

The Genealogy of Bakunin's Theory of Revolt

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This review study critically engages with Felipe Corrêa's *Freedom or Death: The Theory and Practice of Mikhail Bakunin*. Although Corrêa works with the entirety of Bakunin's corpus, he fails to adequately examine the double-negative aspect of revolt in Bakunin's philosophical anthropology. My aim with this paper is to remedy this, *vis-à-vis* an exegesis of Bakunin's appropriation of Hegel's concept of negation, and its naturalized reemergence in a theory of revolt.

Keywords: Bakunin – dialectic – Hegel – negation – revolt

The book, *Freedom or Death: The Theory and Practice of Mikhail Bakunin* by the Brazilian historian Felipe Corrêa, is a masterful exposition of the life, thought, and practice of the revolutionary figure, and the result is quite revolutionary in itself. Its scope, rigor, and accessibility make it the primary reference point for all future research on Bakunin. It shatters myths that cast him as a “conservative, reactionary, precursor of fascism, apostle of destruction and chaos, individualist, and disciple of Stirner or Rousseau” (Corrêa 2024, 434).¹ To this list of lingering and tiresome myths I can add his dismissal as a philosophically inept nihilist; who co-wrote the terrorist pamphlet *Catechism of a Revolutionist* (1869) with Nechayev; who lacked constructive plans for revolutionary organization; and

¹ Corrêa explains how the unavailability of Bakunin's texts, historical circumstances and the dominance of Marxism, led to his caricatures in the 20th century. The growing dissatisfaction with Marxism, and the emergence of young scholars not content with one-sided caricatures, inspired by the gradual release of Bakunin's writings – first by Arthur Lehning (*Archives Bakounine*, (1961 – 1982), and then by the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam (*Bakounine: Oeuvres complètes [CD-ROM]*, 2000), changed our understanding of Bakunin. Due to the outdated English translations of his texts, I will use the *Archives* and *Oeuvres complètes* and my own translations.

whose secret societies tried to seize the International Workingmen's Association or to destroy it.² By placing Bakunin in his historical context and debates, Corrêa makes a vital contribution to the anarchist movement's currently ongoing global public and academic resurgence.

Corrêa manages to bring a sense of unity and coherence to Bakunin's political-philosophical trajectory, by dividing his life into three periods: "From Philosophy to Praxis" (1836 – 1843); "Revolutionary pan-Slavism" (1844 – 1863); "From Socialism to Anarchism" (1864 – 1876). This is possible due to two major ruptures in Bakunin's life – his shift from philosophy to revolutionary practice in 1843, and his return to philosophy to support revolutionary practice in 1864. The book's structure reinforces this division: each part starts with a biographical overview of Bakunin's life in the said period, and the reader is given much-needed context for the analyses of the origins and developments of his thought that reveal surprising continuities.

Nevertheless, the book's ambition clashes with its execution. On the one hand, it does not strike the right balance between the biographical parts and the conceptual exegesis. This can be forgiven, since *Freedom or Death* is intended as a comprehensive introduction to Bakunin's life and thought that should generate new discussions. On the other hand, Corrêa writes that there are theoretical elements in Bakunin "which can support strategies for social change for the future," but he chose not to "make an assessment of which elements would be more or less pertinent to this" (Corrêa 2024, 61). This is a missed opportunity. Notably, *Freedom or Death*, in spite of brilliant study of Hegel's influence on Bakunin, does not delve with equal rigor into Bakunin's theory of revolt. If Corrêa seeks ideas that might resonate in contemporary discourse and activism (as stated in the underdeveloped parts on Bakunin's reception in Brazil), Bakunin's theory of revolt ought to merit his attention. I seek to complement Corrêa, by retracing how Hegel's concept of negation influenced Bakunin's theory of revolt.

My scope is limited, for I will trace Bakunin's use of philosophy, and only work with his first and last period. By this I do not mean to dismiss his pan-Slavism. Instead, I follow Angaut, who explains that in 1842 Bakunin abandoned philosophy "and only returned to it briefly (again, as an outsider!) to put philosophy at the service of political practice rather than to philosophically ground a social and political ideology" (Angaut 2011, 14). I will trace Bakunin's use of negation in relation to consciousness, philosophy of history, and revolt.

