal argues:

My main objection to ideological anarchism is that it depends not on free-thinking and direct action, but on obedience, passivity, and conformity, to an externality—either a manifesto, a platform, or other mechanisms of control. Further, it focuses on a top-down, centralized organization as a means of bringing anarchism from the center outward. (Neal 1997)

For Neal, “little a anarchism” is an anarchism that rejects obedience to strict dogmatic social theory, and which instead develops itself through free, spontaneous action.

The difference in approach is reflected in different attitudes towards anarchist history and practice. “Big A anarchists” fear that the rejection of ideological commitment leads to a rejection of the history of anarchist thought, at least in terms of admitting its usefulness. The repercussions are division and the serious splintering of continuity in anarchist thought and action. “Little a anarchists” treat the lack of ideological commitment in the new generation of activists as beneficial and the formal commitment to anarchism's past as constraining. From this perspective, the rich history of anarchism has no strategic relevance to contemporary struggles.

WHERE ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CLASSICAL AND NEW ANARCHISM?

“Little a anarchism” is a major component in the makeup of what is being called new anarchism. The claim is that it represents a shift away from the more dogmatic anar-

chism of the mid 20th century and anarchist currents within the old left. David Graeber explains this shift:

At the moment, there's something of a rupture between generations of anarchism: between those whose political formation took place in the 60's and 70's—and who often still have not shaken the sectarian habits of the last century—or simply still operate in those terms, and younger activists much more informed, among other elements, by indigenous, feminist, ecological and cultural-critical ideas. The former organize mainly through highly visible Anarchist Federations like the IWA, NEFAC, or IWW. The latter work most prominently in the networks of the global social movements, networks like Peoples Global Action, which unites anarchist collectives in Europe and elsewhere with groups ranging from Maori activists in New Zealand The latter—what might be loosely referred to as the "small-a anarchists," are by now the far majority. But it is sometimes hard to tell, since so many of them do not trumpet their affinities very loudly. There are many, in fact, who take anarchist principles of anti-sectarianism and open-endedness so seriously that they refuse to refer to themselves as anarchists for that very reason. (Graeber 2002, 3)

Graeber's view captures another aspect of the post-ideological tendency. And it chimes in with contemporary critiques of classical anarchists such as Mikhail Bakunin and the idea that the political and theoretical battles that these anarchists waged belong to the past. Barbara Epstein writes,

The anarchist mindset of today's young activists has relatively little to do with the theoretical debates between anarchists and Marxists, most of which took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has more to do with an egalitarian and anti-authoritarian perspective.

There are versions of anarchism that are deeply individualistic and incompatible with socialism. But these are not the forms of anarchism that hold sway in radical activist circles, which have more in common with the libertarian socialism advocated by Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn than with the writings of Bakunin or Kropotkin. Today's anarchist activists draw upon a current of morally charged and expressive politics. (Epstein 2001)

In a similar vein, Purkis and Bowen write,

Anarchist theory works on a number of different levels. Because it proposes radical changes in society, it is essentially idealistic. However, on another level, it is firmly rooted in the here and now with regard to practical examples of people on all sides actively undermining power and authority, sometimes in weird and wonderful ways. The terrains of theory and action have changed, and now there are generations of activists operating in many fields of protest for whom the works of Kropotkin, Malatesta, and Bakunin are as distant in terms of their description of the world as the literary classics of writers such as Charles Dickens. (Purkis and Bowen 1997, 2)

The consensus seems to be that new anarchists have next to nothing to learn from classical anarchism and that they have little in common with classical anarchism. In my view, the conscious effort to ignore or distance contemporary anarchism from the classical anarchism of the 19th century is a mistake.

To show why, I will probe a few staple questions about Bakunin, since he is undoubtedly an important figure in the historical canon that post-ideological anarchism rejects: Can we call Bakunin's thought ideologically dogmatic? Does he adhere to strict revolutionary principles that must guide revolutionary activity? Does

Bakunin promote a fixed organization of society, which should be implemented as a formal ideology? The logic of “little a anarchism” is that the answer to these questions is “yes.” I will argue that the answer is emphatically “no.” I’d like to examine Bakunin’s writings on science, authority, and spontaneity to illustrate why this is the case. To make the argument, I will be using texts that are easily available to ordinary readers and not restricted to specialists.

