

Was Bakunin an anarchist?

Bakunin's use of the word "anarchy"

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"Let us specify, from the beginning of this little study, what we mean by 'libertarian socialism', what we could otherwise call social anarchism, what others call anarchy. But for the last thirty years or so, the author of these lines has renounced the word 'anarchy' for what it has of imprecision and contradiction, for the confusion to which it gives rise within the anarchist movement itself... (...)

"But we must also recognise that it was a fatal error on Proudhon's part to choose such a debatable term, even if its etymological character could, with a great deal of dialectic, seemingly and perhaps rightly prove him right. The consequences of this error have propagated, and continue to propagate, we repeat, within the anarchist movement itself. One does not define an ideal by a negation..."¹

This study is not intended to question Bakunin's status as an "anarchist", if by that we mean a thinker and man of action who developed radical critical thinking about the nature and the function of the state, but simply to question his use of the word "anarchy". Nothing more.

The word "anarchy", coined somewhat provocatively by Proudhon, who had studied ancient languages and took the term in its etymological sense, was contested even within the so-called "anarchist" movement. Bakunin called himself above all a "revolutionary socialist", a "federalist" or "collectivist", and very secondarily an "anarchist"².

In 1906, prominent theoreticians of the Spanish anarchist movement proposed to abandon the term *anarquía*, which was misinterpreted by the public.

"In any language the meaning given to the word by usage is preponderant, and to create such confusion was to create anarchy in the traditional sense of the term. For on the whole, public opinion, unaware of Proudhon's fantasy or refusing to submit to it, has retained the negative meaning attributed to the word anarchy, and since 1840 anarchists have been fighting to make it admit what it did not want. And

1 Gaston Leval, *Conceptions constructives du socialisme libertaire*, Cahiers n° 18/19 de janvier-avril 1972 de la revue *Autogestion et socialisme*. Republished by Éditions du groupe Maurice Joyeux, 2002.

2 I hope that readers will forgive me for not giving the bibliographical sources in the English version, where they exist. With some exceptions, I have simply translated the French sources available to me, in particular Bakunin, in the hope that these translations do not deviate too much from the original meaning of the texts. I sometimes had to retranslate into English texts that were originally written in this language when the only version available to me was the French translation!

so we have placed ourselves, for having stubbornly distorted the meaning of a word against the general will, outside the public mind”.³

Leval added privately that people were often attracted to the movement by the word “anarchy” rather than by the substance of the doctrine it represented.

Piotr Kropotkin writes that Bakunin’s party “avoided even giving itself the name of anarchist. The word *an-archie* (that’s how it was written then) seemed to link the party too much to the Proudhonians whose ideas of economic reform the International was fighting at that time”⁴. The word “anarchy” and its derivatives frequently come back in Bakunin’s language, but several distinctions should be made:

Chronologically. The young Bakunin, philosopher and conservative, then the militant of the Slavic cause, used the term in its common sense of chaos, disorder. From August 1867 onwards, it is necessary to distinguish between the rare texts in which he expressly claims to be anarchist and the more numerous ones in which he claims to be anarchist but makes restrictions concerning the word. However, the vast majority of the occurrences of the word are negative.

Semantically. After 1867, a distinction must be made between the uses of the word which only serve to designate an established fact, the simple observation of a situation of chaos, and the rare positive uses of the term, almost systematically followed by clarifications or restrictions on the term. The word “anarchy” is *exceptionally* used as a political doctrine. It is clear from Bakunin’s writings that it is not a term that he chose, that it was chosen by his opponents to designate a current that Bakunin himself designates by other terms: revolutionary socialist, federalist, collectivist.

Early texts

In his early texts, written in Russia as a young man with a passion for philosophy and political conservatism, the word is taken in its ordinary sense of disorder, chaos. In a letter to the Beer sisters dated 24 June 1837, in which he talks mainly about his own and his sisters’ states of mind, he refers to the “anarchy of minds” of those who “think that their individuality can solve everything”. The expression comes up again in a text from 1838: the “anarchy of the spirits” is then “the main disease of our new generation, an abstract, illusory generation, alien to all reality”⁵.

The young Bakunin was then an outspoken conservative and France was not to his liking: the French, he said, “transform philosophy and all truth into hollow and meaningless phrases, into arbitrariness and anarchy of thought, into a cuisine of new ideas”⁶. What is targeted behind this “anarchy” is obviously the rationalist and materialist thinking of France, whose philosophers have never been able to rise “to the Ethereal Element of pure thought”. The “sensitive-irritable” nature of French philosophers, attached to “everyday interests”, prevents them from “plunging into the eternal Kingdom of the Idea”⁷.

The French have rejected Christianity, “that eternal and non-transitory proof of the Creator’s love for his creation”. Today, the ills from which France suffers are due to the rejection of religion, which is “the essence of the life of every state”.

It is significant that the use of the word “anarchy” is mainly reserved for his reflections on France and its thinkers of 18th century whose “hollow ratiocinations, superficial and frivolous reasoning have done much harm on earth and caused the loss of many young men by drawing them away from the substantial and important interests of life and giving them over to the fatal empire of a thoughtless and

3 Gaston Leval, *L’État dans l’histoire*, Éditions du Monde libertaire, p. 18.

4 Kropotkin, *Paroles d’un révolté*.

5 “Gymnasialreden de Hegel. Avant-propos du traducteur”, Spring 1838

6 *Ibid.*

7 “Fragments de notes sur la philosophie et l’histoire”, 16 June 1838.

senseless arbitrariness” — another way to say that the French Enlightenment thinkers led young men to concern themselves with politics rather than with such essential things as the search for God and eternal order. The French led philosophy to frivolity, impiety and liberalism. The young Bakunin, who appeared to be a straight-laced dandy at the time, protested that true philosophy “will never be impious and anarchistic”⁸.

It was the time when Bakunin was attacking the “empirical philosophical reasoning of Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot”. The French Revolution was targeted by the young man, who thought that Germany had been spared the hurricane that had blown over France. Apart from Descartes and Malebranche, the French “never rose to the level of speculative reflection”: the “so-called philosophy of the Eighteenth Century” remained at the level of empirical research, at the finite categories of understanding, whereas the Germans had “reached the abstract element of pure understanding”⁹.

If it is true that the word “anarchy” is used by the young Bakunin in its common sense, it is rather ironic to note that it serves essentially to designate a country and a thought whose heritage the future revolutionary will strongly assume a few years later, after 1842.

Period 1847-1867

When in November 1847 Bakunin made his first public appearance and gave his speech on the 17th anniversary of the Polish revolution, he made, against all expectations and to the bewilderment of his audience, an assessment of the situation in tsarist Russia. He wanted to show that, in addition to the power that oppressed the Poles, there was also a power that oppressed the Russian people themselves, which the aristocrats who made up the bulk of the Polish nationalists did not care about, any more than they did about their own people. Bakunin wanted to show that the internal situation of his country was catastrophic: “our administration, our justice, our finances, are all lies: lies to deceive foreign opinion, lies to numb the security and conscience of the sovereign, who lends himself to them all the more willingly, as the real state of things frightens him.” It is, he says, “a *complete anarchy*”¹⁰.

A few months later, the revolution was rumbling throughout Europe and it was of Germany that Bakunin painted a picture in a letter to Pavel Annenkov dated 17 April 1848. The situation seems to him curious, paradoxical: Germany, he says, “lives in disorder, but without revolution proper”, a situation due, according to him, to the absence of any centralisation: in Aachen the workers fight against the bourgeoisie whereas in Cologne it the situation is “dead calm”. He got to know some “real democrats” on whom he placed some hopes. If Reaction is broken, “its debris is still present everywhere and threatens without respite”. Unfortunately, the bourgeoisie “desperately rejects the republic because it brings with it social problems and the triumph of democracy”: “*anarchy without revolution* – that is the situation in Germany”, he concludes.

Negative definition

The notion of anarchy has most of the time for Bakunin the usual meaning of “chaos”, “disorder”: when in 1872 he complains about the situation of the Turin section of the International, which has no leadership, which is “tossed between the conceited and the intriguing”, the Russian revolutionary regrets “that there is no one in Turin to put order to this disgusting anarchy”¹¹. There is no ambiguity about the fact that the term is taken here in its “normal”, pejorative sense.

8 “De la philosophie – article premier” 1839.

9 “Gymnasialreden de Hegel”, 1838.

10 “The internal affairs of the country go horribly wrong. It is a complete anarchy, with all the semblance of order” . The Anarchist Library, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/mikhail-bakunin-speech-on-the-17th-anniversary-of-the-polish-revolution?v=1619301836>

11 Letter to Celso Ceretti, 13-27 mars 1872.

At the time Bakunin wrote these lines – 1872 – he was already supposed to be an “anarchist” (since 1867-1868). We are therefore entitled to wonder about this “anarchist” who insists on using this word in the sense of “chaos”. Anarchy is still a negative concept in *L’Empire knuto-germanique* [the Knuto-german Empire¹²] when God, the “orderer of this world”, actually produces “anarchy, chaos”. Anarchy and chaos are clearly designated as synonyms.

