

For Reasons of State

Written by Michael Bakunin, circa 1867, as published in The Voluntaryist, April 1992.

We shall now examine what the State, thus constituted, should be in relation to other states, its peers, as well as in relation to its own subject populations. This examination appears to us all the more interesting and useful because the State, as it is here defined, is precisely the modern State.... Let us see, then: of what does its morality consist?...

The great statesmen of our days, the Palmerstons, the Muravievs, the Cavours, the Bismarcks, the Napoleons, had a good laugh when people took their religious pronouncements seriously. They laughed harder when people attributed humanitarian sentiments, considerations, and intentions to them, but they never made the mistake of treating these ideas in public as so much nonsense. Just what remains to constitute their morality? The interest of the State, and nothing else. From this point of view, which, incidentally, with very few exceptions, has been that of the statesmen, the *strong men* of all times and of all countries—from this point of view, I say, whatever conduces to the preservation, the grandeur and the power of the State, no matter how sacrilegious or morally revolting it may seem, *that is the good*. And conversely, whatever opposes the State's interests, no matter how holy or just otherwise, *that is evil*. Such is the secular morality and practice of every State. ...

The existence of one sovereign, exclusionary State necessarily supposes the existence and, if need be, provokes the formation of other such States, since it is quite natural that individuals who find themselves outside it and are threatened by it in their existence and in their liberty, should, in their turn, associate themselves against it. We thus have humanity divided into an indefinite number of foreign states, all hostile and threatened by each other. There is no common right, no social contract of any kind between them; otherwise they would cease to be independent states and become the federated members of one great state. But unless this great state were to embrace all of humanity, it would be confronted with other great states, each federated within, each maintaining the same posture of inevitable hostility. War would still remain the supreme law, an unavoidable condition of human survival.

Every state, federated or not, would therefore seek to become the most powerful. It must devour lest it be devoured, conquer lest it be conquered, enslave lest it be enslaved, since two powers, similarly and yet alien to each other, could not coexist without mutual destruction.

The State, therefore, is the most flagrant, the most cynical and the most complete negation of humanity. It shatters the universal solidarity of all men on the earth, and brings

some of them into association only for the purpose of destroying, conquering, and enslaving all the rest. It protects its own citizens only; it recognizes human rights, humanity, civilization within its own confines alone. Since it recognizes no rights outside itself, it logically arrogates to itself the right to exercise the most ferocious inhumanity toward all foreign populations, which it can plunder, exterminate, or enslave at will. If it does show itself generous and humane toward them, it is never through a sense of duty, for it has no duties except to itself in the first place, and then to those of its members who have freely formed it, who freely continue to constitute it or even, as always happens in the long run, those who have become its subjects. As there is no international law in existence, *and as it could never exist in a meaningful and realistic way without undermining to its foundations the very principle of the absolute sovereignty of the State*, the State can have no duties toward foreign populations. Hence, if it treats a conquered people in a humane fashion, if it plunders or exterminates it halfway only, if it does not reduce it to the lowest degree of slavery, this may be a political act inspired by prudence, or even by pure magnanimity, but it is never done for a sense of duty, for the State has an absolute right to dispose of a conquered people at will.

This flagrant negation of humanity which constitutes the very essence of the State is, from the standpoint of the State, its supreme duty and its greatest virtue. It bears the name *patriotism*, and it constitutes the entire *transcendent morality* of the State. We call it transcendent morality because it usually goes beyond the level of human morality and justice, either of the community or of the private individual, and by that same token often finds itself in contradiction with these. Thus, to offend, to oppress, to despoil, to plunder, to assassinate or enslave one's fellowman is ordinarily regarded as a crime. In public life, on the other hand, from the standpoint of patriotism, when these things are done for the greater glory of the State, for the preservation or the extension of its power, it is all transformed into duty and virtue. And this virtue, this duty, are obligatory for each patriotic citizen; everyone is supposed to exercise them not against foreigners only but against one's own fellow citizens, members or subjects of the State like himself, whenever the welfare of the State demands it.

This explains why, since the birth of the State, the world of politics has always been and continues to be the stage for unlimited rascality and brigandage, brigandage and rascality which, by the way, are held in high esteem, since they are sanctified by patriotism, by the transcendent morality and the supreme interest of the State. This explains why the entire history of ancient and modern states is merely a series of revolting crimes; why kings and ministers, past and present, of all times and all countries—statesmen, diplomats, bureaucrats, and warriors—if judged from the standpoint of a simple morality and human justice, have a hundred, a thousand times over earned their sentence to hard labor or to the gallows. There is no horror, no cruelty, sacrilege, or perjury, no imposture, no infamous transaction, no cynical robbery, no bold plunder or shabby betrayal that has not been or is

not daily being perpetrated by the representatives of the states, under no other pretext than those elastic words, so convenient and yet so terrible: “*for reasons of state.*”

These are truly terrible words, for they have corrupted and dishonored, within official ranks and in society’s ruling classes (many) men.... No sooner are these words uttered than all grows silent, and everything ceases; honesty, honor, justice, right, compassion itself ceases, and with it logic and good sense. Black turns white, and white turns black. The lowest human acts, the basest felonies, the most atrocious crimes become meritorious acts.

The great Italian philosopher Machiavelli was the first to use these words, or at least the first to give them their true meaning and the immense popularity they still enjoy among our rulers today. A realistic and positive thinker if there ever was one, he was the first to understand that the great and powerful states could be founded and maintained by crime alone—by many great crimes, and by a radical contempt for all that goes under the name of honesty. He has written, explained, and proven these facts with terrifying frankness. ... Machiavelli concluded from these facts, with a good deal of logic, that the State was the supreme goal of all human existence, that it must be served at any cost and that, since the interest of the State prevailed over everything else, a good patriot should not recoil from any crime in order to serve it. He advocates crime, he exhorts to crime, and makes it the *sine qua non* of political intelligence as well as of true patriotism. Whether the State bear the name of a monarchy or of a republic, crime will always be necessary for its preservation and its triumph. The State will doubtless change its direction and its object, but its nature will remain the same: always the energetic, permanent violation of justice, compassion, and honesty, for the welfare of the State.

Yes, Machiavelli is right. We can no longer doubt it after an experience of three and a half centuries added to his own experience. Yes, so all history tells us: while the small states are virtuous only because of their weakness, the powerful states sustain themselves by crime alone. ...

Such are the conclusions to which we are inevitably led by an examination of the external relations which the so-called free states maintain with other states. Let us now examine the relations maintained by the State founded upon the free contract arrived at among its own citizens or subjects.

We have already observed that by excluding the immense majority of the human species from its midst, by keeping this majority outside the reciprocal engagements and duties of morality, of justice, and of right, the State denies humanity and, using that sonorous word patriotism, imposes injustice and cruelty as a supreme duty upon all its subjects. It restricts, it mutilates, it kills humanity in them, so that by ceasing to be men, they may be solely citizens—or rather, and more specifically, that through the historic connection and

succession of facts, they may never rise above the citizen to the height of being man.

We have also seen that every state, under pain of destruction and fearing to be devoured by its neighbor states, must reach out toward omnipotence, and, having become powerful, must conquer. Who speaks of conquest speaks of peoples conquered, subjugated, reduced to slavery in whatever form or denomination. Slavery, therefore, is the necessary consequence of the very existence of the State.