BAKUNIN AS A POST-IDEOLOGICAL THINKER

Bakunin looked at abstract ideas, particularly regarding humanity and human society, with a critical eye. Bakunin recognized that oppression and domination within the material world were most often carried out through some sort of abstract principles understood to be above humanity. This was because Bakunin, not unlike his modern day fellow anarchists, understood that to shape human action according to abstract principles was to stifle the voluntary and spontaneous associations that he held so dear. It was in essence a restriction of human freedom. Bakunin writes,

Until now all human history has been only a perpetual and bloody immolation of millions of poor human beings in honor of some pitiless abstraction—god, country, power of state, national honor, historical rights, judicial rights, political liberty, public welfare. (Bakunin 1970, 59)

Bakunin understood that imposing abstract ideas on human behaviors was a constraint. Abstractions developed as expressions of particular interests and they resulted in domination. In particular, he recognized that they were rooted in conventional sources of power such as god and the state. However, he took this critique further by looking at the ways in which science was used as an analytical tool to understand the material world. He argued that science was a product of the human mind, and in consequence was subjectively

restricted. Science could only grasp general ideas from the endless amount of specifics, and thus was incapable of understanding the individual experience of every human life:

. . . human thought, and in consequence of this, science can grasp and name only the general significance of real facts, their relations, their laws—in short, that which is permanent in their continual transformations—but never their material, individual side, palpitating, so to speak, with reality and life, and therefore fugitive and intangible. (Bakunin 1970, 54)

Bakunin stressed the importance of spontaneous initiative in human interaction. For him, this spontaneity was something that couldn't be predicted, or couldn't be solidified into strict scientific formulas. Science worked from human thought, and was therefore capable of only understanding general ideas, but not the diversity and unpredictability of reality itself.

Recognizing this inherent flaw in science, Bakunin argued that maintaining spontaneous and free social life was more important than allowing it to be led by scientific theory. To guide action with science was to overlook its flaws and therefore threaten life with theoretical authority. He writes, "Life . . . alone spontaneously creates real things and beings. Science creates nothing; it establishes and recognizes only the creations of life" (Bakunin 1970, 55). For Bakunin, the material reality of human existence—including its diversity, spontaneity, aspirations, and overall freedom—was the real developmental force of human life. Science itself created nothing.

Bakunin's critique of science as an abstraction reflects his commitment to human freedom and spontaneity. For Bakunin, freedom existed in the unrestricted decision-making power that individuals exercised over their own lives, springing directly from their own consciousness. This meant that humans were truly free

insofar as they could make decisions without any external coercion. Bakunin writes,

I am a fanatical lover of liberty. I consider it the only environment in which human intelligence, dignity, happiness, can thrive and develop. I do not mean that formal liberty which is dispensed, measured out, and regulated by the State; for this is a perennial lie and represents nothing but the privilege of a few, based upon the servitude of the remainder. Nor do I mean that individualist, egoist, base, and fraudulent liberty extolled by the school of Jean Jacques Rousseau and every other school of bourgeois liberalism, which considers the rights of all, represented by the state, as a limit for the rights of each; it always, necessarily, ends up by reducing the rights of the individuals to zero. (Bakunin [1993] 2002, 261)

For Bakunin, freedom relied upon individual initiative, either developed from the individual consciousness itself, or freely accepted by the individual. Any restriction upon this threatened freedom and liberty and thus created an environment where domination would flourish.

Bakunin understood that individual freedom and liberty coincided with a society based upon mutual aid, voluntary association, and social freedom. He argued that only within society, and only through social cooperation, could human liberty and freedom be fully developed:

Man completely realizes his individual freedom as well as his personality only through the individuals who surround him and thanks only to the labor and the collective power of society. Without society he would surely remain the most stupid and the most miserable among all the ferocious beasts . . . society far from decreasing his freedom, on the contrary creates the individual

freedom of all human beings. (Bakunin [1993] 2002, 271)

Bakunin recognized that free cooperation and social interaction amongst one another was necessary if humans were to develop to their full potential. It was only through social life that humanity could develop a consciousness of the world and produce the material required to survive in it.

Bakunin saw cooperation and mutual aid as synonymous with individual freedom, and as an essential component for human survival. He also believed that human beings would cooperate with one another freely and spontaneously because this was a “natural law,” or essential to their existence. Without this free cooperation, human beings couldn’t survive, let alone develop themselves. He writes,

In human society, as in nature, every being lives only by the supreme principle of the most positive intervention in the existence of every other being. The character and extent of this intervention depend upon the nature of the individual. To abolish this mutual intervention would mean death. And when we demand the freedom of the masses, we do not even dream of obliterating any of the natural influences that any individual or group of individuals exercise upon each other. We want only the abolition of artificial, privileged, legal, and official impositions. (Bakunin [1993] 2002, 257)

For Bakunin, it was a mistake to think that individual interests resulted in competition or antagonism. Instead, this idea was an abstraction imposed by authorities—the church and state—used to structure social life for the benefit of particular interests. Bakunin argued that it was important, then, to seek out and destroy these abstractions, which otherwise hindered the spontaneous functioning of social life. This was the role he gave to theory and its purpose was investigative.