In a letter to Albert Richard¹³, he evokes, “to save the revolution, to bring it to a successful conclusion, in the very midst of this anarchy”, the constitution of a “collective dictatorship, invisible, not clothed with any power, but all the more effective and powerful – the natural action of all the energetic and sincere socialist revolutionaries, scattered over the surface of the country, of all the countries, but strongly united by a common thought and a common will”. So anarchy is still here a situation of chaos to which it is a question of putting an end by methods that are not very “anarchist” thanks to the intervention of men whom he does not describe as “anarchists” but as “socialist revolutionaries”...

The concept appears in an even more pejorative sense in May 1872 in a letter to Tomás González Morago¹⁴. Bakunin takes up the theme of a debate between him and Marx on the strategy of the International. He defended the idea of freedom of debate in the organisation and was opposed to it having a single, compulsory programme – an intention he attributed to Marx. Bakunin bases his argument on the fact that the different federations and sections of the International are at extremely different stages of theoretical development and that it is necessary to stick to what brings them together – i.e. economic solidarity – rather than to what could divide the organisation:

“...I challenge you to formulate an explicitly single doctrine that can unite under its banner millions, I say, only tens of millions of workers. And unless you impose the beliefs of one sect on all the others, you will end up with the creation of a multitude of sects, that is to say, with the organisation of a real anarchy within the proletariat for the greater triumph of the exploiting classes...”¹⁵

Thus “anarchy” within the proletariat would be beneficial to the exploiting classes... Yet, at the same time, when he speaks of the debates of ideas within the International, Bakunin grants anarchy the status of a doctrine by affirming that “all doctrines must have full freedom to produce themselves – the authoritarian theories of Marx, as well as our anarchic theories; provided that none of them has the insane and odious pretension of imposing itself as an official truth, nor that none of them undermines in the slightest way that practical solidarity of the proletariat of different countries in the economic struggle.”

We thus have a constant back and forth movement between the two meanings of the word: *in the same text*, “anarchy” plays into the hands of the exploiting classes, but Bakunin claims it as “our anarchic theories”. This creates, it must be said, a certain amount of confusion, even if, depending on the context, we understand what he means. The problem is that when one is engaged in political action, a minimum of clarity is necessary: it is not very productive to use words that can have several meanings and whose context must be explained each time...

1847-1848 Period

In the context of a strictly private exchange, the word “anarchy” may well be used in its current sense: thus, in a letter to Carlo and Emilio Bellerio, dating from

12 Why “knuto-Germanic”? The knout is a whip with leather straps ending in metal hooks or balls, an instrument of torture in ancient Russia. The knout symbolises the tyrannical character of the Russian Empire. “Germanic” because according to Bakunin Russia was a country whose substratum was a Slavic peasantry dominated by a monarchy and bureaucracy of Germanic origin.

13 12 March 1870.

14 21 May 1872.

15 Letter to Morago, *loc. cit.*

1875, Bakunin refers to papers that have gone astray “in the somewhat anarchic removal” of his effects... But precisely, a word whose meaning requires constant consideration of its context finally ends up becoming inoperative.

A clear majority of texts – about forty – contain the word “anarchy” in the common sense. We will not list all of them, but merely give a few examples spread over ten years.

In “To the Russians, Poles, and all Slavic friends” of February 1862, we learn that “Anarchy, distrust of oneself and of others reign in all classes of society, in all the powers of the official world”.

In September 1865, in the first article for *Il popolo d'Italia*, the State is denounced because it “does not create order, but on the contrary disorder, permanent frozen anarchy, absolute injustice and the methodical exhaustion of millions of men subjected and kept in darkness by force, for the benefit of a few corrupted by privilege”. It is thus clearly the state that creates anarchy.

In *Federalism, Socialism, Anti-theologism*, which is considered to be a kind of pivotal moment in Bakunin’s transition to “anarchism”, the word “anarchy” is used twice, in a pejorative sense: the State and the Church, he says, start “from this fundamental supposition, that men are fundamentally evil and that, left to their natural freedom, they would tear each other apart and offer the spectacle of the most dreadful anarchy”.

In “To the workers of Spain”¹⁶, he evoked in 1868 “the iniquity and anarchy of bourgeois civilisation” and explained that the aim of the International was “the triumph of the cause of labour against privilege, against monopolised capital and against hereditary property, an iniquitous institution guaranteed by the State, an anarchic institution if ever there was one, since it perpetuates and develops the inequality of conditions, the source of social disorder”. At that time, Bakunin was supposed to be an “anarchist”, we should note. But the meaning he gives to this word is absolutely unequivocal: *it is the state and the capitalist system which create anarchy*; the existence of the bourgeoisie “has no other law, as we know, than this anarchy expressed in these words which have become so famous: ‘*Laissez faire et laissez passer*’”¹⁷.

In “The International Workers’ Movement”, published in *L’Egalité* on 22 May 1869, it is a question of “putting an end to the frightening rot which has invaded all the strata of society, and founding in place of the present anarchy a social order in conformity with justice and the general well-being”.

In January 1870, Bakunin wrote a text, “To the officers of the Russian army”, in which he evoked the Polish insurrection of 1863, and in particular the Polish Committee, which he said was “in the grip of disarray and negligence”. The introduction of intellectuals into this committee, replacing the homogeneous elements that had previously made it up, was a catastrophe: “From a Committee that acted and never lost itself in useless talk, they made a parliament. A party was formed which began to seek support outside, thus undermining the whole organisation. Where before there had been perfect order, thanks to which lightning-quick action could be triggered, anarchy set in and action was replaced by endless deliberation.” Let us remember, at the risk of repeating ourselves, that at the time of the writing of this text, Bakunin was supposed to be an “anarchist”...

In “Science and the Vital Question of Revolution” (March 1870), we learn that “the absence of a government engenders anarchy and anarchy leads to the destruction of the State”. We can imagine the impact made by a politician quoting Bakunin on a TV channel today... The Russian revolutionary specifies that the destruction of the state can lead either “to the enslavement of a country by another state”, as was the case in Poland, or to “the total emancipation of all workers and the abolition of classes, as will hopefully soon be the case throughout Europe”.

Anarchy, here, is an observation that has an ambiguous value. It is not a political doctrine but an upheaval in society. It can lead to totally contradictory

16 “L’association internationale des travailleurs de Genève aux ouvriers d’Espagne”, 1 novembre 1868.

17 *L’Empire Knouto-Germanique et la Révolution Sociale*. Suite. Dieu et l’Etat. 4. Novembre 1870-avril 1871.

situations: oppression or liberation, depending on the circumstances. But elsewhere, *in the same text*, Bakunin suggests that the increase in class contradictions within the state causes “disorder, anarchy, the weakening of the state organisation which is necessary to maintain the despoiled people in obedience”. Anarchy is equated with disorder, but it is clear that Bakunin was prepared to live with the consequences of “the multiplicity and diversity of class interests” if this can lead to the emancipation of the people through a revolution. Anarchy should therefore be seen as an established fact that leads to political opportunities that must be seized.

Anarchy as an established fact

The concept of anarchy is frequently used by Bakunin to designate an established fact. After 1848, anarchy is invoked in some texts not as a doctrine but as a situation of unavoidable disorder during a great historical upheaval. Bakunin sees this “anarchy” as the inevitable consequence of the collapse of a whole social and political system: it is therefore a situation that revolutionaries must use to channel the mass movement in a positive direction. If he does not fear anarchy, if on the contrary he calls for it, it is only because it is an inevitable stage in a revolution that must put in place a new social order. To “invoke” anarchy in this case is to simply to call for the collapse of capitalism and the disruption that will follow, it is not in itself a political programme or a social project.

This is why a militant who would like to make propaganda for his ideas would act very clumsily if he “called for chaos” rather than emphasizing the positive aspects of libertarian thought.

In a letter to Georg Herwegh of 8 December 1848, *i.e.* after the writing of his “Appeal to the Slavs”, Bakunin foresees: “anarchy, the destruction of the states can only be for the near future”. This will certainly not happen to the German bourgeois, who is “good-naturedly abject”. Fortunately, in this official Germany composed of the “too great mass of petty bourgeois”, there are also the proletarians of the cities and especially the important peasant masses. So Bakunin thinks that “only an anarchic peasant war” can save Germany – accompanied, he points out, by a financial collapse that will lead to what he calls a “bonification of the bourgeoisie”. We see that “anarchy” serves all sorts of purposes.

The German democratic leaders are incompetents who “imagined that they could set the peasants in motion by abstract, political, constitutional or republican phrases” and who fear above all to awaken the “so-called ‘evil passions’”.¹⁸

“The evil passions will provoke a peasant war, and I rejoice in this, since *I do not fear anarchy* [my emphasis], but on the contrary call for it with all my soul. Only anarchy can rescue us from the accursed mediocrity in which we have vegetated for so long. The resolute, reasonable and energetic democrats, who are truly revolutionary, do not lose courage, no more as I do.”¹⁹

By “evil passions” one must not understand the unreasoned unleashing of vice, depravity and perversity – although many people understand it in that sense. The passions here designated as evil are the instinct for revolt, for freedom, for equality, which appear evil from the point of view of the bourgeoisie and the State. Bakunin does not seem to fear this anarchy, which is an unavoidable element of any revolution.

