

"Everyone carries within themselves the germs of this lust for power, and every germ, as we know, because of a basic law of life, necessarily must develop and grow, if only it finds in its environment favourable conditions. These conditions in human society are the stupidity, ignorance, apathy, indifference, and servile habits of the masses - so one may say justly that it is the masses themselves that produce those exploiters, oppressors, despots and executioners of humanity, of whom they are the victims."

Mikhail Bakunin
(Power and Authority)

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imperfect expression - whereas we, real beings, living, working, struggling, loving, aspiring, enjoying, and suffering, are its direct representatives.

But, while rejecting the absolute, universal, and infallible authority of men of science, we willingly bow before the respectable, although relative, temporary, and closely restricted authority of the representatives of special sciences, asking for nothing better than to consult them by turns, and feeling very grateful for such valuable information as they may want to extend to us - on condition, however, that they be willing to receive similar counsels from us on occasion, when matters about which, we are more learned than they.

In general, we ask nothing better than to see men endowed with great knowledge, great experience, great minds, and above all great hearts, exercise over us a natural and legitimate influence, freely accepted, and never imposed in the name of any official authority whatever - celestial or terrestrial. We accept all natural authorities and all influence of fact, but none of right; for every authority and every influence of right, officially imposed as such, becoming directly an oppression and a falsehood, would inevitably impose upon us... slavery and absurdity.

The only great and omnipotent authority, at once natural and rational, the only one which we may respect, will be that of the collective and public spirit of a society founded on equality and solidarity and the mutual human respect of all its members.

Yes, this is an authority which is not at all divine, which is wholly human, but before which we shall bow willingly, certain that, far from enslaving them, it will emancipate men. It will be a thousand times more powerful than all your divine, theological, metaphysical, political, and judicial authorities, established by the Church and state, more powerful than your criminal codes, your jailers, and your executioners.

In a word, we reject all privileged, licensed, official, and legal legislation and authority, even though it arise from universal suffrage, convinced that it could turn only to the benefit of a dominant and exploiting minority, and against the interests of the vast enslaved majority. It is in this sense that we are really Anarchists.

POWER AND AUTHORITY

Power and Authority is an extract from the book "The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism"
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All men possess a natural instinct for power which has its origin in the basic law of life enjoining every individual to wage a ceaseless struggle in order to insure his existence or to assert his rights. This struggle among men began with cannibalism; then continuing throughout the centuries under various religious banners, it passed successively through all forms of slavery and serfdom, becoming humanised very slowly little by little, and seeming to relapse at times into primitive savagery. At the present time that struggle is taking place under the double aspect of exploitation of wage labour by capital, and of the political, juridical, civil, military and police oppression by the State and Church, and by State officials; and it continues to arouse within all the individuals born in society the desire, the need, and sometimes the inevitability of commanding and exploiting other people.

Thus we see that the instinct to command others, in its primitive essence, is a carnivorous, altogether bestial and savage instinct. Under the influence of the mental development of men, it takes on a somewhat more ideal form, and becomes somewhat ennobled, presenting itself as the instrument of reason and the devoted servant of that abstraction, or political fiction, which is called the public good. But in its essence it remains just as baneful, and it becomes even more so when, with the application of science, it extends its scope and intensifies the power of its action. If there is a devil in history, it is this power principle. It is this principle, together with the stupidity and ignorance of the masses, upon which it is ever based and without which it never could exist, - it is this principle alone that has produced all the misfortunes, all the crimes, and the most shameful facts of history.

And inevitably this cursed element is to be found, as natural instinct, in every man, the best of them not excepted. Everyone carries within himself the germs of this lust for power, and every germ, as we know, because of a basic law of

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life, necessarily must develop and grow, if only it finds in its environment favourable conditions. These conditions in human society are the stupidity, ignorance, apathy, indifference, and servile habits of the masses - so one may say justly that it is the masses themselves that produce those exploiters, oppressors, despots, and executioners of humanity, of whom they are victims. When the masses are deeply sunk in their sleep, patiently resigned to their degradation and slavery, the best men in their midst, the most energetic and intelligent of them, those who in a different environment might render great services to humanity, necessarily become despots. Often they become such by entertaining the illusion that they are working for the good of those whom they oppress. On the contrary, in an intelligent, wide-awake society, jealously guarding its liberty and disposed to defend its rights, even the most egoistic and malevolent individuals become good members of society. Such is the power of society, a thousand times greater than that of the strongest individuals.