² Bakunin's authorship was refuted in Leier (2006).

I. Bakunin's Hegel

Corrêa writes that Bakunin “established himself as the largest Hegelian in Russia” (Corrêa 2024, 79).³ He did so with translator’s “Preface” to Hegel’s *Gymnasium Lectures* (1838), and the incomplete two-part article “On Philosophy” (1839 – 1840), where he tried to overcome the crisis of alienation in Russia. It is assumed that these texts are conservative, and Bakunin tried to reconcile *himself* with reality. In fact, they propose an overhaul of the education system, and covertly criticize Tsarism as one of the sources of alienation, by banning philosophy in schools. But philosophy itself also led to alienation. Going forward I will analyze how these texts relate to his theory of revolt.

In his “Preface,” Bakunin explains that modern alienation begins with the Reformation and Cartesian philosophy, which culminates with Fichte and Kant, whose subjectivism, by turning the subject into the foundation of reality, emptied objectivity of its content. The subjectivist

thinks that all the good of humanity consists in realizing the finite conceptions of his finite understanding and the finite goals of his finite will; the wretch is unaware that the real world is above his pitiful, powerless individuality; he is unaware that sickness and evil reside not in reality but in himself, in his own abstraction (Bakunin 2000a, 2).⁴

³ Corrêa’s listing of Hegel’s works is confusing: “*Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Science of Logic, The Philosophy of Nature, Philosophy of the Spirit (Phenomenology of Spirit, Elements of the Philosophy of Right, The Philosophy of History, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, and Lectures on the History of Philosophy)*” (Corrêa 2024, 79). The *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* has three parts: the *Logic* (Part 1), the *Philosophy of Nature* (Part 2), and the *Philosophy of Spirit* (Part 3). Corrêa lists the *Philosophy of Nature* and the *Philosophy of Spirit* in italics as if they were separate books (rather than parts of the *Encyclopaedia*). It is unclear what the parentheses after the *Philosophy of Spirit* mean since the works contained in the parenthetical list are quite heterogeneous. Also, he mentions the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, but lists the *Philosophy of History* as if it were a book and fails to indicate that it too is a set of lectures, sc. *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. All of this speaks for a less than certain grasp of Hegel’s corpus and casts a shadow over his analyses of Bakunin’s relation to Hegel.

⁴ Fichte and Kant were major influences on Bakunin, and his ideal of education draws as much from their thought as from Hegel’s. Notably, for many years, Bakunin carried a copy of Fichte’s *Lectures on the Vocation of the Scholar* in his pocket. On Fichte’s concept of a scholar, see Dvoranová (2009), and for Bakunin’s critique of Kant, see Marchevský (2021).

Opposing subjectivism as the cause of alienation, Bakunin turns to Hegel, and uses his dialectical method and conception of philosophy as the knowledge and understanding of *absolute truth*, to integrate the individual into social totality.

For Bakunin neither pure theory nor pure facts give us true knowledge. Alone, they yield unrelated data that does not give the individual a sense of meaning and purpose. Hegel's philosophy of Spirit resolves this, because it takes as the essence of all knowledge the belief "in necessity, and the first step that knowledge takes is to refute contingency and establish necessity" (Bakunin 2000b, 5). It transcends the abstract, limited, and commonsense understanding that separates the individual from the world, by showing that reality is governed by reason, which unfolds dialectically, a process also occurring in the human consciousness. Philosophy, as the highest form of speculative thinking, grasps reason through the concept (*Begriff*), understood as the developmental unity of the universal (thought) and of the particular (perception). Because of this, philosophy's object, as Bakunin explains, is "the infinite, universal, necessary, and unique truth, which occurs in the diversity and finitude of the real world" (Bakunin 2000b, 7). Truth realizes itself in history and what has been realized becomes the truth, and as such, what we understand as truth is culturally situated, and socially conditioned. On this point, Bakunin is drawing on the much-maligned maxim from *Philosophy of Right*: "What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational" (Hegel 2003, 20). This is not an uncritical endorsement of reality, rather, it refers to the concordance of reality with the rational idea, a nuance not lost on Bakunin. He, as Corrêa explains, distinguishes "*reality (Realität)* – as an existing, casual, contingent, empirical reality," from "*effective reality or effectiveness (Wirklichkeit)* – as a rational and necessary order, coincidence of the rational idea with its historical manifestations" (Corrêa 2024, 111). Once individuals understand that reality has a rational structure of which they are a part, they may be reconciled with it and realize their freedom. How does Bakunin explain this?