Moreover, a month before his letter to Herwegh, Bakunin had underlined the chaos that reigned in Europe:

“Has not Europe suddenly become a vast chaos, in which those who say they are destined to restore order, only increase the disorder by their call to arms, by the bombardments and the state of siege, by their attacks,

¹⁸

¹⁹ Letter to G. Herwegh, 8 Décembre 1848.

their crimes that cry out for vengeance, by their massacres and their devastations? Is not anarchy permanent, and is not every attempt to tame it more anarchic than anarchy itself? See! Revolution is everywhere.”²⁰

Here, Anarchy is chaos and those who want to control it make things worse. Once again, this is an established fact that Bakunin is content to observe. Anarchy is almost a metaphysical notion which represents the force, the “new spirit” which, with its dissolving power, “has irrevocably penetrated humanity”. These words were written in 1848, twenty years before the Russian revolutionary chose to devote himself solely to the workers’ movement. His turn of mind, as well as his vocabulary, are reminiscent above all of the young Bakunin of the “philosophical” period. There are accents in this passage close to *The Reaction in Germany*, which Bakunin wrote in 1842, and in particular the concluding sentence:

“Let us therefore have confidence in the eternal Spirit, which only destroys and annihilates because it is the *unfathomable* and *eternally* creative source of all life. The pleasure of destruction is at the same time a creative voluptuousness!”

The Spirit “digs into the deepest and darkest layers of European society. And the Revolution will not rest until it has created a new and better world in its place”. Once again, the anarchy evoked in 1842 in *The Reaction in Germany* has nothing to do with a political doctrine, it is a concept that lies in the trailing sky of Hegelianism.

In a sketch for a text entitled “The Situation in Russia”, Bakunin is less lyrical. At the end of 1848 and the beginning of 1849 the situation in Germany had deteriorated. The class antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the people had increased and was leading to a confrontation in which one must destroy the other:

“While the whole of Europe is deeply shaken by the Revolution and all the other peoples are seized by the demonic forces of the age, torn into parties, split in two, on the one side the people proper, on the other the bourgeoisie, from this moment on they have become irreconcilable enemies who will not rest until one has completely overcome and subdued the other, while all are on the verge of sinking into the abyss of a frightful anarchy and a frightful, bloody and merciless civil war.”²¹

The tone is no longer that of an Appeal in which, according to the laws of the genre, a certain emphasis is required: here we have direct, uncoded language: anarchy takes on its common meaning.

In February-March 1849 Bakunin declares the Fatherland in danger²² – it is about the German fatherland. The article was the third in a series that appeared in the *Dresdner Zeitung*, a newspaper that was itself described as “anarchist”. In this article, Bakunin challenges “Welcker *et. alt.*”, i.e. the moderate democrats. Karl Welcker (1790-1869) was a democrat nationalist who had participated in the war of liberation against Napoleon. He participated in the elaboration of the programme that was to be adopted during the March Revolution. He was elected to the Frankfurt parliament (1848-1849), and helped to draft the Frankfurt constitution. In Parliament he opposed Carl Vogt, Bakunin’s friend.

The danger in question is twofold: “a conspiracy of the princes against the conquests of the people”, and the external peril resulting from “Russia’s opposition to the establishment of a strong Germany”. The Russian armies are on the frontiers “as troops of the Empire, to fight anarchy, and as allies of the [German] princes, to

20 Bakounine, *Appel aux Slaves*.

21 “La situation en Russie”. Esquisses. 1. Fin 1848 - début 1849. – Voir également *L’Empire knouto-germanique* : l’empire d’Allemagne du XIII^e siècle y est décrit comme étant “désorganisé et en proie à la plus profonde anarchie”. *L’Empire Knouto-Germanique et la Révolution Sociale*. Fragments et variantes. Fragment C. Novembre 1870 - avril 1871.

22 “La Patrie est en danger !” février-mars 1849, *Dresdner Zeitung*, N° 72, 25 mars 1849.

fight the young freedom". Freedom and anarchy are clearly semantically related here.

Here we have one of the many cases where the word "anarchy" is used in several senses *in the same text*. The first use of the word makes it almost synonymous with freedom. But Bakunin also uses it in the sense of chaos, but this time anarchy is brought about by the Prussian power allying itself with Russia against the people: the King of Prussia "will bring us a secret or public alliance with the Russian against all the natural needs of our people. And for this, it will be necessary to artificially bring about anarchy in Germany.

Thus, the concept of anarchy is not assigned a particular value: it is not only related to the popular masses, it is also a situation that can be provoked by the ruling power. There are other examples in Bakunin where anarchy is caused by power, or by the capitalist system.

In the second half of this pessimistic article, Bakunin makes some curious reflections. Our future is bleak, he says, and "there is nothing to say that, in the present circumstances, we can easily overcome a radical upheaval of political and social relations." Will the scales tip towards the oppressed people? towards military dictatorship? towards "a long impotence of the peoples of Central Europe?"

To say that Bakunin foresaw the fate of Germany and predicted the "heaps of rubble, ashes and desolate ruins, blood and tears, misery and the return to savagery" that would mark the beginning of the twentieth century is obviously absurd. It can be argued, however, that he understood perfectly well that the failure of democracy in Germany would have terrible consequences.

After his participation in the Dresden insurrection, Bakunin was arrested. We know what happened next: the Saxon authorities handed him over to Austria, who handed him over to Russia. It was from his prison that he wrote a "Confession" to the tsar, which in fact turned out to be an indictment of the regime in Russia. The tsar expected Bakunin to give the names of his accomplices: Bakunin replied that he would confess his own "sins" but not those of others.

The word "anarchy" appears nine times in the Confession. It is taken in its common meaning and is used to refer to the chaotic situation in Germany and Austria where "anarchy had succeeded oppression". Clubs, newspapers, "all manifestations of a chattering anarchy" were suspended. As for Bohemia, it "was then in the most complete anarchy". Bakunin explained to the tsar that the French democrats were "dangerous and strong" thanks to their "extraordinary discipline"; in contrast, among the Germans, "anarchy predominates".

The word "anarchy" is used too often in this text written for the tsar for it not to be intended. While Russia was keen to maintain the *status quo* in Central Europe, Prussia and Austria were nonetheless rival powers. The Russian revolutionary is at pains to show the Tsar that the German countries are in a state of decay. That is why he wants to prove that "anarchy prevails" among the Germans. He even allows himself an innovation, referring to this "anarchy" as a "consequence of Protestantism", which can only please the tsar, head of an orthodox state.

"...anarchy is the fundamental feature of the German spirit, of the German character and of German life: anarchy between the provinces, anarchy between town and country, anarchy between inhabitants of the same place, between people who frequent the same circle; anarchy, finally, in every German taken individually, between his thought, his heart and his will."²³

Here Bakunin may have been overdoing it, but this did not seem to strike the tsar. "Anarchy" did not reappear in Bakunin's vocabulary until 1862, after his escape from Siberia. One can then distinguish several uses of the word:

- The common, negative use, in the sense of disorder.
- In the sense of a simple established fact.

23 Bakounine, "Confession", 1851.

- In the sense of a political doctrine which Bakunin expressly claims, without comment.
- In the sense of a doctrine which he claims but with reservations about the word itself.

In 1863, during the Polish insurrection, he thought that it was necessary to “turn against the government the weapons it uses against the Poles” and “to take advantage of this very anarchy which it inspires today within the government for its own defence and in which it plunges itself more and more without shame”²⁴. “Anarchy” produces opportunities that must be seized, but nothing more.

In 1869 he referred to the “phenomena of anarchy” caused by the Pugachev uprising and the French invasion in 1812²⁵.

However, while a supporter of the established order would evoke this situation of “anarchy” with horror, indignation or some form of reprobation, Bakunin does not generally give the concept of anarchy any particular emotional or moral value. The term can have a positive or negative connotation depending on the context. Thus, speaking of the Slavs, he states that they are defined by “their communal mores, their essentially agricultural character, their anarchic aspirations, their profound hatred of everything that represents power and of the very principle of authority”²⁶. In this sense, this is obviously a positive observation, which fits in with the Bakuninian thesis that the Slavs have rarely, if ever, constituted a state on their own.

On 1 April 1870, reproaching Albert Richard for being a centralist, a supporter of the revolutionary state, Bakunin declared himself in favour of “Revolutionary anarchy, directed on all points by an invisible collective force – the only dictatorship I admit, because only it is compatible with the frankness and full energy of the revolutionary movement”.

“Revolutionary anarchy” does not appear here as a doctrine but as a mass phenomenon which occurs in periods of unrest and which revolutionaries must take advantage of. Moreover, the Russian revolutionary specifies that it is necessary to “foment, awaken, unleash all passions”, “produce anarchy”, that is to say “the uprising of all local passions”, the awakening of spontaneous life on all points so that the “socialist revolutionaries” can play the role of “invisible pilots in the midst of the popular storm” in order to “direct it”²⁷. It is clear that it is the “socialist revolutionaries” – not the “anarchists” – who use anarchy to lead the popular movement.

Here again, “anarchy” is the observation of a situation of chaos from which the revolutionaries must take advantage. It is not, let us repeat, a political doctrine.

“France can no longer be saved by the regular means of civilisation, of the State. It can only escape decay by a supreme effort, by an immense convulsive movement of the whole nation, by the armed uprising of the French people.”²⁸

Curiously, he who wants to “produce” anarchy is far from being a spontaneist. Indeed, a popular insurrection leads to nothing if it is not duly prepared, channelled. Bakunin advocates a “collective dictatorship”, “without sash, without title, without official right, and all the more powerful, as it will have none of the appearances of power”.

