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Bakhtin as Anarchist? Language, Law, and  
Creative Impulses in the Work of  
Mikhail Bakhtin and Rudolf Rocker

**T**he various directions toward which Bakhtin studies are presently moving suggests that whatever the differences from one scholar to another, there remains a nagging question in much Bakhtinian work: What *else* can be done with Bakhtin? This is not, or should not be, a purely academic concern; indeed, it may be because Bakhtin's work is so obviously applicable to concerns beyond tenure-article production that it is so frequently asked. My suggestion would be to take him at his radical word and bring his ideas to bear upon this crucial moment in the inglorious history of the twentieth century. Whatever claims made to the contrary by increasingly self-satisfied corporate elites whose wealth has been growing by leaps and bounds even as the well-being of the majority throughout the world continues to decline, we are in desperate need of useful political alternatives and the ways of thinking thereabout that Bakhtin could offer. This is not to say that we ought to straitjacket theoretical works with undue political responsibilities; but Bakhtin's corpus, read in a properly historical perspective, contains political ideals whose impact could reach far beyond the histori-

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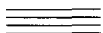
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cal circumstances under which his works were written. "Ideals" should not be taken to suggest that Bakhtin's work is "utopian," if by this we mean politically irrelevant because unrealizable in the real world; indeed, I find in most of his work a rather consistent "political" theme which is very close to the pragmatic approach to society espoused by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and, moreover, by Rudolf Rocker. A number of notable Bakhtin scholars see Bakhtin's interest in Rabelais and his sometimes utopian approach to language and society as an exception to be explained away. In *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, for example, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson categorically express their cynicism about that "professed utopianism, which is so much at odds with the anti-utopianism of Bakhtin's other writings. Bakhtin's lifelong dislike of systems, his distrust of final answers, and his preference for the messy facts of everyday life made him deeply suspicious of all utopian visions."<sup>1</sup> Among the "utopian visions" that Morson and Emerson expressly reject is his anarchism, which they associate with the work of Mikhail Bakunin.

A serious examination of Bakhtin's work with regard to questions of anarchism will, I think, show that Morson and Emerson are right as far as the definition of utopianism they employ and the utopian thinkers to whom they refer can bring them. The problem is that Bakunin is not a "utopianist," in my sense, nor is he the best comparative figure for understanding Bakhtin's anarchism (even though such aspects of Bakunin's theory as revolution's festival character are critical precursors). Bakhtin never cites (in terms of the available archive) any anarchist other than Rabelais, "who"—as noted by Rocker—"in his description of the happy Abbey of Thélème (*Gargantua*) presented a picture of life freed from all authoritative restraints."<sup>2</sup> So why do Morson and Emerson favor Bakunin over William Godwin, Peter Kropotkin, Pierre Proudhon, or Rudolf Rocker? The problem is compounded by the fact that their portrayal of Bakunin's work, and indeed their view of anarchism as a whole, is at best too narrow (often seeming to reduce Bakunin's corpus to his declaration that "the will to destroy is a creative will!"<sup>3</sup>), at worst simply incorrect. As a result, they take up many negative stereotypes of anarchy that have been promulgated in our society by self-interested elites who recognize a far more significant threat therein than could ever be found in totalitarian "challenges" such as Bolshevism or Maoism (both of which are discussed all the time). Con-

sequently, anarchism, which could help explain the relationship between those facets of Bakhtin's works that are sometimes deemed incompatible, remains obscure.

Here, the problem of reading Bakhtin as an anarchist is approached in two ways: first, in order to situate Bakhtin's work in its appropriate political context, it is examined alongside that of Rocker rather than Bakunin (although there are important points of overlap); and second, Rocker's views on law are applied to Bakhtin's work and shown to help explain some of its apparent contradictions, especially where Bakhtin appears to favor a clearly determined sense of responsibility that seems (but is not) incompatible with anarchism, properly defined. The critical link between Rocker and Bakhtin—indeed, between anarchism in general and Bakhtin's approach—is the belief, explicit and implicit in the corpus of both men, that maximal freedom of interaction, movement, and intermingling is a vital and invigorating element for human development, that any attempt to limit human diversity and freedom is an impediment to this development, and that attempts to maintain them through the upholding of, say, natural law are essential. As Rocker puts it: "In every field authority leads to ossification and sterility, while the free unfolding of ideas is always creative."<sup>4</sup>