He follows Hegel's development of knowledge; but, with less focus on the development of the Spirit as on the emancipatory role of knowledge for the subject. "On Philosophy" recounts the dialectical process of knowledge from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as the individual's necessary development from sense-certainty, through empirical observation and judgment, to reason, where it becomes self-consciousness.⁵ Self-consciousness is achieved when the individual understands that their thoughts "are not opposed to the objective

⁵ In the *Phenomenology*, the second stage is perception.

world of nature and Spirit...but, on the contrary, penetrate it and constitute its essentiality” (Bakunin 2000c, 17). Simply put, our thoughts are not simply reflections of reality, but are part of that reality. Thought expresses the rational logic of the world, which we grasp in the concept. As such, there is no difference between thought and being, between the internal and external world, or between the subject and object. To show how the process of knowledge is necessary, Bakunin uses a child as the clearest example of the dialectical development from sense-certainty to reason. It is also at this point, where Bakunin begins to diverge from Hegel.

We know Hegel saw the dialectic as “the principle of all movement, all life, and all actual activity” (Hegel 2010, § 81). The determination of any being generates its opposite. Consciousness grasps this process dialectically by negating one determinacy, through relating it to its opposite, thereby exposing the inadequacy of both. Through determinate negation, consciousness negates and sublates both individually into higher concepts. Bakunin accepts this premise, but shifts it to a more anthropological dimension. He does not see negation merely as the function of the dialectic; human consciousness *is* negation. Due to its rational inner potential, it must negate its given condition to become what it can be. A child is an internal “contradiction between the infinity of its ideal inner essence and the narrowness of its outer existence, and this is the source of movement, of development, aimed solely at abolishing it” (Bakunin 2000c, 20). Overcoming contradictions via negation is the human striving for freedom. It is a necessary and endless process grounded in their essence that will always push it onward.⁶ In eloquent Hegelian phrasing, Bakunin explains that the

true reality of man consists precisely in his spiritual development, in the fulfillment of his reason. He must know the infinite truth that constitutes his substance, his essence, and fulfill it in his actions, so that it is in the identity of true knowledge and human actions, in the truth of his theoretical world and in the concordance of his practical and theoretical worlds that his entire reality resides (Bakunin 2000c, 19 – 20).

In the process, the individual must overcome their immediate, abstract subjectivity vis-à-vis mutual recognition, for “all virtues, are based on this unity of self-consciousness with oneself and others. I am we” (Bakunin 2000c, 38). In

⁶ Consciousness as the *negative* that uses the dialectic, is also in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the section on skepticism. See Hegel (2018, § 203).

Bakunin's reading of Hegel, this is how the individual attains absolute truth – "the identity of the subject and the object and the unity of subjects among themselves, infinite truth and freedom." (Bakunin 2000c, 38). The philosopher must assess if reality corresponds with the rational idea; if not, to identify the conditions for negating its contingent elements that hinder freedom. In this way, education is the foundation of Bakunin's theory of revolt.

II. Philosophy of History

In "The Reaction in Germany" (1842), Bakunin applies negation to history, creating a dialectical framework that will remain the staple of his lifelong activity. Already in "On Philosophy," he was not content with Hegel, for

the concept, the universal essence of the human organism, which has its being in the transparent and free ether of creative thought that fulfills itself, does not contain any flaws in itself, it is not subject to destruction, but neither does it possess any reality (Bakunin 2000c, 24).

Theory, Bakunin believes, requires practice, and he sought the realization of Hegel's philosophy in history, conceived as the conflict among people, driven by two opposing principles: the positive (the status quo), and the negative (freedom), which are partially represented by two parties, the reactionaries and the revolutionaries. Yet neither fully embodies the entire principle, which constitutes its essence.

