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## An anarchist guide to ... Bakunin

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**Y**ou told the Tsar, Bakunin, that you understood that there was no contradiction between the severity of law and love for mankind and that love for mankind does not rule out severe execution of the laws.

2 But you also said that the strict execution of law, for the sake of mankind, is a form of dictatorship and that human beings must rebel against it.

3 At the same time you also recognised that Christianity is not just about discipline but also about love.\*

4 Should humans rebel against this, too?

**L**et's suppose that churchmen in centuries past immersed themselves in Biblical study, just as you sank yourself into German metaphysics, and that they became obsessed with systems of punishment and rules of conduct.

2 Let's agree that churchmen, like philosophers and scientists, are prone to become so convinced of the rightness of their own systems that they mistakenly come to believe that general well-being depends on their acceptance.

3 I've had reason to question several of those who put themselves at the head of various churches ...

4 But what of your own cause?

5 You've said that your acquaintance with religious rituals and dogmas convinced you of the vanity and insignificance of all church teachings, that you looked for inspiration but found only rote-learning, that you searched for a cause but found only conformity.

6 Didn't socialism then absorb you like a new religion?

7 You described it as a force for renewal and a revitalising movement.†

8 The negativity of your brand of socialism is difficult to fathom, however.

9 How can the passion for destruction, as you put it, also be a creative passion?‡

10 You attacked poverty and injustice. 11 You railed against the decrepitude, weakness and depravity of the social systems that humans had created.

12 You decried the heartlessness of the privileged classes, and the poverty of their culture.

13 You condemned their faithlessness as the egotism and habit of social advantage masquerading as a right and a calling.

14 You championed the rude, unenlightened people, who they denigrated as the mob.

15 You saw that they were impoverished, but also somehow believed them to be powerful.

16 You saw energy in their menace, in their ability to strike terror in the heart of the privileged.§

\* Me too. Proudhon's express desire not to establish a new church was one of the things that first impressed me about him.

† -yes, socialism as anti-theologism, anti-statism: God and the state are my points of departure.

‡ Negation is the dynamic of history! Take matter and animality as basic principles of life, and it becomes clear that the material world can only change and develop through its negation that is, in the ideal, in humanisation and emancipation! That's what the German metaphysicians failed to understand. Like the holy men they began with the ideal, the perfect, the eternal and the divine, and then wrestled with the collapse into the dirty, imperfect material world. That's why Hegel's idealism had to be turned on its head and why the fictive principle of mediation or reconciliation or transcendence in history, the only mechanism that philosophers had to explain the process of recovery, had to be challenged. Anything new in history comes through the deliberate destruction of the old and the rebuilding of the new. Proudhon understood this, well: 'in demolishing we shall build', he said. Kropotkin's inversion, 'in building we shall demolish', plays with the same idea, although gives it a different spin. You probably know that I described socialism in my confession to the Tsar as a natural, necessary, inevitable result of the economic and political development of western Europe. But I also said that it was also an elemental force summoned to completely destroy western states. Not at first aware of its destructive power, socialism was undermined by German Caesarism – underwritten by an idea of change based on the progressive development of antagonistic forces: a materialist version of the old doctrines. Marx understood my view correctly: the foundation of my social revolution is will, not economic conditions. And that was one of the main differences between us.

§ Yes, I admit to a lot of quixoticism. I felt it my duty to rebel against oppression no matter what its cause or who it affected. But I didn't just discuss the symptoms of inequality or the energy that I hoped it would release in urban and rural workers and amongst the underclass. I also wrote about the institutionalisation of privilege and the distinction between citizens and slaves. Who could doubt that social life was defined by the antagonism between the political and the privileged classes, between those who owned land and capital and/or who had access to bourgeois education, on the one hand and the disinherited, denied all these things, on the other? Everyone happily admitted that social life in ancient times was based on a division between citizens and slaves but pretended that the French Revolution marked a watershed that smashed the classical model. Modern politics was the same system perpetuated: the political classes were not slaves in law, as they had been in ancient civilisations, but were slaves in fact. They were forced to work for the privileged and forced to do their bidding.

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**Y**ou told the Tsar that you wanted to institute a republic.

2 You said that this would not be a parliamentary regime - an elected aristocracy - that it would not take a constitutional form or institute representative systems.

3 You rejected the balance of powers, which liberals defended as a bulwark against tyranny.

4 This principle of division was just a Machiavellian trick, you said, designed to immobilise all the forces active in society.

5 You rejected the idea of a social contract, too...\*

**Y**our solution was purile and offensive.

2 The quip about having to abolish me - as if I didn't exist! - is a crowd-pleaser but it's difficult to see how the call for an atheist republic resolves the injustices you attack.

3 How can the faithlessness of the privileged classes be cured by the abandonment of faith?†

**Y**ou did not want to abolish me. You wanted to become me.‡

2 You could never admit it, but all you really wanted was a return to Eden.§

\* Correct. Rousseau's idea was not much different to Hobbes's - both different versions of the fall. Rousseau imagined an anti-social society, peopled by beings living in isolation who destroyed each other's freedom when forced to live in society. And he created the state because he failed to see the naturalness of society. The protections it offered were like the consolations tendered by the holy men who had previously placed us in the care of Kaisers, Tsars and Emperors. The social contract promised to restrict individual liberty only in order to deliver it universally. This was a promise of security and the relinquishment of liberty, because with contract and the state come the determination of morality and justice and the abdication of reason to law.

† What I said about the necessity of abolishing God was no more a quip than Voltaire's dictum about the necessity of invention. Those who profess this view are the oppressors and exploiters, the monarchs, bankers, police, jailers and officials of all sorts, who have most to fear from its denial and negation. I attacked political republicans who attacked the church authorities and conspired to overthrow the existing rulers but who aimed only at changing the content of the laws and the means of their enforcement - the refashioning the state. These atheists renounced organised religion but remained wedded to religious ideas. They were nothing but willing slaves! Devoted to the state, always ready to sacrifice liberty in its name they insisted that everyone else was duty-bound to do the same. Atheism is not measured by attacks against the outward manifestations of religious power, or the corruptions of religious institutions, however grotesque these happen to be. Atheism denies the idea of the divine that reinforces the conception of the world's imperfections, compared to the perfection of the world-to-come, and the baseness of humanity compared to the beauty of the eternal. The cure for faithlessness is not the abandonment of faith but its rediscovery and relocation in humanity, in ourselves. Atheism is freethinking; the refusal of obedience and the rejection of slavishness; the denial of free will for the assertion of liberty!

‡ Nearly. I thought it was possible for mortals to live like gods by deciding what was good and evil for themselves. That's why I compared Adam and Eve to gorillas: omnivorous, intelligent and ferocious beasts equipped with the power to think and the desire to rebel. I rejected what the holy men said about the fall from grace and Satan's deception. Their disobedience was the reclamation of freedom otherwise stifled by care.

§ No. As I told the Tsar, I wanted to be free in the freedom of others, to look for my happiness in the happiness of others - this was my faith - and it means respecting the humanity of others even while fighting against repugnant and annoying people. In the state, the same is done in our name, for others' benefit and at our cost.