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Michail Bakunin

Last Letters

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1873–1875

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One of the passions which now absorb me is an insatiable curiosity; having recognized that evil has triumphed and that I cannot prevent it, I am determined to study its development as objectively as possible . . .

Poor humanity! It is evident that it can extricate itself from this cesspool only by an immense social revolution. But how can this revolution come about? Never was international reaction in Europe so formidably organized against any movement of the people. Repression has become a new science systematically taught in the military schools of all countries. And to breach this well-nigh impregnable fortress we have only the disorganized masses. But how to organize them, when they do not even care enough about their own fate to know or put into effect the only measures that can save them? There remains propaganda; though doubtlessly of some value, it can have very little effect [in the present circumstances] and if there were no other means of emancipation, humanity would rot ten times over before it could be saved.

There remains another hope: world war. These gigantic military states must sooner or later destroy each other. But what a prospect!

Letter to the Comrades of the Jura Federation, October 12th, 1873

I cannot retire from public life without addressing to you these few parting words of appreciation and sympathy.

. . . in spite of all the tricks of our enemies and the infamous slanders they have spread about me, your esteem, your friendship, and your confidence in me have never wavered. Nor have you allowed yourselves to be intimidated when they brazenly accused you of being “Bakuninists,” hero-worshippers, mindless followers . . .

You have to the highest degree always conscientiously maintained the independence of your opinions and the spontaneity of your acts; the perfidious plots of our adversaries were so transparent that you could regard their infamous insinuations only with the most profound disgust . . .

Powerfully supported by your fellow workers of Italy, Spain, France, Belgium, Holland, and America, you have once again repulsed the dictatorial attempts of Mr. Marx and placed the great International Workingmen’s Association back on the right road . . .

Your victory, the victory of freedom and of the International against authoritarian intrigues, is complete. Yesterday, when victory seemed to hang in the balance — although I for my part never doubted it — it would have been impermissible for anyone to leave your ranks. But now that it is a fait accompli, everyone has the freedom to act according to his personal convenience.

I therefore take this opportunity, my dear comrades, to beg you to accept my resignation as a member of the Jura Federation and of the International.

. . . Do not believe that I resign mainly because of the personal disgust and disappointments that I have suffered during the last few years. Although I have not been altogether insensitive to these indignities, I would have continued to endure them if I thought that my participation in your struggles would help the cause of the proletariat. But I do not think so any longer.

By birth and personal status — though certainly not by sympathy or inclination — I am a bourgeois and, as such, the only useful work that I can do among you is propagandize. But I am now convinced that the time for grand theoretical discourses, written or spoken, is over. During the last nine years more than enough ideas for the salvation of the world have been developed in the International (if the world can be saved by ideas) and I defy anyone to come up with a new one.

This is the time not for ideas but for action, for deeds. Above all, now is the time for the organization of the forces of the proletariat. But this organization must be the task of the proletariat itself. If I were young, I would live among the workers and share their life of toil, would together with them participate in this necessary work of proletarian organization.

But neither my age nor my health allows this. I must, on the contrary, have privacy and repose. Any effort, even a short journey, becomes for me a very serious undertaking. I feel sufficiently strong morally, but physically I tire too quickly, and I no longer have the necessary strength for struggle. In the camp of the proletariat I can be only an obstacle, not a help.

You see then, my friends, that I am obliged to offer my resignation. Living far from you and from everyone, of what use would I be to the International in general and the Jura Federation in particular? Your great association in its militant and practical activities cannot permit sinecures or honorary positions.

I will retire then, dear comrades, full of gratitude to you and sympathy for your great and holy cause, the cause of humanity. With brotherly concern I will avidly watch your progress, and salute with joy each of your new triumphs. Until death I will be yours. . .

But before parting, permit me again to add these few words. The battle that you will have to sustain will be terrible. But do not allow yourselves to be discouraged and know that in spite of the immense material resources of our adversaries, your final triumph is assured if you faithfully fulfill these two conditions: adhere firmly to the great and all-embracing principle of the people's liberty, without which equality and solidarity would be falsehoods, Organize ever more strongly the practical militant solidarity of the workers of all trades in all countries,

and remember that infinitely weak as you may be as individuals in isolated localities or countries, you will constitute an immense irresistible force when organized and united in the universal collectivity.

Farewell,
your brother,
M. Bakunin

Letter to Élisée Reclus, February 15th, 1875

You are right, the revolutionary tide is receding and we are falling back into evolutionary periods — periods during which barely perceptible revolutions gradually germinate. . . . The time for revolution has passed not only because of the disastrous events of which we have been the victims (and for which we are to some extent responsible), but because, to my intense despair, I have found and find more and more each day, that there is absolutely no revolutionary thought, hope, or passion left among the masses; and when these qualities are missing, even the most heroic efforts must fail and nothing can be accomplished.

I admire the valiant persistence of our Jura and Belgian comrades, those “Last Mohicans” of the International, who in spite of all the obstacles and in the midst of the general apathy, obstinately set themselves against the current of events and continue to act as they did before the catastrophes, when the movement was growing and even the least efforts brought results.

Their labor is all the more praiseworthy in that they will not see the fruits of their sacrifices; but they can be certain that their labor will not be wasted. Nothing in this world is ever lost; tiny drops of water form the ocean.

As for myself, my dear friend, I am too old, too sick, and shall I confess it? — too disillusioned, to participate in this work. I have definitely retired from the struggle and shall pass the rest of my days in intense intellectual activity which I hope will prove useful.