The historical conflict is framed as a *negative* dialectic.⁷ Its structure is Hegelian, but Bakunin alters it – there is no sublation of opposites into a higher unity – instead, both sides are destroyed equally. Due to this, Bakunin has been accused of nihilism, for he wrote that the "passion for destruction is at the same time a creative passion!" (Bakunin 2000d, 14). Once its logic is examined properly, this charge loses its ground. Corrêa does this when he explains that negative dialectic, "does not constitute a quantitative, gradual change, which brings to the new elements of the old; but it is, distinctly, a qualitative transformation, which forges the paradigm of nature that is incompatible with new foundations" (Corrêa 2024, 129). Mediation between opposites requires their equality, but in the revolutionary context they are in contradiction. Angaut shows that Bakunin's source is Hegel's "Doctrine of Essence," where each side of the contradiction "contains within itself the relation to its other

⁷ Bakunin does not use the term; his scholars do. It has no relation to Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1966), or his method. See also Tóth (2012).

and thus has its own determinacy, since everything it is consists first and foremost in being opposed to its other” (Angaut 2007, 44). Bakunin applies this logical schema to history.

According to him, revolutionary conflict is initiated when people become aware of their unjust situation. The reactionaries defend the existing social and historical structures by suppressing dissent. They are opposed by those who want the realization of their theoretically recognized, but practically denied freedoms. Not content with the inadequate concessions the existing order is willing to make, they turn revolutionary. For Bakunin, this is inevitable, because freedom always asserts itself against that which denies it. Once freedom is recognized, mediation is no longer possible and the conflict of the two sides finds its resolution only in revolution. The impossibility of mediation is the purpose of the negative dialectic. The positive appears to be unchanging and immobile, and it is defined by its exclusion of the negative. This act of exclusion is a negative movement that exposes the negative *as* the dominant force in the dialectic. As Bakunin explains, the positive, “precisely because of its positivity, is no longer the positive but the negative; by eliminating the negative from it, it eliminates itself and rushes to its own ruin” (Bakunin 2000d, 49). The reactionaries, defending the existing structure that fails to offer an adequate solution to the issues generated by it, pave the way for their destruction. This destruction must also be understood properly. Once the negative overtakes the positive, it destroys itself. Once the reactionaries are defeated and the old structure collapses, the revolutionaries cease to be needed as the negative force. Freedom, at first existing in a purely negative relation to the positive, and as an idea, reconstitutes itself as the new positive, embodied in the new social world.

But before the conflict escalates, Bakunin leaves room for dialogue, and Corrêa uses this to challenge his portrayal as a nihilist, who ignores empirical reality in favor of ideas. He draws our attention to the fact that in “The Reaction” the revolutionaries must actively seek to “persuade and convert,” those in favor of mediation, and engage them in “due combat and ethical confrontation” (Corrêa 2024, 138). Having explained the role of negation in consciousness and history, I turn to Bakunin’s theory of revolt.

III. Revolt

Bakunin returned to Hegel and philosophy to create a coherent worldview that could reflect and support the principles of an anti-authoritarian revolutionary

activity.⁸ It is systematically outlined in the incomplete section "Philosophical Considerations on the Divine Phantom, the Real World and Man," of his unfinished book, *The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution* (1870 – 1871). It marks a shift from idealism to materialism, with the goal of dismantling the theological metaphysics underpinning authority. Hegel's concept of negation is entirely naturalized, and freedom is the inner telos of matter's development, but the frame of the negative dialectic remains intact.

In Bakunin's scientific-naturalist materialism, as Corrêa calls it, nature *is* matter. Everything that exists, directly or indirectly, exerts "a perpetual action and reaction," and "all this infinite quantity of particular actions and reactions, combining into a single general movement, produces and constitutes what we call life, universal solidarity and causality, nature" (Bakunin 1981, 193). Bakunin turns matter into a living, effective element, and Corrêa shows that he does this by turning the dialectic of reality (*Realität*) and effective reality (*Wirklichkeit*) into the dialectic of "the *natural world* (existing reality, that which has been realized) and *nature* (logical totality, totality of possibilities, that which can also be realized)" (Corrêa 2024, 315). Beyond matter, no God or first principle exists. It develops as the result of its inherent properties, through the incessant dialectic of action and reaction, from the lowest stages to the highest with the elements of past stages integrated into new configurations. This has deterministic implications for humans – our consciousness is matter becoming aware of itself. Our freedom is therefore determined by the laws of matter that we codify through science, into natural laws.⁹ Knowledge of these laws is emancipatory, and this idea harkens back to the role of education in "On Philosophy." But knowledge is now tied to revolt, which becomes the driving force in the evolution of human nature. As human reason develops, revolt becomes its practical expression, through which human consciously negate and transform aspects of reality.

