



To The Comrades Of The International Workingmen's Association Of Locle And Chaux-De-Fonds

Michail Bakunin

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First Letter

Friends and Brothers,

I feel the need, before leaving your mountains, to express to you once again in writing my profound gratitude for the fraternal reception you have accorded me. Is it not a wonderful thing that a man, a Russian, a one-time noble, completely unknown to you when he arrived here, found himself surrounded by hundreds of friends almost the very moment that he set foot in your country? Such miracles no longer happen these days, except at the hands of the International Workingmen's Association, and that for one simple reason: the International alone represents today the historical life, the creative power of the social and political future. Those who are united by a living body of thought, by a will and a great passion held in common, are truly brothers, even if they do not realize it themselves.

There was a time when the bourgeoisie, endowed with the same power of life and exclusively constituting the historical class, offered the same spectacle of fraternity and union, in its acts as well as its thoughts. It was the finest hour of this class, ever respectable to be sure, but since that time impotent, stupid and sterile; it was the epoch of its most energetic development. Such was the case before the great revolution of 1793; such was still the case, although to a much lesser degree, before the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. In those days the bourgeoisie had a world to conquer, a place to take up in society, and, organized for battle, intelligent, audacious, feeling itself strong because it bore the principle of right for everyone, it was endowed with an irresistible omnipotence. It alone made three revolutions against the monarchy, the nobility and the clergy united.

In this epoch the bourgeoisie too had created an international association, a universal and formidable one, Freemasonry. It would be a substantial error to judge the Freemasonry of the last century, or even that of the first part of the present century, by what it is today. The bourgeois institution par excellence, Freemasonry, in its devel-

opment, in its growing power at first and later in its decadence, represented in a way the development, power and moral and intellectual decadence of the bourgeoisie. Today, fallen to the sad position of a senile old intriguer, it is a useless, sometimes malevolent and always ridiculous nullity, whereas, before 1830 and especially before 1793, having gathered together at its core, with very few exceptions, all the minds of the elite, the most ardent hearts, the proudest spirits, the most audacious personalities, it had constituted an active, powerful, and truly beneficial institution. It was the energetic incarnation and implementation of the humanitarian ideal of the eighteenth century. All those great principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, of reason and human justice, elaborated theoretically at first by the philosophy of that century, became in the hands of the Freemasons practical dogmas and the foundations of a new moral and political program, the soul of a gigantic enterprise of demolition and reconstruction. In that epoch, Freemasonry was nothing less than the universal conspiracy of the revolutionary bourgeoisie against the feudal, monarchical and divine tyranny. It was the International of the bourgeoisie.

It is known that all the principal actors of the first revolution were Freemasons, and that when this revolution broke out it was able to find, thanks to Freemasonry, friends and devoted and powerful collaborators in all other countries, a fact that was assuredly of great help in its victories. But it is equally clear that the triumph of the revolution killed Freemasonry, for once the revolution had largely fulfilled the aspirations of the bourgeoisie, and had enabled it to displace the old nobility, the bourgeoisie went on quite naturally, after having been an exploited and oppressed class for such a long time, to become in its turn a privileged class, a class of exploiters, oppressive, conservative and reactionary in nature, the most reliable friend and supporter of the State. After the coup d'Etat of the first Napoleon, Freemasonry became an imperial institution throughout a large part of the European continent.

Let us now examine the role this abstraction, the State, parallel to the historical abstraction called the Church, has played and continues to play in real life, in human society.

The State is, as I have said, by its very principle an immense cemetery in which all manifestations of individual and local life, all the interests of the parts that together constitute society, come to sacrifice themselves, to die and be buried. It is the altar upon which real liberty and the well-being of peoples are immolated for the sake of political grandeur; and the more complete this immolation, the more perfect is the State, I conclude from this, and it is my conviction, that the Empire of Russia is the State par excellence, the State without rhetoric and without slogans, the most perfect State in Europe. Any State, on the other hand, in which the people can still breathe, is, from the standpoint of the ideal, an incomplete State, just as all the other Churches are, in comparison with the Roman Catholic Church, only partly realized as Churches.

The State is, as I have said, a voracious abstraction of the life of the people; but in order for an abstraction to come into being, develop and continue to exist in the real world, there must be a real collective body interested in its existence. This cannot be the great mass of the people, since they are precisely its victims; it must be a privileged body, the sacerdotal body of the State, the governing and political class that is to the State what the sacerdotal class of religion, the priesthood, is to the Church.

And what do we really see in all of history? The State has always been the patrimony of some privileged class, whether sacerdotal, noble, or bourgeois, and, in the end, when all the other classes have been used up, of a bureaucratic class. The State descends or rises up, depending upon how you look at it, into the condition of a machine. It is absolutely necessary for its welfare that there be some privileged class interested in its existence. And it is precisely the solitary interest of this privileged class that we call patriotism.