Morson and Emerson's viewpoint hinges upon the idea that the type of freewheeling "philosophic" anarchy found by some Westerners in Bakhtin's work is inappropriate because it makes him an apostle of such Bakuninian-anarchist "solutions." They suggest that the West has often treated Bakhtin as a "Bakunin of our times" and that "initial critical reception of Bakhtin in the West focused primarily on those passages in Bakhtin that do sound a great deal like Bakunin. His admirers described libertarian Bakhtin, an apostle of pure freedom and carnival license, who rejoices in the undoing of rules, in centrifugal energy for its own sake, in clowning, and the rejection of all authority and 'official culture.'"<sup>5</sup> To the degree that this is true (they and others also having described his appropriation early on by structuralists, Marxists, and Formalists), it nevertheless reflects an erroneous grasp of Bakunin's view and, more seriously, of anarchism as a historical reality. Murray Bookchin offers sufficient grounds for questioning Morson and Emerson's approach in a single passage:

Beneath the surface of Bakunin's theories lies the more basic revolt of the community principle against the state principle, of the social principle against the political principle. Bakuninism, in this respect, can be traced back to those subterranean currents in humanity that have tried at all times to restore community as the structural unit of social life. Bakunin deeply admired the traditional collectivistic aspects of the Russian village, not out of any atavistic illusions about the past, but because he wished to see industrial society pervaded by its atmosphere of mutual aid and solidarity. Like virtually all the intellectuals of his day, he acknowledged the importance of science as a means of promoting eventual human betterment; hence the embattled atheism and anticlericalism that pervades all his writings. By the same token, he demanded that the scientific and technological resources of society be mobilized in support of social cooperation, freedom, and community, instead of being abused for profit, competitive advantage, and war. In this respect, Mikhail Bakunin was not behind his times, but a century or more ahead of them.<sup>6</sup>

In *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism* Rocker adds to this a description of Bakunin's economic approach when he writes that Bakunin "based his ideas upon the teachings of Proudhon, but extended them on the economic side when he, along with the federalist wing of the First International, advocated collective ownership of the land and all other means of production, and wished to restrict the right of private property only to the product of individual labour."<sup>7</sup> Both visions are more accurate portrayals of the (Bakunin) approach than the joyful rule breaking to which he is reduced in the Morson and Emerson text. It is true that Bakunin and Rocker (like most anarchists) are against the arbitrary or self-serving use of power; but Rocker is particularly interesting because he devoted much of his writing to the relationship between culture and structures of authority. The most powerful articulation of his views on culture is to be found in *Nationalism and Culture*, which is virtually contemporaneous with Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel." Here, Rocker relates the dangers of power to the suppression of cultural production, the parallel arising from the simple reason that "power is never creative. It uses the creative force of a given culture to clothe its nakedness and to increase its dignity. Power is always a negative element in history."<sup>8</sup> But even though anarchy in almost all of

its forms is against power and authority, it does not follow that it “rejoices in the undoing of rules, in centrifugal energy for its own sake,” or even “in clowning,” as Morson and Emerson suggest.

To examine but one concrete historical example—the anarchy that existed in mountain pueblos in Spain after the 1870s—is to glimpse the degree to which being anti-authoritarian can also imply a need for forming social units on the basis of clearly defined values and goals. Bookchin’s *Spanish Anarchists* provides an important glimpse into anarchist existence:

[The] solidarity, reinforced by a harsh environment of sparse means and a common destiny of hard work, produces a fierce egalitarianism. The preferred form of transaction between peasants and laborers is *aperceria*, or partnership, rather than wages. Although they own the land and work as hard as the laborers, the peasants may give as much as half the crop to their temporary “partners.” This type of relationship is preferred not only because it is wiser to share what one has in hand rather than to speculate on monetary returns, but also owing to a rich sense of fraternity and a disdain for possessive values. In the life of the *pueblo*, poverty confers absolutely no inferiority; wealth, unless it is spent in behalf of the community, confers absolutely no prestige. The rich who own property in or near the *pueblo* are generally regarded as a wicked breed whose power and ambitions corrupt society. Not only is the *pueblo* immune to their influence, but in reaction, tends to organize its values around the dignity of work and the importance of moral and spiritual goals.<sup>9</sup>

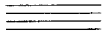
As this last statement indicates, the key relation was between being anti-authoritarian and “adopting all the personal standards of the Anarchists in the cities,” standards which in some cases were consistently libertarian but not necessarily random, violent, or uncontrolled. “A man did not smoke, drink, or go to prostitutes, but lived a sober, exemplary life in a stable free union with a *companera*. The church and state were anathema, to be shunned completely. Children were to be raised and educated by libertarian standards and dealt with respectfully as sovereign human beings.”<sup>10</sup> The key to this form of anarchism, which eventually gave way to a more anarcho-syndicalist approach as proletarian anarchism drifted increasingly toward syndicalism (particularly in the cities), was not this kind of chaotic

breaking of rules for its own sake, but living “in a stable free union with a *companera*.”