When addressing revolt in the part "Freedom, Society, and the Individual," Corrêa fails to do justice to the two dimensions of revolt Bakunin outlines: external and internal. In "On Philosophy," Bakunin argued that as reason is the essence of human beings, who are forever torn between their potentiality and always limited actuality. This contradiction "does not allow him to exist for long in limitation, but continually drives him forward towards the realization of the internal, potential truth, and elevates him continuously

⁸ Bakunin also takes elements from Feuerbach, Comte, Marx and Darwin. See Angaut (2011).

⁹ In Bakunin we discern an environmentalist element – freedom cannot exist without nature.

above his external, temporary limitation” (Bakunin 1981, 480). As is clear, the theme of the individual as a negativity that perpetually strives to overcome its internal and external limits, is continually present in his thought. In his anarchist period, however, it becomes the ethical tenet of his writings, and revolt, far from being a mere natural instinct provoked during the encroachment on one’s freedom, must be, consciously, directed at oneself. Corrêa does not mention this aspect of Bakunin and only contents himself with the exposition of how revolt is directed against external impediments to freedom, namely authority.

Bakunin’s anarchism sees freedom developing from bottom-up, contrary to its idealist or liberal conceptions. My freedom is not limited by the freedom of the other; it is confirmed in it, when “I recognize the freedom and humanity of all the people around me. It is only by respecting their humanity that I respect my own” (Bakunin 1981, 172). Although freedom arises from the constant interaction of individuals upon another, when this interaction takes the form of authority, as the imposition of one’s will on the other, either through coercion or threats of violence, it negates that freedom. Consequently, external revolt has a radical ethical dimension, when it is an act through which the individual seeks their liberation and, by extension, the liberation of others. Yet external revolt is always informed by the individual’s character and motivation. A rational agent does not negate or destroy the very condition of their freedom, society, which is why education and critical thinking are vital. Through them, individuals learn that their freedom consists of the ability to act autonomously, in accordance with one’s rationality, which is socially and culturally conditioned by their community. Society exerts a supreme influence on the individual, who cannot exist outside of it, and therefore necessarily accepts and reproduces what they are taught. Corrêa does not overlook this; in fact, he stresses that in society, individuals submit “the same natural laws and associate themselves for that which involves their humanity – they are in solidarity in their thinking, in their labor, and also in their freedom” (Corrêa 2024, 341). Bakunin explicitly ties freedom to internal revolt. The individual “must at least partly rebel against himself, for with all his material, intellectual, and moral tendencies and aspirations, he is himself nothing but the product of society” (Bakunin 1981, 174). They must submit their ideas, opinions, prejudices, and positions

under scrutiny.¹⁰ Only in this way, can one fully overcome their childish self-centeredness, and exist as a fully realized human being.

Among our contemporary issues is a sense of social alienation, fueled by the unfulfilled promises of freedom, when people no longer feel that the public sphere reflects their interests or values. The underwhelming conclusion of *Freedom or Death* could have been avoided, had it explored Bakunin's relevance in this discourse, since his theory of rational revolt addresses alienation through education, critical thinking and dialogue. This is excusable if it is due to the book's origin as a dissertation, as is the lack of the Russian secondary sources. What is inexcusable is the lack of index in a book designed for an academic audience. Regardless, as a synthesis of past research, *Freedom or Death* crowns the end of a long scholarly odyssey and will hopefully spark new research initiatives.

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¹⁰ Dialogue is vital in Bakunin's critique of science. See Stewart (2021, 229 – 257) and Kulcsár (2023).

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