Bakunin's critique of science can be applied to an understanding of ideology. He understood the importance of spontaneous life over any sort of pre-developed theoretical framework. Although not specifically addressing social or political theory, Bakunin's skepticism about the explanatory role of theory is captured in his comments on science:

It would be sad for mankind if at any time theoretical speculation became the only source of guidance for society, if science alone were in charge of social administration. Life would wither, and human society would turn into a voiceless and servile herd. The domination of life by science can have no other result than the brutalization of mankind. . . . In opposition to the metaphysicians, the positivists, and all worshippers of science, we declare that natural and social life must always come before theory, which is only one of its manifestations but never its creator. From out of its own exhaustible depths, society develops through a series of events, but not by thought alone. Theory is always created by life, but never creates it. (Bakunin [1993] 2002, 327)

Bakunin's critique of science and the role gave to theory brings his work closer to post-ideological or "little a anarchism" than the critics admit. He understood that spontaneous life, when not interfered with by authoritarian ideologies, would function in a manner that was beneficial both to the individual and the society as a whole. Bakunin used theory not as a tool to guide human life, but to uncover the manifestations of authority and power that hindered this spontaneity. He understood that theory could be an emancipatory agent when defining particular ideologies that threatened human freedom. Theory wasn't to be used as ideology, but to identify and repel ideological authority.

Consistent with his understanding of freedom and ideological authority, Bakunin recognized the need to

create organizations that were based upon free association and were carried out from the bottom up. For Bakunin, if organizations were based upon top-down hierarchy, then they would inevitably threaten the spontaneous and free development of the individuals who made up the organization. The goal for Bakunin was to create forms of organization that did away with authoritarian principles, and were based most importantly on freedom and autonomy. He writes,

The political and economic organization of social life must not, as present, be directed from the summit to the base—the center to the circumference—imposing unity through forced centralization. On the contrary, it must be reorganized to issue from the base to the summit—from the circumference to the center—according to principles of free association and federation. (Bakunin [1993] 2002, 77)

Bakunin clearly recognized the need to eliminate structures of organization that were based upon authority. He saw these authoritarian principles to be inherent in organizations that were structured vertically, where decision-making power was cast from the top, down. The organization of social life developed from spontaneous social interaction based upon common need. It was not to be decided upon from outside social life, and then implemented in some sort of pre-determined fashion.

Consistent with his skepticism about ideological authority, Bakunin considered what a future society based on principles of voluntary association, mutual aid, and spontaneous organization might look like. In doing so, his intention was not to develop an authoritarian ideology, but to use theory in order to repel ideologies that might interfere with the natural functioning of social interactions. Bakunin even checked himself when developing such ideas:

It is impossible to determine a concrete, universal, and obligatory norm for the internal development and political organization of every nation. The life of each nation is subordinated to a plethora of different historical, geographical, and economic conditions, making it impossible to establish a model of organization equally valid for all. Any such attempt would be absolutely impractical. It would smother the richness and spontaneity of life which flourishes only in infinite diversity and, what is more, contradict the most fundamental principles of freedom. (Bakunin [1993] 2002, 77)

Bakunin understood that the role of theory was not to push general ideological frameworks onto human life. This ran counter to the free, spontaneous, and voluntary society that he supported. At the same time, however, he recognized that there was a need to experiment with forms of societal organization and to think about the ways in which voluntary and free association might be supported and enabled to flourish.

Bakunin looked to the basic tenets of federalism to develop his ideas. For Bakunin, federal organizations would be needed immediately following the social and political revolution to meet human needs. He thought of federalism as a form of organization; in economic terms, as units of production. Yet the federal system was not a fixed framework to be applied everywhere. Rather, it was a thought experiment designed to show that society could be organized to support free association and mutual aid.

For Bakunin the basic unit of political organization was the commune and he imagined that communes would co-operate on the basis of voluntary association in order to meet collective needs. In association, communes would remain autonomous and free in their functioning and decision-making. He writes, "all organizations must proceed by the way of federation from the base to the summit, from the commune to the coordinating association of the country or nation" (Bakunin [1993]

2002, 83). There would be no overarching authority to restrict the free development of each commune.

Another example of Bakunin's thoughts on organizational structure is how he compared and contrasted the International Workingman's Association with the state. This again illuminates Bakunin's use of theory in a post-ideological manner. Bakunin is using theory to highlight the authoritarian elements within the state, and compare it to what he saw as a voluntary organization (the International Workingman's Association). His thoughts weren't to promote a particular ideology. Rather, they were to critique an existing one (the state) and to exemplify a free association that came about through voluntary association and not through force (the International).