When read in this light, Morson and Emerson’s conclusion reads like an argument for, rather than against, considering Bakhtin in a properly anarchistic framework: “It must be admitted that there are indeed elements of antinomianism, theoretical anarchism, and holy foolishness in his thought about carnival. But on the whole Bakhtin insulates himself against that sort of thinking better than it might at first appear. Judged by the entirety of his work, Bakhtin is, if anything, an apostle of constraints. For without constraints of the right sort, he believed, neither freedom nor creativity, neither unfinalizability nor responsibility, can be real.”<sup>11</sup> This last observation speaks to the issue of what Rocker calls “natural law,” to which we will return. Suffice to say that a strong current of Enlightenment and classical liberal thinking runs through certain strains of anarchism and that it shows up most clearly in the important place allocated to rationality and the role of law in anarchist society as described by Rocker. So once again, Morson and Emerson’s view of “a dominant critical image of an anarchistic Bakhtin,” in which “he is described as an antinomian rejoicing, Bakunin-like, in joyful destruction, carnival clowning, and novels-as-loopholes,” hinges upon a misunderstanding of concepts of anarchy, as in their concluding sentence of this paragraph: “Bakhtin, who never gave up his commitment to ethical responsibility, is presented as playfully and anarchically irresponsible.”<sup>12</sup> It is simply wrong to consider anarchy as necessarily irresponsible or ludic—wrong on both philosophical and historical grounds. “Anarchists,” declares Rocker, “desire a federation of free communities which shall be bound to one another by their common economic and social interests and shall arrange their affairs by mutual agreement and free contract.”<sup>13</sup> This description directly contradicts the view of anarchy projected by Morson and Emerson when they write that “generally speaking, Bakhtin was much less concerned with millenarian fantasies and holy foolishness than with the constraints and responsibilities of everyday living. Carnival, while offering a provocative insight into much of Rabelais and some of Dostoevsky, ultimately proved a dead end. In his last period, laughter but not the idealization of carnival anarchy remained—and the functions of laughter were more closely specified.”<sup>14</sup>

It is not enough to suggest that Morson and Emerson simply misrepresented Bakunin and most of the anarchist tradition in *Mikhail Bakhtin*.

Indeed, I only mention this work because, even though otherwise carefully and rigorously argued and researched, it (like so many other texts) reduces “anarchy” to something analogous with “indeterminate chaos,” thereby draining the political significance from a truly revolutionary corpus. Rather than harping on this text, we can go considerably further by turning to the work of Rocker. The description of anarchy in *Nationalism and Culture* helps explain not only the importance of carnival in Bakhtin’s work, its relationship to ethical concerns, and Bakhtin’s continued importance for anarchist politics, but also the crucial links between Rocker and Bakhtin in terms of their basic portrayals of language and social formations. I will quote more from Rocker’s works (taking a relatively greater knowledge of Bakhtin for granted). It is interesting to consider how readily available works by Lenin, Mao, Stalin, and Trotsky are in any language, whereas Rocker, Proudhon, and even contemporary anarchists like Murray Bookchin and George Woodcock remain largely unknown.



We can begin our comparison between Bakhtin and Rocker in the unlikely area of language studies. Consistent with what Noam Chomsky has called a “Cartesian” approach to language,<sup>15</sup> Rocker claims that language itself does not have a national origin. Rather, human beings are endowed with the ability to “articulate language which permits of concepts and so enables man’s thoughts to achieve higher results, which distinguish man in this respect from other species.”<sup>16</sup> Rocker’s objective in discussing language is to undermine notions of racial purity, upheld by the Nazis at the time when he was writing his book. More important, though, is his sense that discourse is like a living entity inasmuch as it constantly evolves and adapts, taking in new expressions and terms from various strata of society or from different cultures or groups. This dynamic, never-fixed status of language threatens authority and is therefore itself subject to various attempts on the part of authoritarian institutions like governments to control its functioning, according to both Rocker and Bakhtin. In a passage describing the regimentation of French life in the seventeenth century, Rocker gives the example of the establishment of the Académie in 1629, commenting that its institution was intended “to subordinate language and poetry to the authoritarian ambitions of absolutism.” In effect, the authorities were aiming for a unitary French language by imposing upon it “a strict guardian that