The Restoration resuscitated it somewhat. Seeing itself threatened by the return of the Old Regime, forced to concede to the coalition of Church and nobility the place that it had conquered through the first revolution, the bourgeoisie became of necessity revolutionary once again. But what a difference between this reheated revolutionarism and the ardent and powerful revolutionarism that had inspired it at the end of the last century! In the old days the bourgeoisie had been of good faith, had believed seriously and naively in the rights of man, had been driven along and inspired by the genius of demolition and reconstruction, had been in full possession of its intelligence and at the height of its powers. It had as yet no fears that an abyss might be separating it from the people; it felt itself, believed itself, to be the people's representative, and it really was. But the Thermidorean reaction and the Conspiracy of Babeuf deprived it of this notion forever. The abyss that separates the toiling people from the exploiting bourgeoisie, from the dominant class that takes everything for itself, has opened, and it will take nothing less than the entire body of the bourgeoisie, their whole privileged existence, to fill it in again. Furthermore, it was no longer the bourgeoisie in its entirety, but only a part of it that returned, after the Restoration, to the task of conspiring against the clerical and aristocratic regime, and against the legitimate monarchs.

In my next letter, I shall, if you will be so good as to permit me, develop my ideas on this last phase of constitutional liberalism and bourgeois carbonarism.

Second Letter

I said in a preceding article that the reactionary, legitimist, feudal and clerical threat had incited a revival of the revolutionary spirit of the bourgeoisie, but that between this new spirit and the one that had animated it before 1793 there was an enormous difference. The bourgeois of the last century were giants, in comparison with whom even the most daring of the bourgeoisie of this century seem to be only pygmies. To be assured of this, one has only to compare their programs. What was the program of eighteenth-century philosophy and of the Great Revolution? Neither more nor less than the integral emancipation of all humanity; the realization of the rights and real and complete liberty of every man, through the social and political equalization of all; the triumph of the human world over the wreckage of the divine one; the reign of justice and fraternity over the earth. The trouble with this philosophy and this revolution was that neither understood that the realization of human brotherhood was impossible so long as States existed, and that the real abolition of classes, the political and social equalization of individuals, will be possible only through the equalization of the economic means of education, instruction, labor, and life for everyone. Nevertheless, one cannot reprove the eighteenth century for not having understood this. Social science is not created and studied solely in books; it needs the great lessons of history, and we had to have the revolution of 1789 and 1793. We had to undergo the experiences of 1830 and 1848, to be able to arrive at this henceforth irrefutable conclusion: that any political revolution that does not have economic equality as its immediate and direct purpose is, from the standpoint of the rights and interests of the people, only a disguised and hypocritical reaction.

This most simple and evident truth was still unknown at the end of the eighteenth century, and when Babeuf appeared and posed the economic and social question, the power of the revolution had already been exhausted. But this man retains the honor of having

of all. On the contrary, it is the immolation of every individual, as of all local associations, the destructive abstraction of living society, the limitation, or rather, complete negation of life and all the parts that compose the “everyone,” for the so-called good of everyone. It is the State, the altar of political religion, upon which the natural society is always immolated: a devouring universality, living upon human sacrifices, like the Church. The State, I repeat, is the younger brother of the Church.

In order to prove this identity of Church and State, I beg the reader to be so good as to note that the one, like the other, is founded essentially upon the idea of the sacrifice of life and of natural right, and that both have the same principle as their point of departure: that of the natural wickedness of men, which can be vanquished, according to the Church, only by divine grace and the death of the natural man in God, and according to the State, only by law and the immolation of the individual upon the altar of the State. Both strive to transform man, the one into a saint, the other into a citizen. But the natural man must die, for the religions of the Church and of the State unanimously pronounce his sentence.

Such, in its ideal purity, is the identical theory of the Church and of the State. It is a pure abstraction; but all historical abstractions presuppose historical facts. These facts, as I said in my last article, are of an utterly real and brutal nature: their nature is violence, conquest, spoliation and reduction to servitude. Man is formed in such a way, that he cannot settle for merely acting, but must also explain and legitimize his acts before his own conscience and the eyes of the world. Religion came along, therefore, to bless the acts that had been performed, and thanks to this benediction, the iniquitous and brutal deed is transformed into right. Juridical science and political right are, as is well known, issues of theology first of all, and secondly of metaphysics, which is nothing but a disguised theology, a theology that makes the pretense of not being absurd and vainly strives to give its content a scientific aspect.

Fourth Letter

One of the greatest services rendered by bourgeois utilitarianism is, as I have said is to have killed the religion of the State, patriotism. Patriotism is, as we know, an ancient virtue, born within the Greek and Roman republics, where there had never been any real religion other than that of the State, nor any object of worship except the State.