For Bakunin, the International Workingmen's Association was an example of the sort of organization he imagined. This had emerged from the material conditions of the workers' lives within capitalism and it was an attempt to unite a variety of different factions of the left and labor organizations. It has developed through their struggles, not from abstract principles. Bakunin writes,

The International Workingmen's Association did not spring ready-made out of the minds of the few erudite theoreticians. It developed out of actual economic necessity, out of the bitter tribulations the workers were forced to endure and the natural impact of these trials upon them minds of the toilers. (Bakunin [1993] 2002, 252)

The International exemplified the type of voluntary cooperation that was essential to his anarchism and the common impulse for liberty that he believed to be natural. It was qualitatively different from the organization of the state:

. . . for the essential difference between the organized action of the International and the action of all the states is that the International is not vested

with any official authority of political power whatsoever. It will always be the natural organization of action of a greater or lesser number of individuals. . . . Governments, by contrast, impose themselves upon the masses and force them to obey their decrees, without for the most part taking into consideration their feelings, their needs, and their will. (Bakunin [1993] 2002, 256)

Because the International was formed voluntarily around common aspirations, Bakunin argued that it was able to elaborate its own political program. In his view, there was no question of developing its own political ideology. The political program was fleshed out directly in the debates of the International. Any attempt to formalize this program in a political theory was an attack on spontaneity. For Bakunin the rejection of theory, in this sense, was the International's essential strength:

No political or philosophical theory should be considered a fundamental principle, or be introduced into the official program of the International. Nor should acceptance of any political or philosophical theory be obligatory as a condition for membership, since as we have seen, to impose any such theory upon the federations composing the International would be slavery, or it would result in division and dissolution, which is no less disastrous. But it does not follow from this that free discussion of all political and philosophical theories cannot occur in the International. On the contrary, it is precisely the very existence of an official theory that will kill such discussion by rendering it absolutely useless instead of living and vital, and by inhibiting the expression and development of the worker's own feelings and ideas. (Bakunin [1993] 2002, 302)

Bakunin's ideas about on authority and spontaneity in his discussion of science, and his analysis of organ-

izational structures provide the answers to the questions posed at the start of this essay. Does Bakunin's philosophy promote a particular ideological framework, which should be replicated in human society? Is Bakunin's thought sectarian, dogmatic, or ideologically strict? Most importantly, does Bakunin's thought authoritatively push abstract principles onto the living diversity of human life? As I have shown, Bakunin was aware of the dangers of ideology taking the form of authority within society. He used his theory as a tool to uncover and dismantle ideologies that restricted the free social interaction of human existence. His intention was not to direct human life, but to explore how we could stop human life from being directed. Bakunin advanced anarchist theory to counteract the dangers authoritative compliance that seemed inherent in conventional theorizing; he was writing in a post-ideological manner.

CONCLUSION

Although Bakunin was clearly alert to the dangers of ideology, he straddled the division between the "big A" and "little a" anarchists outlined above. On one hand, there is a highly recognizable post-ideological tint to his work. On the other hand, Bakunin searched desperately for a unified international movement that would undermine the existing bourgeois and state directed order. This is where Bakunin is most important for contemporary anarchist activists and theorists. He imagined an international revolution, a destruction of the old order that would release creative processes of free initiative and direct democracy and the construction of new free societies.

Reading Bakunin, we are given an insight into how we might strengthen our post-ideological social movements, using theory, not jettisoning it. By recognizing the dangers of theorizing, Bakunin proposed a way to engage theory without restricting spontaneous social life. It seems that to ignore his work is to refuse an avenue that leads toward a form of structure without

authority, or a method in which to engage theory without the effects of domination.

In what ways, then, is reading Bakunin helpful, and why am I even concerned with the dismissal or neglect of Mikhail Bakunin? I think Bakunin offers us a way to use theory as a critical lens to spell out and combat authoritarian structures. Drawing on Bakunin does not threaten to stifle our anti-authoritarian social movements, but to clarify the purposes of our struggles and identify our enemies. Contemporary anarchist activists can read Bakunin fruitfully to think about what's at stake when we struggle without a clear idea of the obstacles to transformation and when we engage in theorizing that stifles revolutionary practice.

This engagement with Bakunin points to a larger project of recognizing the continuity of anarchism as a body of thought and practice. It is quite often we hear of the diversity and inconsistency of anarchism. This is clearly the case and I don't wish to deny it. However, it is important to highlight consistencies in anarchist activity that self-identifies as anarchistic, particularly in regards to a libertarian socialist project, because these have played the most prominent role in the history of anarchist activity. Exploring this continuity isn't a project of reification, where we must somehow apply or implement classical anarchist ideas into today's movements. It is to celebrate a rich, still vibrant history of anarchism, one that bears scars of sectarianism and hallmarks of diversity, and which holds the hope of realizing a world free of domination and exploitation. Exploring the continuities of classical anarchist thought isn't to fall into the jaws of authority, but to remind ourselves of our past battles, to identify our past mistakes, and to ultimately learn from our complex history. To understand who we are, we must understand who came before us, and a look at classical anarchism might just help do that.

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