endeavoured with all its power to eliminate from it popular expressions and figures of speech. This was called 'refining the language.' In reality it deprived it of originality and bent it under the yoke of an unnatural despotism from which it was later obliged forcibly to free itself."<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin's approach questions attempts to repress heteroglossia, while also taking for granted (particularly in his discussions of the revitalization of languages and communities through the infusion of new genres and perspectives) not only the danger posed by efforts to establish uniform language practices but the very impossibility of doing so. For both Bakhtin and Rocker, the *vital*, living aspects of language must be protected from authoritarian suppression or oppression just as people must be. Says Bakhtin: "Language—like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives—is never unitary. It is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualizations that fill it, and in isolation from the uninterrupted process of historical becoming that is a characteristic of all living language."<sup>18</sup> And Rocker: "Every higher form of culture, if it is not too greatly hindered in its natural development by political obstructions, strives constantly to renew its creative urge to construct." And the sense that people, left to their own devices, will lazily let the sand of time slip between their inactive fingers is, for Rocker, but a poor scare tactic: "Always and everywhere the same creative urge is hungry for action; only the mode of expression differs and is adapted to the environment."<sup>19</sup>

Dialogism for Bakhtin is natural, but to the degree that it is suppressed by societal constraints (such as official or authoritative discourse), it is also an ideal which is only fully articulated in certain limited genres (such as the dialogic novel). Rocker emphasizes the degree to which authority threatens this ideal and should therefore be dismantled. Both uphold attempts to protect the community from those who would isolate it or provide it with a straitjacket of national character. This effort was particularly urgent for Rocker, who witnessed the rise of Nazi nationalism in his native Germany along with the various attempts to justify it or give it a historical basis. These relations nourish language's natural propensity to evolve, just like "an organism" which lives in a state of "constant flux": "Not only does it make the most diversified borrowings from other languages, a phenomenon due to the countless influences and points of contact in cultural



life, but it also possesses a stock of words that is continually changing. Quite gradually and unnoticeably the shadings and gradations of the concepts which find their expression in words alter, so that it often happens that a word means today exactly the opposite of what men originally expressed by it.”<sup>20</sup> Any effort to separate the utterance from its context is for Rocker a political act, for Bakhtin a senseless one, and for both a threat to the life of the language itself. Bakhtin argues that “discourse lives, as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse . . . toward the object; if we detach ourselves completely from this impulse all we have left is the naked corpse of the word, from which we can learn nothing at all about the social situation or the fate of a given word in life. *To study the word as such, ignoring the impulse that reaches out beyond it, is just as senseless as to study psychological experience outside the context of that real life toward which it was directed and by which it is determined.*”<sup>21</sup>

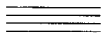
To study language is therefore to recognize its contextual richness, including the infusion of other languages into a single language, for, as Rocker points out, “there exists no cultural language which does not contain a great mass of foreign material, and the attempt to free it from these foreign intruders would lead to a complete dissolution of the language—that is, if such a purification could be achieved at all. Every European language contains a mass of foreign elements with which, often, whole dictionaries could be filled.”<sup>22</sup> This tendency is what Bakhtin’s “polyglossia” means, as defined by Emerson and Holquist: “the simultaneous presence of two or more national languages interacting within a single cultural system.”<sup>23</sup> His description of heteroglossia goes even further, into the various strata of languages which occur through the numerous points of contact between different types of language practice even within a given national language. For Bakhtin, “at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These ‘languages’ of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying ‘languages.’”<sup>24</sup> Again, as described by Bakhtin, this is a natural phenomenon which demands of language researchers a methodology appropriate to the task of discerning

the different threads of discursive practice in a given utterance. To Rocker, this same phenomenon can be threatened and thereby endanger the very essence of society:

For the development of every language the acceptance of foreign elements is essential. No people lives for itself. Every enduring intercourse with other peoples results in the borrowing of words from their language; this is quite indispensable to reciprocal cultural fecundation. The countless points of contact which culture daily creates between people leave their traces in language. New objects, ideas, concepts—religious, political, and generally social—lead to new expressions and word formations. In this, the older and more highly developed cultures naturally have a strong influence on less developed folk-groups and furnish these with new ideas which find their expression in language.<sup>25</sup>

Rocker goes on to note that in some cases the foreign expression for a particular idea is not adopted even when the idea is (or what he calls “loan-translation”). Then,

we translate the newly acquired concept into our own language by creating from the material at hand a word structure not previously used. Here the stranger confronts us, so to speak, in the mask of our own language . . . [*Halbinsel* from peninsula, *Halbwelt* from demi-monde, etc.]. . . . These have an actually revolutionary effect on the course of development of the language, and show us most of all the unreality of the view which maintains that in every language the spirit of a particular people lives and works. In reality every loan-translation is but a proof of the continuous penetration of foreign cultural elements within our own cultural circle—in so far as a people can speak of “its own culture.”<sup>26</sup>