“But in order for it to act, it must exist, and for that *it must be prepared and organised in advance*; for it will not be done by itself –

24 1863, *Zemlja i Volja*, 9 juillet 1863.

25 “Point de vue sur la façon de comprendre l’action dans le passé et le présent”, été 1869.

26 *L’Empire Knouto-Germanique et la Révolution Sociale*. Fragments et variantes. Fragment O. Novembre 1870-avril 1871.

27 Letter to Albert Richard, 1^{er} April 1870.

28 *Lettre à un Français*. Continuation, 25-26 août 1870.

neither by discussions, nor by exhibitions and debates of principles, nor by popular assemblies.”²⁹

These words only make sense in the context: we are in the middle of the Franco-Prussian war, and Bakunin expects a popular uprising to end the war and overthrow the regime. In this agitation, he proposed nothing more than the constitution of a clandestine party – the International was banned in France – and to take over the leadership of the movement. Let’s remember that at the same time Marx was rejoicing that the defeat of France would ensure the hegemony of the German proletariat in Europe³⁰.

Things change a little in June 1870 in a letter to Netchayev. We are, says Bakunin, “the declared enemies of all official power, even if it is an ultra-revolutionary power, of all publicly recognised dictatorship; *we are socialist-revolutionary anarchists*”³¹. But he specifies: “if we are anarchists, you may ask, by what right do we want to act on the people and by what means shall we do so?” The “if” thus introduces a conditionality to the quality of “anarchist”.

Yet, in the same letter, there is talk of men who “confront, struggle and destroy each other. In short, a frightful anarchy with no way out”, but of which, once again, revolutionaries must take advantage: “in the midst of this popular anarchy”, says Bakunin, there must be a “secret organisation whose members are scattered throughout the Empire”, driven by the same idea and the same goal. It is therefore a question of taking advantage of the chaos caused by the war, of sending propagandists throughout the country to transform this war into a social revolution. This is the model of the French revolution that Bakunin has in mind.

“Anarchy” with reservations

When Bakunin refers to “anarchy”, he often feels it necessary to step back, either by adding a synonym or by clarifying the meaning of the word, which shows that he is aware of its ambiguity and the problems it poses. When he refers to the differences between the various parties which are in conflict: “the reddest” Jacobins, “bourgeois socialists”, “state communists”, he shows that they all agree against “the revolutionary socialists, really popular – the anarchists or, so to speak, the Hebertists of socialism”. This formulation is perfectly significant. “revolutionary socialist” is so to speak the generic term: “anarchist” and “Hebertists of socialism” is the precision given to qualify the generic term.³²

In “The Slavic Question”, a text he sent to Herzen in August 1867, Bakunin says: “I am an anarchist”, but he adds that “in order not to give my enemies the upper hand for so little, I am a federalist from head to foot”. Another example of Bakunin asserting he is an “anarchist” but feeling compelled to precise what he means by that.

In a letter to Albert Richard of 12 March 1870, Bakunin once more feels necessary to explain what he means when he speaks of anarchy, “that is to say, the real, the frank popular revolution: legal and political anarchy, and the economic organisation from the bottom to the top and from the circumference to the centre, of the triumphant world of the workers. At the same time, Bakunin provides us

29 *Ibid.*

30 The statements of Bakunin that we report are from August 1870. On 20 July Marx had written a letter to Engels in which he stated that “the French need to be beaten. If the Prussians are victorious, the centralisation of state power will be useful for the centralisation of the German working class.” Marx adds: “German preponderance will moreover transform the centre of gravity of the labour movement of Western Europe from France to Germany; and it is enough to compare the movement in the two countries, from 1866 to the present, to see that the German working class is superior to the French both theoretically and organisationally. The preponderance, on the world scene, of the German proletariat over the French proletariat would be at the same time the preponderance of our theory over that of Proudhon.”

31 Letter, 2-9 juin 1870.

32 *Lettre à un Français*. Continuation, 25-26 août 1870. The Hebertists take their name from Jacques-René Hébert (1757-1794). They appeared in the summer of 1793 and formed the most radical wing of the revolutionary movement.

with elements of definition: it is in fact a federalist system. But it is not clear what he means by “legal anarchy” (“anarchie juridique”): absence of all laws, or legalisation on anarchy?

In the chapter of *L'Empire knouto-germanique* [The Knuto-German Empire] entitled “Historical Sophisms of the Doctrinaire School of German Communists”, where are mingled refutations of Marxism, accounts of his past relations with Marx and philosophical considerations on science, Bakunin sets out his own views, concluding: “This is the sense in which we are really anarchists.”

Again, he feels the need to clarify the meaning of the word.

A further distancing from the term can be found in “Mazzini’s Political Theology and the International”³³. The Russian revolutionary clearly prefers the term “revolutionary socialist”, but he is forced to note that the term “anarchist” seems to be unavoidable: after having outlined his positions, he feels he must specify that this is “the whole difference between the revolutionary socialists, *otherwise known as anarchists* [my emphasis], and the authoritarian and doctrinaire communists of Germany. He does not say: the revolutionary socialists call themselves anarchists; he says that they are *otherwise* called such. So it is others who call them like that.

Finally, in a text written between November 1870 and April 1871, Bakunin specifies:

“...we reject all legislation, all authority and all privileged, patented, official and legal influence, even if it comes from universal suffrage, convinced that they can only ever be used for the benefit of a dominant and exploitative minority against the interests of the immense enslaved majority. This is the sense in which we are really anarchists.”³⁴

By specifying: “this is the sense in which we are really anarchists”, one senses that this is a default designation.

“Statism and Anarchy”

Statism and Anarchy was published in 1873; it is Bakunin’s last important text, the one in which he sums up his thinking. The book, which is quite voluminous, is presented as a “publication of the social-revolutionary party”, from which it can be deduced that the name “social-revolutionary”, or “revolutionary socialist”, is the one that the Russian revolutionary claims, which is also confirmed in other texts.

The word “anarchist” only appears on page 209 of the manuscript (out of 308) and then only seven times, in different meanings but never in a negative sense. It is either the observation of an established fact or an explicit claim by the author to a doctrine.

Bakunin thus evokes “the path of the anarchist social revolution bursting forth of its own accord in the people, destroying all that opposes the impetuous flow of the people’s life, so that from the depths of its being, the new forms of a free community may then be created.” Similarly, “the peasant revolution, anarchic by nature” leads “directly to the abolition of the state”.

Statism and Anarchy is one of the few texts in which Bakunin claims anarchy as a doctrine and incorporates it into a programme; thus, he speaks of “we revolutionary-anarchists”. The book contains a refutation of the Marxist theses on the dictatorship of the proletariat, as well as an echo of what Marx had written in the Alleged Splits in the International ³⁵:

33 Deuxième partie: fragments et variantes. Fragment U. Août-octobre 1871.

34 Bakunin, *L'Empire Knouto-Germanique et la Révolution Sociale*. Suite. Dieu et l’Etat. 1. Novembre 1870 - avril 1871.

35 “The Alleged Splits in the International”, a text by Marx adopted by the General Council. Published in Geneva in 1872.

“All socialists understand by Anarchy this: the goal of the proletarian movement, the abolition of classes once achieved, the power of the state, which serves to keep the great producing majority under the yoke of a small minority, disappears, and the governmental functions are transformed into mere administrative functions.”

Bakunin responds in some way to Marx in Appendix A of *Statism and Anarchy*:

“...anarchy, *that is to say*, the free and autonomous organisation of all the separate units or parts composing the communes and their free federation founded, from the bottom up, not on the injunction of any authority, even an elected one, any more than on the formulations of any learned theory, but as a consequence of the natural development of the needs of all kinds which life itself will have brought to light.”

Bakunin’s use of the word “anarchy” in *Statism and Anarchy* is systematically situated in the context of a refutation of Marxist theses:

“While the politico-social theory of the anti-authoritarian or anarchist socialists infallibly leads them to a complete break with all governments, with all forms of bourgeois politics, and leaves them with no other way out than social revolution, the opposing theory, the theory of the authoritarian communists and of scientific authoritarianism attracts and engulfs its supporters, under the pretext of tactics, in ceaseless compromises with the governments and the various bourgeois political parties, that is to say, pushes them directly into the camp of reaction.”

In this passage, the claim to the word “anarchist” is clearly presented as optional: one is an anti-authoritarian socialist, or an anarchist. In another passage of the book Bakunin develops the main lines of the revolutionary socialist programme, and concludes: “Such are the convictions of the revolutionary-socialists and that is why we are called anarchists.” Again, it is clear that the term “anarchist” is not the one that first comes to mind; it is also clear that it is a term that has been chosen by others and that Bakunin is forced, for various reasons, to endorse, albeit unwillingly.

The wording is not innocent: “revolutionary-socialist” is the name he claims for himself; “anarchist” is the way others refer to him. However, Bakunin assumes this appellation:

“*We do not protest against this epithet*, because we are, in fact, enemies of all authority, because we know that it exerts the same perverse effect as much on those who are invested with it as on those who must submit to it.”³⁶

If one does not *protest* against an epithet, it remains obvious that one did not *choose* it. This does not prevent Bakunin from claiming the title of anarchist in point 3 of the programme of the Slavonic section of Zurich:

“3. Adopting the anarchist revolutionary programme, which alone, in our opinion, reflects all the conditions for a real and complete emancipation of the popular masses, and convinced that the existence of the state, in whatever form, is incompatible with the freedom of the proletariat, that it is an obstacle to the international fraternal alliance of the peoples, we want the abolition of all states. For the Slavic peoples in particular, this abolition is a matter of life and death, and at the same time the only means of reconciliation with the peoples of other races, for

36 Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*.

example the Turkish, Magyar or German peoples.”(*Statism and Anarchy*, Appendix B.)