What is the State? It is, the metaphysicians and doctors of law answer, the public thing, the collective goods and interests, the rights of everyone as opposed to the dissolving action of the interests and selfish passions of each individual. It is justice and the realization of morality and virtue on earth. Therefore the individual can perform no more sublime act or greater duty than to devote himself, sacrifice himself, to the ideal of dying for the sake of the triumph and the power of the State. This, in a few words, is the whole of the theology of the State. Let us now see if this political theology does not, like the religious theology, hide under its very beautiful and poetic appearance quite common and quite dirty realities.

We will begin by analyzing the idea itself of the State, as its advocates represent it to us. This is the sacrifice of the natural liberty and interests of each component — of individuals, and of such comparatively small collective units as associations, communes and provinces — to the interests and freedom of everyone, to the prosperity of the great whole. But what, in reality, is this everyone, this whole? It is the agglomeration of all the individuals and all the tightly knit human collectivities that compose it. But what actually becomes of the whole at the moment when all individual and local interests have been sacrificed in order to compose it and coordinate themselves within it? It is not the living whole, that allows each one to breathe at his ease, and becomes more fruitful, more powerful, and freer, the more widely it develops within itself the full liberty and prosperity of every man. It is not the natural human society that confirms and augments the life of every man by the life

posed the greatest problem that had ever been posed in history, that of the emancipation of humanity in its entirety.

In comparison with this immense program, what goal do we see pursued by the program of revolutionary liberalism in the era of the Restoration and the July Monarchy? Its so-called liberty — so dignified, so modest, so well-regulated so restrained — was conceived entirely for the modified temperament of a half-sated bourgeoisie who, weary of combat and impatient to begin enjoying the fruits of its victories, felt itself still threatened, only no longer from above, but now from below, and watched with inquietude as these innumerable millions of exploited proletarians, tired of suffering and preparing to demand their rights in return, massed together like a huge black finger pointing towards the horizon.

At the beginning of the present century this rising specter, later to be baptized the “red specter,” this terrible ghost of the rights of all men opposed to the privileges of a fortunate class, this justice and reason of the people, which, as they progress, should reduce to dust the sophisms of political economy, of jurisprudence, of bourgeois politics and metaphysics, became at the moment of the triumph of the bourgeoisie in the modern world, the constant nemesis of its pleasures, the diminishers of its confidence and its spirit.

And nevertheless, the social question was still nearly unknown during the Restoration, or rather, nearly forgotten. True, there were a few great isolated dreamers, such as Saint-Simon, Robert Owen and Fourier, whose genius or great hearts had guessed at the necessity for a radical transformation of the economic organization of society. Around each of them a small number of devoted and ardent disciples grouped themselves, forming a number of small churches, but they were as little known as their masters were, and exercised no influence outside their own groups. There was still the communist testament of Babeuf, transmitted by his illustrious friend and colleague, Buonarrotti, to the most energetic proletarians, by means of a popular and secret organization, but this was still only a subterranean activity. Its manifestations did not make themselves felt

until later, during the July Monarchy, and it was not perceived at all by the bourgeois class during the Restoration. The people, the masses of workers, remained quiet and did not demand anything for themselves.

It is clear that if the specter of political justice had any sort of existence at all in this epoch, it could only have been in the bad conscience of the bourgeois. Where did this bad conscience come from? Were the bourgeois who lived under the Restoration any more wicked than had been their fathers who made the revolution of 1789 and 1793? Not in the slightest! They were virtually the same men, but placed in another milieu, in the midst of different political conditions, enriched by a new experience, and therefore possessing a different conscience.

The bourgeois of the last century had sincerely believed that in emancipating themselves from the monarchical, clerical, and feudal yoke they would emancipate all the people along with them. And this naive and sincere belief was the source of their heroic audacity and all their marvelous power. They felt themselves united with all men, and, marching into battle, they carried the rights and the strength of all men within themselves. Thanks to these rights and to this power of the people that had been incarnated, so to speak, in their class, the bourgeois of the last century were able to scale the fortress of political power that their forefathers had coveted for so many centuries, and capture it. But at the very moment when they planted their banner upon it, a new realization entered their minds. As soon as they had conquered the source of power, they began to understand that their bourgeois interests had nothing in common with the interests of the masses, that, on the contrary, the two were radically opposed, and that the power and exclusive prosperity of the possessing class and to be supported by the misery and social and political dependence of the proletariat. From then on, the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the people was radically transformed, and even before the workers had come to understand that the bourgeois were their natural enemies, much more through

of it, being its worldly and terrestrial expression and application. The State is the younger brother of the Church, and patriotism, that virtue and cult of the State, is only a reflection of the cult of the divine.

According to the precepts of the idealistic school, which is religious and political at the same time, the virtuous man must serve God and devote himself to the State. And it is this doctrine that bourgeois utilitarianism began to combat, using justice as a weapon, at the beginning of this century.