Man's nature is so constituted that, given the possibility of doing evil, that is, of feeding his vanity, his ambition, and his cupidity at the expense of someone else, he surely will make full use of such an opportunity. We of course are all sincere Socialists and revolutionists; and still, were we endowed with power, even for the short duration of a few months, we would not be what we are now. As Socialists we are convinced, you and I, that social environment, social position, and conditions of existence, are more powerful than the intelligence and will of the strongest and most powerful individual, and it is precisely for this reason that we demand not natural but social equality of individuals as the condition for justice and the foundation of morality. And that is why we detest power, all power, just as people detest it.

No one should be entrusted with power, inasmuch as anyone invested with authority must, through the force of an immutable social law, become an oppressor and exploiter of society.

We are in fact enemies of all authority, for we realise that power and authority corrupt those who exercise them as much as those who are compelled to submit to them. Under its baneful influence some become ambitious despots, lusting for power and greedy for gain, exploiters of society for their own benefit or that of their class, while others become slaves.

The great misfortune is that a large number of natural laws, already established as such by science, remain unknown to the masses, thanks to the solicitous care of these tutelary governments that exist, as we know, only for the good of the people. And there also is another difficulty: namely, that the greater number of the natural laws inherent in the development of human society, which are quite as necessary, invariable, and inevitable as the laws which govern the physical world, have not been duly recognised and established by science itself.

I they have been recognised, at first by science and then by means of an extensive system of popular education and instruction - once they have become part and parcel of the general consciousness - the question of liberty will be

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which the application of science to life is impossible. And if such universality ever could be realised in a single man, and if he wanted to make use of that universality to impose his authority upon us, it would be necessary to drive that man out of society - because the exercise of such authority by him would reduce all the others to slavery and imbecility.

I do not believe that society ought to maltreat men of genius as it has done up to now; but neither do I believe that it should pamper them, still less accord than any exclusive privileges or rights whatever. And that is so for three reasons: first, because it has often happened that society mistook Charlatan for a man of genius; second, because, through such a system of privileges, it might transform even a real man of genius into a charlatan, demoralise and degrade him; and finally, because it might thus set up a despot over itself.

I recapitulate. We recognise, then, the absolute authority of science, for science has for its object only the mentally elaborated reproduction, as systematic as possible, of the natural laws inherent in the material, intellectual, and rural life of both the physical and social worlds, those two worlds constituting in fact one and the same natural world. Outside of this only legitimate authority, legitimate because it is rational and is in harmony with human liberty, we declare all other authorities false, arbitrary, and fatal.

We recognise the absolute authority of science but we reject the infallibility and universality of the representatives of science. In our church - if I may be permitted to use for a moment an expression which otherwise I detest; Church and State are my two bugbears - in our Church, as in the Protestant church, we have a chief, an invisible Christ, science; and, like the Protestants, being even more consistent than the Protestants, we will suffer neither Pope, nor council, nor enclaves of infallible Cardinals, nor Bishops, nor even priests. Our Christ differs from the Protestant and Christian Christ in this - that the latter is a personal being, while ours is impersonal. The Christ of Christianity, already completed in an eternal past, appears as a perfect being, whereas the completing and perfecting of our Christ, science, are ever in the future; which is equivalent to saying that these ends never will be realised. So, in recognising absolute science as the only absolute authority, we in no way compromise our liberty.

By the words "absolute science" I mean the truly universal science that would reproduce ideally, to its full extent and in all its infinite detail, the universe, the system, or the co-ordination of all the natural laws manifested by the incessant development of worlds. It is evident that such a science, the sublime object of all the efforts of the human mind, will never be fully and absolutely realised. Our Christ, then, will remain incomplete throughout eternity, a circumstance which must take down the pride of his licensed representatives among us. Against God and son, in whose name they assume to impose upon us their insolent and pedantic authority, we appeal to God the Father, who is the real world, the real life, of which he (the Son) is only a too

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science, but it eagerly aspires toward a new science cleared from all the stupidities of metaphysics and theology. This new logic will have neither licensed professors nor prophets nor priests, nor drawing its power from each and all, will it found a new church or a new State. It will destroy the last vestiges of this cursed and fatal principal of authority, human as well as divine, and, rendering everyone his full liberty, it will realise the equality, solidarity, and fraternity of mankind.