It is likely that Bakunin did not write this programme alone and that he had to take into account the opinion of other militants in the group who did not have the same reservations about the use of the word “anarchy”. Once the word was thrown around, it became impossible to control.

The French Revolution as a model of “anarchy”

The Great Revolution is a constant reference for Bakunin, in that it sets a precedent³⁷. The events of the French Revolution and the concepts derived from it are constantly recalled. It is therefore natural that during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871 the Russian revolutionary constantly draws a parallel, in particular with the mass uprising of 1792.

In a text from August 1870, Bakunin writes that there is no longer in France “any administration and consequently no trace of government” and that the people of France, left completely to themselves, are “prey to the most dreadful anarchy.”³⁸ Bakunin draws an analogy here with the Extraordinary Commissioners that the Convention³⁹ sent to the provinces. Not only did the revolutionary bourgeois of 1793 not fear “the unleashing of popular passions, but they provoked it with all their strength, as the only means of salvation for the fatherland and for themselves against internal and external reaction”.

“When an Extraordinary Commissioner, delegated by the Convention, arrived in a province, he never addressed himself to the big shots of the region, nor to the well-gloved revolutionaries; he addressed himself directly to the sans-culottes⁴⁰, to the popular scoundrels, and it is on them that he relied to execute, against the big shots and the decent revolutionaries, the decrees of the Convention. So what they were doing was not strictly speaking centralisation or administration, but provocation.”⁴¹

“It is only very rarely,” adds Bakunin, “that they dictatorially imposed the will of the National Convention. They did so only when they came to a region “decidedly and unanimously hostile”: then they “added the argument of the bayonet to their civic eloquence”.

“But usually they came alone, without a soldier to support them, seeking their strength only in the masses, whose instincts were always in conformity with the thoughts of the Convention. Far from restricting the freedom of popular movements, for fear of anarchy, they provoked them in every way. The first thing they used to do was to form a popular club, where they could find none. Revolutionaries for good, they soon recognised the real revolutionaries in the mass, and allied themselves with them to blow up the revolution, the anarchy, and to organise this popular anarchy revolutionarily. This revolutionary organisation was the only administration and executive force used by the Proconsuls of 1793.”

37 Cf. René Berthier, “La Révolution française dans la formation de la théorie révolutionnaire chez Bakounine”, *Les anarchistes et la Révolution française*, éditions du Monde libertaire, 1990. [<http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article187>]

38 *Lettre à un Français*, 27 août 1870.

39

40 “Sans-culottes” was the name given at the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789, out of contempt, to the working classes who wore striped trousers and not short breeches (“culottes”) with stockings, which in the 18th century was the ordinary costume of the nobility and the bourgeoisie. Trousers were the costume of manual workers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, labourers and peasants.

41 *Lettre à un Français sur la crise actuelle*. 6. – 15 septembre 1870.

Bakunin's reference to the French Revolution makes it very clear what he means by "producing anarchy".

After the French defeat in 1871 and the fall of Napoleon III, the delegates of the provisional government were quite different:

"Instead of organising everywhere by the unleashing of revolutionary passions, anarchy and popular power, – they preached to the proletariat, following moreover in this strictly the instructions they had received and the recommendations sent to them from Paris – moderation, tranquillity, patience and blind confidence in the generous designs of the provisional government."⁴²

In 1870, in the middle of the war, Bakunin thought that "what alone can save France, in the midst of the terrible, mortal dangers, external and internal, which threaten her at present, is the spontaneous, formidable, passionately energetic, anarchic, destructive and savage uprising of the popular masses throughout the whole territory of France."⁴³ This does not prevent Bakunin from denouncing in the same text "the present economic anarchy" of a society "which is without pity for those who die of hunger"... In the same text we thus have two contradictory meanings of the word.

To those who, in the catastrophic situation of France following the defeat, cannot save it by "the exaggeration of the revolutionary power of public power", Bakunin says: "Well! save it by anarchy. Unleash this popular anarchy in the countryside as well as in the cities, swell it to the point that it rolls like a furious avalanche, devouring and destroying everything: enemies and Prussians." "Anarchy" here has the meaning of popular insurrection. In sum, Bakunin advocates renewing the episode of the mass uprising of 1792 against the armies coalised against the Revolution: "The peasants will do against the Prussians today, what they did in 1792 against them. – It is only necessary that they have the Devil in them, and it is only the anarchic revolution that can put him in them."

At this level of the examination of the notion of "anarchy" in Bakunin, we understand that it is a situation of political and social chaos resulting from a great commotion: "Since revolution cannot be enforced in the countryside, it must be produced there, by provoking the revolutionary movement of the peasants themselves, by urging them to destroy with their own hands public order, all political and civil institutions, and to constitute and organise anarchy in the countryside."⁴⁴

This notion does not have, as in the "bourgeois" language, an absolutely pejorative connotation. "Anarchy" is not something that Bakunin seeks to avoid at all costs: it is the simple observation of a situation that is part of a strategic analysis and of which revolutionaries must take advantage.

Explicit claims

It is in an 1870 text intended for Russian youth that Bakunin addresses a positive definition of "anarchy"⁴⁵. He distinguishes two distinct parties in the socialist movement:

- "The Party of Moderate or Bourgeois Socialists";
- "The Party of Revolutionary Socialists".

The latter party is itself subdivided into two parties: the "social-revolutionary statist" and the "social-revolutionary anarchists".

Explicit references to "anarchy" as a doctrine appear as the conflict between the

⁴² Bakounine, *Lettre à un français, Continuation III*, 27 août 1870.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ "L'Alliance Universelle de la Démocratie Sociale. Section russe. A la jeunesse russe." Mars 1870.

“anti-authoritarians” and the General Council becomes more acute. It is certainly no coincidence that Bakunin appealed to Proudhon’s patronage in June 1872, *i.e.* between the London conference and the Hague congress. He then evoked Proudhon’s political theory, which “proclaimed an-archy”⁴⁶ – an exact reference because this is how Proudhon wrote the word.

This is a proper claim to the term, since Bakunin adds that there are two opposing systems: “the anarchic system of Proudhon, by us enlarged, developed and liberated from all its metaphysical, idealistic, doctrinaire attire” and “the system of Marx, head of the German School of Authoritarian Communists.”⁴⁷ In October 1872 – the exclusion from the Hague Congress had taken place – Bakunin called himself a “revolutionary anarchist”⁴⁸; and again, in 1873 in *Statism and Anarchy*.

This is also the moment when Bakunin addresses the core of the problem, that of the abolition of the state, to which the Marxists adhere in principle, but not in fact. “If their state is indeed a people’s state, what reason would there be for abolishing it?” he asks. On the other hand, if its abolition is “necessary for the real emancipation of the people, how can it be called a people’s state”? The Marxists are thus faced with an insurmountable contradiction:

“By arguing with them, we have led them to recognise that freedom or anarchy, *i.e.* the free organisation of the working masses from the bottom up, is the ultimate goal of social evolution, and that any state, including their people’s state, is a yoke, which means that, on the one hand, it engenders despotism, and on the other, slavery.”⁴⁹

So we have a definition: anarchy is “the free organisation of the working masses from the bottom up”.

Marxists say that dictatorship is “a necessary transitional phase in order to achieve the total emancipation of the people: anarchy or freedom being the goal, the state or dictatorship the means. Thus, in order to emancipate the popular masses, one should begin by enslaving them.”

There are very few texts in which Bakunin explicitly declares himself an anarchist, without reservation. Two of them are letters – January and September 1873 – to Zamfirij Konstantinovitch Ralli-Arbore. In the January letter, he gives him a curious speech:

“Never forget that in any revolution there is three quarters fantasy and only one quarter reality, or, in other words – for I can see you frowning as you read these lines – life, my friend, is always broader than doctrine; life will never fit into a doctrine, even one as universal as our anarchist doctrine.”

This reflection is interesting in more than one respect. First of all, it gives “anarchy” the status of a doctrine, which is rare. But above all, it invites us not to adopt a dogmatic position and not to let ourselves be limited by doctrines.

In the second letter to Ralli, Bakunin refers to the Geneva congress of the AIT held on 1-6 September 1873, after his exclusion. On this occasion he says: “we anarchists”, and “anarchy is our programme”. Such a statement is unusual, and is explained by the context. For two years there had been a tug-of-war between the two currents in the International – the “authoritarians” and the “anti-authoritarians”. In September 1871, shortly after the end of the Commune, a conference had been held in London, which statutorily had no decision-making power.

The Marxist positions won by a dummy majority obtained by rigged mandates

46 “Frères de l’Alliance en Espagne”, 12-13 juin 1872.

47 *Ibid.*

48 “Lettre au journal “La Liberté” de Bruxelles”, 1-8 octobre 1872.