What makes Bakhtin's work useful for immigration or refugee studies is its insistence upon the urgency of maintaining maximum openness between speech communities, lest the language and the community of speakers become frozen in a debilitating inbreeding of existing ideas and speech

genres. This tendency, which is generally the product of efforts by some authoritarian structure like the State,

will occur only when a national culture loses its sealed-off and self-sufficient character, when it becomes conscious of itself as only one among *other* cultures and languages. It is this knowledge that will sap the roots of a mythological feeling for language, based as it is on an absolute fusion of ideological meaning with language; there will arise an acute feeling for language boundaries (social, national and semantic), and only then will language reveal its essential *human* character; from behind its words, forms, styles, nationally characteristic and socially typical faces begin to emerge, the images of speaking human beings. . . . Language, no longer conceived as a sacrosanct and solitary embodiment of meaning and truth, becomes merely one of many possible ways to hypothesize meaning.<sup>27</sup>

So, the heteroglossia of language is nourished in situations in which people interact, and the recognition of this heteroglossia allows us to better understand how language actually functions. Again, this implies that structures of authority which attempt to seal off cultures from one another or to impose a standardized version of culture according to (say) nationalist ambitions are, for Bakhtin and Rocker, repressive forces. Rocker's views on how culture is stimulated are clear: "Cultural reconstructions and social stimulation always occur when different peoples and races come into closer union. Every new culture is begun by such a fusion of different folk elements and takes its special shape from this." Notice that he refers to both foreign elements (polyglossia) and to different strata of culture (heteroglossia). And notice as well that attempts to seal off cultures lead to a retrograde "inbreeding," nicely described by Rocker (and equally true for Bakhtin): "All experience indicates rather that . . . inbreeding would lead inevitably to a general stunting, to a slow extinction of culture. In this respect it is with peoples as it is with persons. How poorly that man would fare who in his cultural development had to rely on the creations of his own people!" Communities, like relationships, must be nourished and continually revitalized with diverse influences. Says Rocker, in one of his more purple passages: "New life arises only from the union of man with woman. Just so a culture is born or fertilized only by the circulation of fresh blood in

the veins of its representatives. Just as the child results from the mating so new culture forms arise from the mutual fertilization of different peoples and their spiritual sympathy with foreign achievements and capacities.”<sup>28</sup>



It is in this light that any notion of “originality” in Bakhtin’s world is based upon fallacious assumptions, and any attempt to trace origins for political reasons (nationalism, e.g.) is for Rucker equally dangerous because it implies that purity is sought where there are interrelations and knowledge to be learned therefrom:

We are always dependent upon our predecessors, and for this reason the notion of a “national culture” is misleading and inconsistent. We are never in a position to draw a line between what we have acquired by our own powers and what we have received from others. Every idea, whether it be of a religious, an ethical, a philosophic, a scientific or an artistic nature, had its forerunners and pioneers, without which it would be inconceivable; and it is usually quite impossible to go back to its first beginnings. Almost invariably thinkers of all countries and peoples have contributed to its development.<sup>29</sup>

This is an argument for the promotion of unfettered associations of peoples across all cultural and linguistic lines. And—yet another point of intersection between Bakhtin and Rucker—it is an argument for the study, and the fostering, of intertextuality:

The inner culture of a man grows just in the measure that he develops an ability to appropriate the achievements of other peoples and enrich his mind with them. The more easily he is able to do this the better it is for his mental culture, the greater right he has to the title, man of culture. He immerses himself in the gentle wisdom of Lao-tse and rejoices in the beauty of the Vedic poems. Before his mind unfold the wonder-tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and with inner rapture he drinks in the sayings of the wine-loving Omar Khayyam or the majestic strophes of Firdusi. . . . In one word, he is everywhere at home, and therefore knows better how to value the charm of his own homeland. With unprejudiced eye he searches the cultural possessions of all peoples and so perceives more clearly the strong unity of all mental

processes. And of these possessions no one can rob him; they are outside the jurisdiction of the government and are not subject to the will of the mighty ones of the earth. The legislator may be in a position to close the gates of his country to the stranger, but he cannot keep him from making his demands upon the treasure of the people, its mental culture, with the same assurance as any native.<sup>30</sup>