Does it follow that I reject all authority? No, far be it from me to entertain such a thought. In the matter of boots, I refer to the authority of the bootmaker. When it is a question of houses, canals, or railroads, I consult the authority of the architect or engineer. For each special type of knowledge I apply to the scientist of that respective branch. I listen to them freely, and with all the respect merited by their intelligence, their character, and their knowledge, though always reserving my indisputable right to criticism and control. I do not content myself with consulting a single specialist who is an authority in a given field; I consult several of them. I compare their opinions and I choose the one that seems to me the soundest.

But I recognise no infallible authority, not even on questions of an altogether special character. Consequently, whatever respect I may have for the honesty and sincerity of such and such individuals, I have no absolute faith in any person. Such faith would be fatal to my reason, to my liberty, and to the success of my undertakings: it would immediately transform me into a stupid slave, an instrument of the will and interests of others.

If I bow before the authority of the specialists and declare myself ready to follow, to a certain extent and so long as it may seem to me to be necessary, their general indications and even their directions, it is because their authority is imposed upon me by no one, neither by men nor by God. Otherwise I would reject them with horror and send to the Devil their counsels, their directions, and their knowledge, certain that they would make life pay, by the loss of my liberty and self-respect, for such odd bits of truth enveloped in a multitude of lies, as they might give me.

I bow before the authority of specialists because it is imposed upon me by my own reason. I am aware of the fact that I can embrace in all its details and positive developments only a very small part of human knowledge. The greatest intelligence would not be equal to the task embracing the whole. Hence there results, for science as well as for industry, the necessity of division and association of labour. I take and I give - such is human life. Each is an authoritative leader and in turn is led by others. Accordingly there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination.

This sane reason forbids me, then, to recognise a fixed, constant, and universal authority, for there is no universal man capable of embracing all the sciences, all the branches of social life, in all their wealth of details, without

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solved. The most recalcitrant authorities will then need to admit henceforth there will be no need of political organisation, administration, or legislation. Those three things - whether emanating from the will of the sovereign or issuing from the will of a parliament elected by universal suffrage, or even conforming to the system of natural laws (which has never happened and never will happen) - are always equally baneful and hostile to the liberty of the people because they impose upon the latter a system of external and therefore despotic laws.

The liberty of man consists solely in that he obeys natural laws because he has not recognised than as such himself, and not because they have been imposed upon him by any external will whatever - divine or human, collective or individual.

Suppose a learned academy, composed of the most illustrious representatives of science; suppose this academy were charged with legislation for, and the organisation of, society, and that, inspired only by the purest love for truth, it would frame none but laws in absolute conformity with the latest discoveries of science. Well, I maintain that that legislation and that organisation would be monstrosities and this for two reasons.

First, human science is always and necessarily imperfect, and, comparing what it has discovered, we may say that it is still in its cradle. This is true to such an extent that were we to force the practical life of men, collective as well as individual, into strict and exclusive conformity with the latest data of science, we should condemn society as well as individuals to suffer martyrdom on a Procrustean bed, which will soon end by dislocating and stifling them, life always remaining an infinitely greater thing than science.

The second reason is this: a society obeying legislation emanating from a scientific academy, not because it understood the reasonableness of this legislation (in which case the existence of that academy would become useless) but because the legislation emanated from the academy and was imposed in the name of science, which was venerated without being understood - that society would be a society of brutes and not of men. It would be a second edition of the wretched Paraguayan republic that submitted so long to the rule of the Society of Jesus. Such a society would rapidly sink to the lowest stage of idiocy.

But there is also a third reason rendering such a government impossible. This reason is that a scientific academy invested, so to speak, with absolute sovereign power, even if it were composed of the most illustrious men, would unavoidably and quickly end by becoming morally and intellectually corrupted. Such has been the history of academies when the privileges allowed them were few and scanty. The greatest scientific genius, from the moment that he becomes an academician, an officially licensed savant, inevitably deteriorates and becomes sluggish. He loses his spontaneity, his revolutionary boldness, that wild and troublesome characteristic of the greatest geniuses that are

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always called upon to destroy old decrepit worlds and lay the foundations of new worlds. Doubtless our academician gains in good manners, in worldly and utilitarian wisdom, what he loses in power of thought.

It is the characteristic of privilege and of every privileged position to destroy the minds and hearts of men. A privileged man, whether politically or economically so, is a man depraved intellectually and morally. This is a social law which admits of no exception, and which is equally valid with respect to entire nations as well as social classes, social groups, and individuals. It is the law of equality, the supreme condition of freedom and humanity.