49 *Statism and Anarchy*.

offered to men who were sure of them, delegates co-opted by the General Council, uninformed federations, in short a whole arsenal of measures which would prove their worth in the worst moments of the history of the workers' movement. The conference decided to exclude James Guillaume and Bakunin, who had not been summoned...

Bakunin would later say:

"We know how this conference was botched; it was composed of Mr. Marx's intimates, carefully selected by himself, plus a few dupes. The conference voted for everything he thought fit to propose to it⁵⁰, and the Marxian programme, transformed into official truth, was imposed as a binding principle on the whole International."⁵¹

As this conference had no decision-making value, a congress was convened, which took place in The Hague in September 1872. The same assembly confirmed the exclusion of the two men and the General Council was given full powers. It was given", says Bakunin, "the right of censorship over all the newspapers and all the sections of the International. The urgency of a secret correspondence between the General Council and all the regional councils was recognised; it was granted, moreover, the right to send agents to all countries in order to intrigue in its favour⁵² ... "

When the member federations of the IWA realised the manipulation of which they had been victims, they disavowed the decisions of this rigged congress: the Jura federation on 15 September 1872; the delegates of the French sections in October; the Italian federation in December, as well as the Belgian federation; the Spanish federation in January 1873 as well as the Dutch and English federations.

Of course, not all the federations were "Bakuninian", and the disavowal of Marx's practices did not constitute an act of rallying. However, this disavowal expresses clearly that the international unity of the workers' movement was only possible on the basis of concrete solidarity, as proposed by Bakunin, and that the "powerful centralisation of all powers in the hands of the General Council" led to the *de facto* dissolution of the IWA⁵³.

Without the Byzantinists, that is an essential part of its substance, what was left of the "Marxised" International collapsed. The Geneva congress which followed that of The Hague, organised by the now defunct General Council, was a "fiasco", according to Marx himself. The transfer of the headquarters of the IWA to New York, where no one could go, gave the organisation the "coup de grâce". Marx justified this transfer by saying that "every year hundreds of thousands of men go to America, banished from their country or driven by need"⁵⁴ which, moreover, did not seem compatible with the "powerful centralisation" demanded.

One of the first acts of the new leading body of the IWA was to suspend the Jura federation, which had first stood in solidarity with Bakunin and James Guillaume. Marx was furious because the new General Council in New York at first only *suspended* the Jura federation instead of *excluding* it. "In my opinion the General

50 Bakunin refers to the modification of the statutes of the IWA decided at the confidential London conference in 1871 and ratified by the Hague congress in 1872. Marx had always been obsessed with the idea of introducing into the statutes an article calling for the constitution of workers into national political parties and the conquest of power. The "anti-authoritarians" had opposed the introduction of this clause in the statutes, believing that Article 7 was sufficient and that the federations of the IWA should determine their own positions on this question. Marx and Engels took advantage of the rigged conference and congress to add an Article 7a saying that "the proletariat can only act as a class by constituting itself as a separate political party" and concluding that "the conquest of political power has become the great duty of the proletariat". Technically, this article 7a has no value since almost all the federations of the IWA have disavowed the decisions of the Hague congress. However, Marxists take it for granted that this article is an integral part of the statutes of the International.

51 Œuvres, Champ libre, III, 167.

52 Œuvres, Champ libre, III, 107.

53 Cf. Œuvres, Champ libre, III, 411.

54 Quoted by Cité A. Lehning, Œuvres, Champ libre, 411.

Council in New York has made a great mistake by suspending the Jura Federation. These people have already left the International by their declaration that the International's Congress and Rules do not exist for them⁵⁵."

Marx justified his opinion with the argument, which has been used a lot since then, that the offender had "put himself outside the organisation". This avoids the always somewhat embarrassing task of formally excluding an individual or a group. The only thing to do is to "register" the departure of the troublemaker: "Everyone and every group has the right to withdraw from the International, and when that happens the General Council has only to record their departure officially; it is not in any way its function to suspend them":

"So if the New York General Council does not alter its procedure, what will be the consequences? The Council will follow up its suspension of the Jura by suspending also the secessionist federations in Spain, Italy, Belgium and England. Result: all the riff-raff will turn up again in Geneva and paralyse all serious work there, just as they did in The Hague, and they will once again compromise the whole work of the Congress for the greater good of the bourgeoisie. The great achievement of the Hague Congress was to induce the rotten elements to exclude themselves, *i.e.* to leave. The procedure of the General Council now threatens to invalidate that achievement."⁵⁶

On 30 May 1873, the General Council of New York voted, according to indications sent by Engels, the exclusion of all the federations or sections which declare to dissociate themselves from the Hague congress. The rupture was thus consummated. Marx and Engels, with a small clique of loyalists around them, literally excluded from the IWA almost the entire international labour movement of their time⁵⁷.

Bakunin is therefore not wrong to say that the IWA was separated into two camps: "on the one hand there is, strictly speaking, only Germany"; on the other hand there are, to varying degrees, Italy, Spain, the Swiss Jura, a large part of France, Belgium and Holland and in the very near future the Slavic peoples"⁵⁸. Bakunin reaffirms the inadvisability of making the political question an obligatory principle for the International; solidarity on the ground of struggles unites us, he says, while political questions separate us.

When Bakunin wrote to Ralli in September 1873, these events were recent. At the time, the anti-authoritarians had reason to be satisfied. This was by no means a split of the "anti-authoritarians", since all the federations of the International had disavowed the General Council. It was undoubtedly, at that moment, a crushing victory of the "anti-authoritarians". That's how it should have been perceived at any rate: it was undoubtedly a victory of the "anti-authoritarians".

This explains Bakunin's words to Ralli: "We have demolished the authoritarian edifice, *anarchy is our programme*, therefore there is no reason to retreat" [*My emphasis*] Bakunin had every reason to be satisfied. He therefore no longer felt the need to put restrictions on the appellation "anarchist". In a way, it can be said that it was from this moment that Bakunin assumed the designation of "anarchist".

One of the few occasions when Bakunin explicitly refers to anarchism is in a text that is not actually of much interest for the presentation of his political ideas: "Les intrigues de monsieur Utin" (July-August 1870), in which he refers to the

55 MECW, Laurence & Wishart, vol. 44, Marx to Bolte, 12 February 1873, p. 475

56 MECW, Laurence & Wishart, vol. 44, Marx to Bolte, 12 February 1873, pp 475-476.

57 Strictly speaking, there was no German federation of the International. It was customary to regard the Social Democratic Party as a member of the IWA, but this was only theoretical: there was no German federation, as Engels' panic on the eve of the Hague Congress shows, when only 208 members were counted. Germany had no sections in the International, only a very small number of individual members. It could therefore not send regular delegates to the congresses. In order to be able to vote at the congress, the sections had to have paid their dues. Bebel had written in the *Volkstaat* of 16 March 1872 that the German Internationals had never paid their dues in London!

58 Bakunin, Works, Œuvres, Champ libre, III, 149.

“anarchist doctrine of a non-authoritarian social order”. It is a text that is part of his struggle against the intrigues of the General Council of which Utin was the creature.

“On Europe”

In what is undoubtedly one of Bakunin’s last texts, “On Europe”, the old revolutionary once again evokes “anarchy”, which returns to its current – normal, I dare say – meaning. This return to normality is also a sign that the conflict with Marx – we are in 1876 – has become ancient history. Indeed, Bakunin’s affirmations of anarchy coincide with the climaxes of crisis with Marx.

“Let no one think that I want to plead the cause of absolute anarchy in popular movements. Such anarchy would be nothing but a complete absence of common thought, purpose and conduct, and it would necessarily result in common impotence. Everything that is viable occurs in a certain order which is inherent in it and which manifests what is in it. Each popular revolution, which is not stillborn, will therefore conform⁵⁹ of itself to an order which will be peculiar to it, and which will always be guessed by popular instinct, and will be determined by the natural combination of all local circumstances with the common aim which impassions the masses. For this order to emerge and to establish itself, in the midst of the apparent anarchy of a popular uprising, it is necessary that a single great passion embrace the people and that its object be clearly determined.”⁶⁰

Bakunin means here, we think, that popular movements do not occur without being underpinned by a number of determinisms. A popular revolution is the product of implicit causes of which the moving masses are confusedly aware. The examples Bakunin gives are significant: he cites the Chouans, whose programme was, “alas! excessively reactionary”⁶¹, but the insurgents were animated by “one great passion”: the result was that “the hardened troops of the Republic, commanded by the best generals, were held in check for many years by the disorder of these peasants.” This is Bakunin’s emphasis. He also cites the resistance of the Spaniards against Napoleon, and that of the Russians.

In short, the old revolutionary explains that he does not believe in spontaneity. On this question he had been extremely clear in a text written during the Franco-Prussian war. Socialism, he said, “finds a real existence only in the enlightened revolutionary instinct, in the collective will and in the proper organisation of the working masses themselves, – and when this instinct, this will, this organisation are lacking, the best books in the world are nothing but empty theories, impotent dreams.”⁶²

Revolutionary instinct, will and organisation are therefore the preconditions of a revolution: without these conditions, no “anarchy”, in the sense of chaos from which the revolutionary movement could benefit, could lead to social revolution.