According to this scenario, the artist is of special interest since s/he is the one who promulgates the “mental culture” of a given place and time by setting down in a unique fashion the currents of existing heteroglossia, not by inventing something that stands outside of contemporary experience. Both Bakhtin and Rocker are clear about this idea that the originality of an artistic work is its form, the way in which it ties together already existing strands. Morson and Emerson describe Bakhtin’s views of the artist as follows:

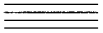
Bakhtin’s most cherished artists are those who enrich humanity’s ways of visualizing the world by creating new form-shaping ideologies. The greatness of Goethe lies in his contribution to the sense of time conveyed by narrative genres; Rabelais played a decisive role in the novel’s ability to sense conventions and assess popular social forms. Bakhtin also believed that the most valuable contribution of Western thought in the humanities was its diversity of genres. In this context, we can understand his impatience with literary histories stressing either the conflict of local schools, or the psychology of individual authors, or the “reflection” of social conflicts. By finding better ways to explore the wisdom of genres, criticism has much more important contributions to make.<sup>31</sup>

The creation of forms situates the author on the same plane as the world that he is describing; if anything, s/he is all the more deeply embedded in the prevailing chronotope. This is, yet again, consistent with Rocker’s approach:

Of course, the artist does not stand outside of space and time; he, too, is but a man, like the least of his contemporaries. His ego is no abstract image, but a living entity, in which every side of his social being is mirrored and action and reaction are at work. He, too, is bound to the men of his time by a thousand ties; in their sorrows and their joys

he has his personal share; and in his heart their ambitions, hopes and wishes find an echo. As a social being he is endowed with the same social instinct; in his person is reflected the whole environment in which he lives and works and which, of necessity, finds expression in his productions. But how this expression will manifest itself, in what particular manner the soul of the artist will react to the impressions that he receives from his surroundings, is in the final outcome decided by his own temperament, his special endowment of character — in a word, his personality.<sup>32</sup>

But no matter how in tune the author is to the general “social discourse” of a society, s/he is also subjected to the limitations imposed by the ruling classes and the form of social organization. One of the constraints to which authors, like all others, are subject is the law; since this is a point of considerable interest for Bakhtin, and considerable confusion for those who conflate “anarchy” with “chaos,” it is worth comparing Rocker and Bakhtin on law and laws.



Bakhtin does discuss specifically legal matters, such as legal discourse, hermeneutics, legal interpretation, power relations in the court, confession, professional discourses, and judicial matters. “The enormous significance of the motif of the speaking person is obvious in the realm of ethical and legal thought and discourse”; indeed, “the speaking person and his discourse is, in these areas, the major topic of thought and speech.”<sup>33</sup> I would argue that Bakhtin’s work is everywhere concerned with issues which could be usefully related to the study of law, including his discussions of alterity, the representation of the self, power in discourse, answerability, authoring, norms, responsibility, ethics, outsidersness, and authenticity — to name but a few.<sup>34</sup> Here I want to emphasize the degree to which responsibility, a fundamental concern for Bakhtin, is ingrained within the major tendencies of anarchist thought like Rocker’s, as evinced by the important relationship established between anarchy and what Rocker calls “natural law.” This emphasis raises further questions about the equivalence frequently posited between anarchy and chaos, as well as opening a discussion on responsibility and ethics in the works of Bakhtin and Rocker.

It is not surprising that, in their respective discussions of law and

responsibility, both make frequent reference to the domain of cultural activity. One of the reasons why the “dialogized” space is idealized in Bakhtin’s work is that it undermines attempts by official authoritative discourse to close down or limit the (natural) dialogism of human culture. Dialogic novels, public squares, or carnival spaces are of interest to Bakhtin precisely because they are places which cultivate dialogism and thereby nourish and revitalize the social domain. Rocker devotes considerable attention to the “cultural forces” in society as well because they

involuntarily rebel against the coercion of institutions of political power on whose sharp corners they bark their shins. Consciously or unconsciously they try to break the rigid forms which obstruct their natural development, constantly erecting new bars before it. The possessors of power, however, must always be on the watch, lest the intellectual culture of the times stray into forbidden paths, and so perhaps disturb or even totally inhibit their political activities. From this continued struggle of two antagonistic aims, the one always representing the caste interests of the privileged minority, the other the interests of the community, a certain legal relationship gradually arises, on the basis of which the limits of influence between state and society, politics and economics—in short, between power and culture—are periodically readjusted and confirmed by constitutions.<sup>35</sup>

Here enters the domain of law which for Bakhtin and Rocker (an area I’d like to explore in future work) is legitimate to the degree that it promotes freedom. Rocker makes this claim overtly in the distinction he draws between natural law and positive law:

In law it is primarily necessary to distinguish two forms: “natural law” and so-called “positive law.” A natural law exists where society has not yet been politically organized—before the state with its caste and class system has made its appearance. In this instance, law is the result of mutual agreements between men confronting one another as free and equal, motivated by the same interests and enjoying equal dignity as human beings. Positive law first develops within the political framework of the state and concerns men who are separated from one another by reason of different economic interests and who, on the basis of social inequality, belong to various castes and classes.<sup>36</sup>

This “positive law” hands power over to the State, which, as Rocker goes on to say, “has its roots in brute force, conquest and enslavement of the conquered,” and which is thereby given “a legal character.” In other words, it is quite possible to promote legal resolutions to conflict, and indeed to found communities upon legal grounds, even from an anarchistic standpoint. But even more important, in terms of reading Bakhtin, it is also possible to argue that the Rabelais book (even from a legal perspective) is consistent with the rest of the Bakhtin corpus (Morson and Emerson’s claim to the contrary notwithstanding).

I would suggest that what is being upheld in *Rabelais and His World* is a carnival of the folk that is specifically directed against the power of the rulers. Throughout the book, Bakhtin advocates laughter as a means of unsettling official dogma, of festivals as occasions to subvert official State gatherings, of riotous behavior to question authorized demeanor. “Unfinalizability” is most certainly one of the lessons we learn from this book, but it comes, in terms of its politics, from an anti-authoritarian and not a pro-chaos perspective. Morson and Emerson interpret the Bakhtin of *Rabelais and His World* as one who believes that “everything completed, fixed, or defined is declared to be dogmatic and repressive.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, the book questions arbitrary State or official authority just as carnival does. In contrast to official society, “carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance.”<sup>38</sup> This doesn’t suggest eternal unruliness as the new norm, but rather an inclusive politics that knows no separation between rulers and ruled, a place where people are freed from the oppression of the other and are inside their own spaces, which they control and for which they are responsible. Morson and Emerson find in Bakhtin’s writings about carnival that “only the destruction of all extant or conceivable norms has value,” when it seems clear that he is simply questioning the ruler-enforced norms, as another *Rabelais* passage quoted by Morson and Emerson also suggests: “The principle of laughter . . . destroys . . . all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities.”<sup>39</sup> The fact is (and here is the link to Rocker and his conception of the anarchist society) that freedom also creates the responsibilities which come naturally in train with liberation:



Only in freedom does there arise in man the consciousness of responsibility for his acts and regard for the rights of others; only in freedom can there unfold in its full strength that most precious social instinct: man's sympathy for the joys and sorrows of his fellow men and the resultant impulse toward mutual aid in which are rooted all social ethics, all ideas of social justice. Thus Godwin's work became at the same time the epilogue of that great intellectual movement which had inscribed on its banner the greatest possible limitation of the power of the state, and the starting point for the development of the ideas of libertarian socialism.<sup>40</sup>

Reason and responsibility become the bases for individual decision making, not authority and power. And for this conception of law, Rocker draws upon various sources, including Richard Hooker, who "maintained that it is unworthy of a man to submit blindly, like a beast, to the compulsion of any kind of authority without consulting his own reason"; and John Locke, who opined "that common and binding relationships existed between primitive men, emanating from their social disposition and from considerations of reason." Others, who "aimed to set limits to hereditary power and to widen the individual's sphere of independence," included "Lord Shaftesbury, Bernard de Mandeville, William Temple, Montesquieu, John Bolingbroke, Voltaire, Buffon, David Hume, Mably, Henry Linguet, A. Ferguson, Adam Smith." Most of them, "inspired by biological and related science, had abandoned the concept of an original social contract" and "recognized the state as the political instrument of privileged minorities in society for the rulership of the great masses."<sup>41</sup>

What is most interesting here in the Rocker-Bakhtin relationship is the emphasis placed upon individuality and creativity, both of which will flourish in the anti-authoritarian societies described. But so too will a higher conception of responsibility and ethics, for, says Rocker, "all schemes having their roots in natural rights are based on the desire to free man from bondage to social institutions of compulsion in order that he may attain to consciousness of his humanity and no longer bow before any authority which would deprive him of the right to his own thoughts and actions." When we consider this kind of society to be the goal to which both aspire, the Rabelais book takes on a different glow, it seems to me, for, like Bakhtin's later work and that of Rocker, it is animated by a sense that great

popular movements should look to overthrow institutions of power and authority in favor of free associations in which the seeds of freedom (and everything that grows along with them) will germinate vigorously. This is not simply a political objective, but a personal one as well, for, as Rocker (like Godwin, Warren, Proudhon, and Bakunin) recognized, “one cannot be free either politically or personally so long as one is in the economic servitude of another and cannot escape from this condition.”<sup>42</sup>