A scientific body entrusted with the government of society would soon end by devoting itself no longer to science but to some other effort. And this effort, as is the case with all established powers, would be to try to perpetuate itself by rendering the society entrusted to its care ever more stupid and consequently more in need of its direction and government.

And that which is true of scientific academies is equally true of all constituent assemblies and legislative bodies, even those elected on the basis of universal suffrage. It is true that the make-up of these latter bodies can be changed, but that does not prevent the formation in a few years time of a body of politicians, privileged in fact if not in law, and who, devoting themselves exclusively to the direction of the public affairs of a country, end by forming a sort of political aristocracy or oligarchy. Witness the United States of America and Switzerland.

Thus no external legislation and no authority are necessary; for that matter, one is separable from the other, and both tend to enslave society and to degrade mentally the legislators themselves.

In the good old times when the Christian faith, still unshaken and mainly represented by the Roman Catholic Church, flourished in all its might, God had no difficulty in designating his elect. It was understood that all the sovereigns, great and small, reigned by the grace of God, if only they were not excommunicated; the nobility itself based its privileges upon the benediction of the Holy Church. Even Protestantism, which contributed powerfully to the destruction of faith, against its will of course, left, in this respect at least, the Christian doctrine wholly intact. "For there is no power (it repeated the words of St. Paul) but of God." Protestantism even reinforced the authority of the sovereign by proclaiming that it proceeded directly from God, without needing the intervention of the Church, and by subjecting the latter to the power of the sovereign.

But ever since the philosophy of the last century [the eighteenth], acting in union with the bourgeois revolution, delivered a mortal blow to faith and overthrew all the institutions based on faith, the doctrine of authority has had a hard time re-establishing itself in the consciousness of men. The present sovereigns continue, of course, to designate themselves as rulers "by the grace of God," but these words which once possessed a meaning that was real, powerful, and palpitating with life, are now considered by the educated classes

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and even by a section of the people itself, as an obsolete, banal, and essentially meaningless phrase. Napoleon III tried to rejuvenate it by adding to it another phrase: "and by the will of the people," which, added to the first one, either annuls its meaning and thereby becomes annulled in turn, or signifies that God wills whatever the people will.

What remains to be done is to ascertain the will of the people and to find out which political organ faithfully expresses that will. The Radical democrats imagine that it is an Assembly elected on the basis of universal suffrage that will prove to be the most adequate organ for that purpose. Others, even more radical democrats, add to it the referendum, the direct voting of the whole people upon every more or less important law. All of them - conservatives, liberals, moderates, and extreme radicals - agree on one point, that the people should be governed; whether the people themselves elect their rulers and masters, or such are imposed upon them but rulers and masters they should have. Devoid of intelligence, the people should let themselves be guided by those who do possess such intelligence.

Whereas in the past centuries authority was demanded in the name of God, now the doctrine is in the name of reason. It is not any more the priests of a decayed religion who demand power, but the licensed priests of the doctrinaire reason, and this is done at a time when the bankruptcy of that reason has become evident. For never did educated and learned people - and in general the so-called enlightened classes - such moral degradation, such cowardice, egoism, and such a complete lack of convictions as in our own days. Because of this cowardice they have remained stupid in spite of their learning, understanding only one thing and that is to conserve whatever exists, madly hoping to arrest the course of history with brutal force of a military dictatorship before which they now have shamefully prostrated themselves.

Just as in the days of old the representatives of divine reason and authority - the church and the priests - too obviously allied themselves with the economic exploitation of the masses - which was the principal cause of their downfall - so now have the representatives of man's reason and authority, the State, the learned societies, and the enlightened classes too obviously identified themselves with the business of cruel and iniquitous exploitation to retain the slightest moral force or any prestige whatever. Condemned by their own conscience, they feel themselves exposed, and have no other recourse against the contempt which, as they know, has been well merited by them, but the ferocious arguments of an organised and armed violence. An organisation based upon three detestable things - bureaucracy, police, and a standing army - this is what now constitutes the State, the visible body of the exploiting and doctrinaire reasoning of the privileged classes

The contrast to this rotting and dying reasoning a new, young, and vigorous spirit is awakening and crystallising in the midst of the people. It is full of life and hope for the future; it is of course not yet fully developed with respect of