At the end of his life Bakunin seems to have returned to the idea of using “anarchy”, *i.e.* political chaos, to transform it into social revolution. In the meantime, he was able to observe a phenomenon that made him change. He noticed that the state had developed enormous means of repression against the working class, which the latter would find very difficult to deal with. The time for revolutions, he thought, was over – “for the moment”⁶³. It should be noted that in

59 The text of the Amsterdam International Institute of Social History says : “will confirm”.

60 “Sur l’Europe”, 1876.

61 The Chouans were royalist peasants from western France who insurged against the First Republic from 1793 to 1800.

62 “Lettres à un Français sur la crise actuelle”, 1870. Significantly, Bakunin follows the same pattern as Proudhon, who explains that the working class will only attain political capacity when it is conscious of itself, when it has an “Idea”, and when it creates an organisation.

63 “... the revolution, for the moment, has returned to its bed, we are back in the period of evolutions, that is to say in the period of underground, invisible and often even insensitive

this text, written very shortly before his death, “anarchy” is once again taken in its sense of “chaos”, and not in that of “political doctrine”.

Little by little, the elements emerge

Little by little, elements emerge that allow us to reconstruct the genesis of the term “anarchy” to designate the revolutionary socialists, or federalists. This term was attributed to them by their “authoritarian” opponents, Marxists and Mazzinians, by two political currents that cannot conceive of a decentralised, federalist form of organisation. In the mental structure of Marxist and Mazzinian “authoritarians”, the autonomy of the parts is equivalent to disorder, to anarchy⁶⁴.

Marx and Bakunin opposed each other on the idea of imposing a political programme on the International, and in particular on the parliamentary conquest of power. Regardless of his views on parliamentary action, Bakunin believed that the federations should be left free to define their own strategy because the conditions in which they found themselves were too varied for a uniform policy to be possible. Marx and Engels failed to impose their views and excluded the entire workers’ movement of their time from the International. It was only twenty years later that the Second International succeeded where Marx had failed, and once again excluded the anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists. For the “authoritarians” – Marxists and Mazzinians – the positions of the revolutionary socialists amounted to disorder, to anarchy.

This is very clear in the texts where Bakunin criticises Mazzini, against whom he fought. This fact is somewhat underestimated because the Mazzinians have been forgotten in history, but at the time they were powerful and influential. Thus, in his “Letter to the Bologna Internationals” of December 1871⁶⁵ Bakunin raises precisely the question of the autonomy of the sections – what he says of Mazzini could apply to Marx:

“This absolute absence of a single dogma and of a Central Government in our great International Association, this almost absolute freedom of the sections, revolts the doctrinarism and authoritarianism of the statesman-prophet Mazzini. And yet it was precisely this freedom which he called anarchy, and which, founded on the real source and creative basis of our real unity, on the real identity of the situation and

revolutions.” Bakunin, letter to Elisée Reclus, 15 february 1875, in: Michel Bakounine et les autres, éditions 10/18, p. 341.

64 I believe that the concept of “anti-authoritarian” is misunderstood today. Anti-authoritarian activists were primarily opposed to a centralising vision of the organisation, in which those at the top of the General Council controlled everything in a bureaucratic way. Semantically, “anti-authoritarian” should be taken in the sense of “anti-bureaucratic”, a word that did not exist at the time and that originally came from the sociology of organisations. Later on, there was a shift in meaning: the word took on a psychologising meaning and was applied to any “authoritarian” personal behaviour. “Authority” was used for all purposes.

One example perfectly illustrates the bureaucratic practices of Marx and Engels. John Hales, a member of the English committee of the International, tells of his troubles with the organisation’s bureaucracy:

“Anyone who did not know the late General Council cannot form an idea of how facts were distorted there and how information which might have enlightened us was intercepted. There has never been a secret conspiracy whose action was more covert than that of the former General Council. Thus, when I was General Secretary of this Council, I never knew and could never obtain the addresses of the federations of the continent. Another example: one day the English Federal Council received a very important letter from the Spanish Federal Council; but the signatory of this letter, the citizen Anselmo Lorenzo, had forgotten to give his address in the letter; the English Federal Council then asked the citizen Engels, who was at that time the corresponding secretary of the General Council for Spain, to give it the address of the Spanish Federal Council: the citizen Engels formally refused. Lately he has made the same refusal to us with regard to the Federal Council of Lisbon.”

The reader has read correctly: John Hales, who for several months was General Secretary of the General Council of the IWA, could not have access to the addresses of the federations on the continent because Engels blocked the information. (John Hales, letter to the Federal Committee of the Jura Federation, 6 november 1872. *L’internationale, documents et souvenirs*, éditions G. Lebovici, p. 25.)

65 Explanatory and justificatory documents N° 1.

aspirations of the proletariat of all countries, it was this freedom which created a real conformity of ideas and all the power of the International.”

Once again, it is the opponent who speaks of “anarchy”. For Bakunin, the unity of the International did not come from the submission of the sections and federations to a Centre which held its power from the transcendent authority of “scientific socialism”, of Marx, of God or Mazzini, it was the consequence of the freedom of debate which reigned there.

There is still, in this letter to the Bologna Internationals, a passage where Bakunin affirms a clear retraction concerning the word “anarchy”. At the 1869 congress of the International, where “Marxists” and “Bakuninists” clashed, he says, to the flag of authoritarian communism and the emancipation of the proletariat by the state, the Belgian, French, French-speaking Swiss, Italian and Spanish delegates had successfully opposed “the flag of absolute liberty, or, *as they say* [emphasis added], of anarchy, that of the abolition of the states and the organisation of human society on the ruins of the states”.

It is still in a letter to the Italians⁶⁶ that Bakunin expresses his reservations: the German workers, he says “call us anarchists, and we call them authoritarians”. These terms, which once again show that Bakunin only took on the label of “anarchist” under duress – as the Germans no doubt took on the label of “authoritarians” – refer to two opposing political visions in the International. But, Bakunin points out, “let a strike break out in Germany, or let the German workers revolt in one way or another against their present government, against despotism both military and bourgeois – and you will see the Jura workers helping their brothers the workers of Germany with all their means; and vice versa, you can be sure that the German workers will do the same for the Jura workers.”

In May 1872, that is, between the London conference which decided to exclude Bakunin and James Guillaume and the Hague congress which effectively excluded them, Bakunin continued to have reservations. He wrote to Anselmo Lorenzo on 7 May of that year: “You are not unaware, Citizen, that they present me on every occasion as the head of the School they call anarchist, in the International. It is an honour *and an insult* which I have never deserved.” [My emphasis.]

When in 1868, in the statutes of the Alliance⁶⁷, Bakunin invokes “anarchy”, it is not of a doctrine that he speaks but of anarchy as a historical jolt from which revolutionaries must take advantage: “We do not fear, we invoke anarchy, convinced that from this anarchy, that is, from the complete manifestation of unleashed popular life, must come freedom, equality, justice, the new order, and the very strength of the Revolution against Reaction.”

Four years later, at the end of August 1872, he used practically the same words: “We invoke anarchy, this manifestation of popular life and aspirations, from which must emerge with and through freedom, the real equality of all, the new order founded on the integral development and freely organised work of all, and the very force of the revolution.”⁶⁸ Moreover, Bakunin is so little “anarchist”, in the anti-organisational and spontaneist sense that the word has come to take on, that he adds:

“...for the triumph of the revolution against reaction, it is necessary that in the midst of the popular anarchy which will constitute the very life and all the energy of the revolution, the unity of thought and of revolutionary action should find an organ. This organ must be the secret and universal Association of International Brothers.”

“Anarchy” as a spontaneous mass movement of popular revolt only makes sense if there is a coherent and structured revolutionary organisation. It is certainly

66 “Lettre à Lodovico Nabruzzi et autres internationaux de la Romagne”, 23-26 janvier 1872.

67 “Statuts secrets de l’Alliance: Programme et objet de l’organisation révolutionnaire des Frères internationaux”. Automne 1868.

68 « Programme de la Fraternité internationale », 30 août-13 septembre 1872.

no coincidence that Bakunin fully endorsed the word (“We revolutionary anarchists”) only after his exclusion from the IWA by Marx and his friends.

Conclusion

This study, we believe, shows that the word “anarchy” in Bakunin is used mainly in its usual sense; that the meaning of the word is often ambivalent since in the same text the word can be used with two opposite meanings. When Bakunin claims “anarchy” as a doctrine, the word is almost always accompanied by qualifiers that clarify its meaning, or by restrictive formulas that make it clear that it is being used instead of another. The pattern is the following: “I am an anarchist, *that is to say...*” This pattern occurs too often for us not to question Bakunin’s real commitment to “anarchy”. Let us recall that even Kropotkin, who remains a reference, questioned this term.

It is also noticeable that when Bakunin wants to name positively the political doctrine he claims, he most often uses the term “revolutionary socialist” or “collectivist”. It seems that the explicit reclamation of the term as a political doctrine occur – somewhat provocatively – at a peak in his conflict with Marx in 1872 and 1873. Once this conflict is over, it resumes its usual meaning.

In the years 1860-1870, there were unsuccessful attempts to form a revolutionary organisation. No one at the time found an acceptable solution. If Bakunin oscillates between public and secret organisation – it should be remembered that workers’ organisations were illegal almost everywhere – the secret organisations in question were more a “network” of militants who corresponded with each other than a body which claimed to be in charge of the international proletariat⁶⁹. The main objective was to try to regroup active and determined militants in order to constitute revolutionary cadres, a task which, chronologically, seems natural when one wants to give a certain orientation to a mass organisation.