Finally, both Bakhtin and Rocker emphasize the individual over the community, despite their stated views on the importance of considering the entire social domain when trying to account for the individual. This is one more point of overlap between Bakhtin’s conception of what society is and should be like and society as envisaged by Rocker. The anarchist conception does not accept any compulsion to act, even for desirable ends; compulsion, regardless of the ends, is a power relation which will ultimately separate people, according to Rocker:

It lacks the inner drive of all social unions—the understanding which recognizes the facts and the sympathy which comprehends the feeling of the fellow man because it feels itself related to him. By subjecting men to a common compulsion one does not bring them closer to one another, rather one creates estrangements between them and breeds impulses of selfishness and separation. Social ties have permanence and completely fulfil their purpose only when they are based on good will and spring from the needs of men. Only under such conditions is a relationship possible where social union and the freedom of the individual are so closely intergrown that they can no longer be recognized as separate entities.<sup>43</sup>

We have here the very basis of the kinds of relationships—confession, laying bare, dialogue—that are upheld by Bakhtin as desirable throughout his entire corpus. Laughter, carnival, dialogue, and excess are means of breaking through the many walls erected by those who would use compulsion to enforce their will; what lies beyond them in the anarchist conception, as described here, is the freedom to act, to create, and to enter into relationships of love, compassion, and responsibility based upon shared concerns.

## Notes

- 1 Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, 1990), 94.
- 2 Rudolf Rocker, *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism* (London, 1990 [1938]), 17. In *Nationalism and Culture* (trans. Ray E. Chase [Montreal, 1998 [1937]]), 131). Rocker, recalling a passage from *Gargantua* that informed a significant area of his anarchist approach to society, says, "A great advance was made by the French Humanist, François Rabelais, who in his novel, *Gargantua*, describes a small community, the famous Abbey of Thé-lème, of wholly free men who had abolished all compulsion and regulated their lives simply by the principle, 'Do what thou wilt'":
 

. . . because free men, well born, well educated, associating with decent company, have a natural instinct that impels them to virtuous conduct and restrains them from vice which instinct they call honour. Such people when repressed and enslaved by base subjection and constraint forget the noble inclination to virtue that they have felt while free and seek merely to throw off and break the yoke of servitude; for we always try to do what has been forbidden and long for what has been denied.
- 3 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 92.
- 4 Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, 467.
- 5 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 42, 43.
- 6 Murray Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years 1868–1936* (New York, 1977), 29–30.
- 7 Rocker, *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*, 20.
- 8 Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, 83.
- 9 Bookchin, *Spanish Anarchists*, 90–91.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 91.
- 11 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 43.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 67.
- 13 Rocker, *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*, 7.
- 14 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 67.
- 15 Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought* (New York and London, 1966).
- 16 Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, 284.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 429, 287.
- 18 M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" (1934–35), in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981), 259–422; quotation from 288.
- 19 Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, 83, 346.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 277.
- 21 Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 292.
- 22 Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, 277.

- 23 See their glossary in Holquist, ed., *Dialogic Imagination*, 431.
- 24 Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 291.
- 25 Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, 278.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 282.
- 27 Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 370.
- 28 Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, 346.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 453.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 347.
- 31 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 284.
- 32 Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, 474.
- 33 Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 349
- 34 I have discussed legal matters from a Bakhtinian perspective on numerous occasions; see, e.g., Robert F. Barsky, *Constructing A Productive Other: Discourse Theory and the Convention Refugee Hearing* (Amsterdam, 1994); "The Discourse(s) of Literature and the Law," in *Face to Face: Bakhtin in Russia and the West*, ed. Carol Adlam, Rachel Falconer, Vitalii Makhlin, and Alastair Renfrew (Sheffield, U.K. 1997), 372–85; "La problématique dialogique: Quel rôle joue le questionnement dans le domaine de la littérature et du droit?," in *Mikhail Bakhtine et la pensée dialogique (Colloque de Cerisy)*, ed. Clive Thomson (London, ONT, forthcoming); and "Outsider Law in Literature: Construction and Representation in *Death and the Maiden*," *SubStance* 84 (Winter 1997): 66–89.
- 35 Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, 86.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 92.
- 38 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984 [1968]), 7.
- 39 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 92, 93.
- 40 Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, 148.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 140, 142.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 143, 167.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 246.