And, in the middle of this fratricidal combat of man against man, amidst this mutual destruction, amidst this reduction of men to servitude by a few who have maintained themselves, under different names and forms, throughout the centuries, what role did religion play? Religion has always sanctified violence, and transformed it into right. It has whisked away humanity, justice and fraternity into a fictitious heaven, so as to leave room on earth for the reign of iniquity and brutality. It has blessed successful brigands, and, in order to increase their fortune even further, has preached obedience and resignation to their innumerable victims, the people. And, the more sublime the ideal adored in heaven appeared to be, the more horrible became the reality on earth. For it is in the nature of all idealism, whether religious or metaphysical, to despise the real world, and, in despising it, to exploit it; with the result that all idealism necessarily engenders hypocrisy.

Man is matter, and cannot despise matter with impunity. He is an animal, and he cannot destroy his own animality. But he can and must transform and humanize it through freedom, that is, through the combined action of justice and reason, which in their turn have a grip upon because they are its products and highest highest expression. On the other hand, every time that man has tried to abstract himself from his animality, he has become its slave and its toy: witness the priesthood of the most absurd and most idealistic religion in the world, Catholicism.

Compare their well-known obscenity with their vow of chastity; compare their insatiable covetousness with their doctrine of the renunciation of the things of this world; and you will agree that there exist no other beings so materialistic as these preachers of Christian idealism. At this very moment, what is the question that is troubling the whole Church most of all? The preservation of its possessions, which everywhere today stand in danger of being confiscated by that other Church, that expression of political idealism, the State.

Political idealism is no less absurd, pernicious or hypocritical than the idealism of religion, and is, besides, only a different form

necessity than ill-will, the bourgeois had already become conscious of this fatal antagonism. This is what I call the bad conscience of the bourgeois.

Third Letter

The bad conscience of the bourgeois paralyzed, as I have said, the whole intellectual and moral movement of the bourgeoisie at the beginning of this century. Let me correct myself — I shall replace the word paralyzed with another: perverted. For it would be incorrect to say that there was any paralysis in a spirit which, passing from theory to the application of the positive sciences, created all the miracles of modern industry, and which, by discovering a new science — statistics — and by pursuing political economy and historical criticism of the development of wealth and civilization to the point where their fullest possibilities could be realized, established the basis for a new philosophy — socialism—which from the standpoint of the exclusive interests of the bourgeoisie is nothing but a sublime suicide, the very negation of the bourgeois world.

The paralysis did not arrive until later, after 1848, when the bourgeoisie, terrified by the results of its earlier efforts, consciously placed itself behind the times, and when, to preserve its possessions, it renounced all thought and will, submitted itself to the protection of the military, and gave itself over, body and soul, to the most complete reaction. Since that time it has done no more inventing, but rather has lost, along with its courage, the very power of creation. It no longer retains even the power or spirit of self-preservation, for everything that it has done and continues to do for its salvation pushes it inexorably toward the abyss.

Until 1848, the bourgeoisie was still full of spirit. To be sure, this spirit no longer coursed with that vigorous sap that had enabled it, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, to create a new world. This was no longer the heroic spirit of a class that was highly audacious because it had to conquer everything: it was the prudent and reflective spirit of a new property owner who, after having acquired an ardently coveted possession, was determined to make it prosper and increase in value. The spirit of the bourgeoisie in the

first half of this century can be characterized in particular by its almost exclusively utilitarian tendency.

The bourgeoisie has been reproached for this, and wrongly. I believe, on the contrary, that it has rendered a last great service to humanity by preaching, much more through example than through its theories, the cult of, or rather the respect for, material interests. Basically, such interests have always prevailed in the world, but until now they always manifested themselves under the cloak of a hypocritical or unhealthy idealism, which is precisely what always transformed them into malicious and iniquitous interests.

No one at all interested in the study of history could have failed to see that there was always some great material interest at the bottom of even the most abstract, the most sublime and idealistic theological and religious struggles. No war of races, nations, States or classes has ever been waged with any purpose other than domination, which is the rendition and necessary guarantee of the possession and free use of goods. Human history, considered from this point of view, is nothing but the continuation of that great struggle for existence that, according to Darwin, constitutes the fundamental law of organic nature.

In the animal world, this battle takes place without ideas and without phases, and is furthermore without a solution; as long as the earth exists, the animal world will devour itself. This is the natural condition of its life. Human beings, omnivorous animals par excellence, began their history with this cannibalism. Today they tend towards universal association, and the collective production and use of goods.

But between these two points, what bloody and horrible tragedy! And we are not yet finished with this tragedy. After cannibalism came slavery, after slavery serfdom, after serfdom wage-labor, after which the terrible day of justice is to come, and only then, much later, the era of fraternity. These are the phases through which the animal struggle for life is transformed gradually, in history, into the human organization of life.