After the death of the Russian revolutionary, the movement which claimed his legacy underwent progressive drifts which lead to a fundamental questioning of Bakuninian principles and to the foundation of anarchism proper, around 1879-1880. And that’s another story...

* * * * *

The final word of the story is perhaps due to an Englishman, John Hales⁷⁰ who, after the Hague Congress of 1872, took a stand in favour of the “anti-authoritarian” International against the group of bureaucrats who controlled the General Council. Hales was not at all an “anarchist”, he thought that workers should present candidates in elections, etc., but he also thought that the federations of the IWA should have the possibility of defining their choices themselves. He therefore attended the Geneva Congress of the anti-authoritarian IWA in 1873 as a delegate of the English Federal Council and of the Liverpool section.

He spoke on the question: “Is there any reason to replace the institution of the General Council with some new administrative machinery?” Traumatized by the bureaucratic excesses of the outgoing General Council, the delegates were all agreed that something else was needed.

Hales said:

“The debate is really about the organisation of a Central Commission or the organisation of anarchy. I fight anarchy because the word and the thing it stands for are synonymous with dissolution. Anarchy means

69 It is in my opinion an anachronism to equate Bakunin’s “Alliance” to a platformist type of organisation.

70 See note 56.

individualism, and individualism is the basis of the present social state which we wish to destroy. Anarchy is incompatible with collectivism. We must not confuse authority with organisation. We are not authoritarian, but we must remain organisers. Far from voting for anarchy, which is the present social state, we must fight it by the creation of a Central Commission, and, in the future, by the organisation of collectivism. Anarchy is the law of death, collectivism the law of life⁷¹.”

The interest of Hales’s statement is that it gives us the representation that the overwhelming majority of the population must have had of the concept of “anarchy” *as soon as the early 1870s*. It also shows the extent to which the insistence on the term obscured, if not inhibited, people’s understanding of the substance of libertarian doctrine.

The interest of Hales’ statement is that it shows us the incredible confusion that existed, *as soon as the early 1870s*, about what ‘anarchy’ was, equating it with chaos and individualism. His statement also shows how the insistence on the term may have obscured, or even inhibited, people’s understanding of the substance of libertarian doctrine.

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Afterword

In 2009, I published a text on monde-nouveau.net in which I examined the different meanings that the Russian revolutionary assigned to this term⁷². Indeed, I had noted that he often used it in different, even contradictory meanings in the same text, that there was never any question of anarchism and that “anarchy” was mostly used in its common sense of “disorder”, “chaos”. However, things were more complex because Bakunin sometimes attributed to chaos, to “anarchy”, a positive meaning in the sense that it could in certain circumstances ultimately lead to desirable consequences. It is in this sense that on two occasions Bakunin explicitly *invokes* anarchy.

To my knowledge, Bakunin only “invokes” anarchism twice: in 1868 in the secret statutes of the Alliance and in 1872 in the programme of the International Brotherhood. The CDRom of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam provides four drafts of the first text, eight of the second, and both texts were by definition not publicly available as they were documents of secret organisations.

Moreover, the obvious draft state in which these two texts appear in the Amsterdam archives does not even prove that they were actually distributed to the militants of the Alliance and the Brotherhood. When Bakunin explicitly “invokes” “anarchy”, he does so in two texts intended for militants close to him, not for the public. This invocation is thus situated within the framework of a strategic reflection limited to a reduced sphere of revolutionary militants who were capable of understanding what Bakunin meant. Authors who, in order to explain Bakunin’s political thought to a wide audience, would put forward these invocations, limited to two texts, and intended for a very narrow circle of people, rather than the most positive aspects of his thought, would be committing a common-sense error and would place themselves on the same ground as all those who share the common opinion of a “pan-destructive” Bakunin.

The invocation of anarchy in the mature Bakunin is irresistibly reminiscent of what he wrote in 1842 in *The Reaction in Germany*, in his Hegelian youth, when he

71 Quoted by James Guillaume, *L'Internationale, Documents et souvenirs*, tome III, V, 5, p. 114. I am translating Hales’ text into English from its French translation because I was unable to find the original English text.

72 “L’Usage du mot ‘anarchie’ chez Bakunine” (http://monde-nouveau.net/ecriture/?exec=article&id_article=185)

declared that the passion to destroy was also a creative passion. I would add that this is one of Bakunin's most misunderstood and misinterpreted sentences.

Bakunin never disavowed this sentence, since he used it again on 3 July 1869 in a letter to Adolf Reichel, and again in 1873 in *Statism and Anarchy*, where we read:

“This negative passion for destruction is far from sufficient to bring the revolutionary cause to the desired level; but without it this cause is inconceivable, even impossible, for there is no revolution without profound and passionate destruction, a saving and fertile destruction because precisely from it, and only through it, new worlds are created and given birth to.”⁷³

Note that in this sentence Bakunin specifies that “negative passion” is “far from sufficient”. Let us add that the idea is not precisely original; Proudhon had also formulated it in 1846 in the *System of Economic Contradictions* when he wrote, in a more concise and less melodramatic way it is true: “Destruam et aedificabo” (I destroy and I build).

It is hard to imagine today the extent of the enthusiasm for Hegel's philosophy in the 1830s and 1840s. But in 1842, when he wrote *The Reaction in Germany*, Bakunin was still completely impregnated with this Hegelian philosophy, which he never got rid of, in fact. The idea that life is a continuous succession of destruction and construction is one of the basic ideas of Hegelian philosophy, and only ignorance can explain why many authors have reduced Bakunin's entire thought to this little phrase about destructive passion, which can only be understood in context.

It must be acknowledged, however, that Bakunin is perhaps partly responsible for the legend of the pan-destroyer that has followed him. He had difficulty resisting the urge to make fun of certain people. James Guillaume writes that the Russian revolutionary “was fond of telling stories, memories of his youth, things he had said or heard. He had a whole repertoire of anecdotes...”⁷⁴ One day, in Italy, a lady asked him: “If the revolution broke out, you would probably find yourself without tobacco: what would you do then?” Bakunin replied: “Well! Madame, I would smoke the revolution.” It is easy to imagine the good lady rushing to tell the story, magnifying it.

James Guillaume recalls another anecdote that Bakunin told with a laugh (this precision is necessary): in Germany, at the end of a dinner organised by bourgeois democrats in 1848, he had made this toast: “I drink to the destruction of public order and to the unleashing of evil passions.” A round of applause followed. When one knows what Bakunin thought of the German bourgeois radicals, this toast can only have been motivated by a malicious desire to provoke those whom he never ceased to consider as anything but wishful thinkers. One can suppose that what amused Bakunin at the evocation of this anecdote was the thunder of applause, which can only be explained by the fact that these good people had had a well-watered meal...

The evocation of James Guillaume is an almost exact quotation of what Bakunin wrote twenty years later in one of his projects of secret society: “Our means of revolution is in the organised unleashing (*sic*) of what is called today the bad passions and in the radical and necessary destruction of what, in the same language, is called public order”.⁷⁵

It may seem surprising that Hegel himself has not been described as a pan-destroyer by the very people who accuse Bakunin of this. The writings of the German philosopher are full of passages which, taken out of context, could lend credence to this idea. His philosophy of history is but a vast panorama filled with collapsing civilisations...

73 Bakounine, *Œuvres*, Champ Libre, vol. IV, p. 223.

74 Arthur Lehning, *Bakounine et les autres*, 10/18, p. 266.

75 “Fraternité internationale. Programme et objet.” End 1868.

The idea that in order to build one must first destroy is a commonplace, but it may also be a preconception that needs to be demonstrated. No doubt it is sometimes necessary to destroy a house in order to build another, but what must be destroyed in the capitalist system are not houses or buildings but social relationships, that is to say things that are more or less immaterial. It is not so much a question of destroying the factories that produce the things necessary for life or the buildings that house the ministries, but of changing the way in which human existence is organised and creating new social relations – although certain things will undoubtedly have to be abolished and certainly not reconstituted. There is no doubt that a certain degree of violence, or rather force, will be necessary, but it is not this violence, or this force, that defines anarchism but the project of society that it carries.

* * * * *

There is of course something of a provocation in my assertion about Bakunin not being an “anarchist” but if one cannot be a bit iconoclastic with anarchists, where do we go? Naturally, I keep on saying that Bakunin is an anarchist when I have a conversation on the question, because nobody expects Bakunin *not* to be an anarchist and I don’t necessarily feel like giving a half-hour explanation each time. Besides, I can easily imagine the mess that would result in the historiography of anarchism if it was agreed that Bakunin was not “anarchist”, but *something else*.

But one can easily imagine as well what would happen during a public meeting or in a meeting between workers in a workshop, if an activist wanted to make propaganda for anarchism and declared: “Comrades, I invoke anarchy”. Even if he were allowed to proceed, he would have to spend a lot of time explaining what he really meant, precious time that could be spent in explaining the “constructive thought of Bakunin”⁷⁶ as Gaston Leval said.

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76 Gaston Leval, *La pensée constructive de bakounine* [The Constructive thought of Bakunin] Editions Spartacus, 1976.

Also: Gaston Leval “Bakounine, constructeur de l’avenir” [Bakunin, builder of the future], <http://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article42>

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