

Table of Contents

Pacific Revolutionaries 1

Pacific Revolutionaries

By Fabian Tompsett

This year's prize for best long-titled left communist analysis of an American literary classic goes hands down to Loren Goldner's *Herman Melville: Between Charlemagne And The Antemosaic Cosmic Man - Race, Class And The Crisis Of Bourgeois Ideology In An American Renaissance Writer*

Goldner argues against left-wing orthodoxy to suggest that the USA, as announced in Melville's *Moby Dick* with its picaresque multicultural proletariat, was not behind statist Europe in the development of revolutionary socialism but ahead. At the same time, Melville and Marx were the first intellectuals to recognise the emergence of a new form of historical activity embodied in the socialised labour of the working class. This activity, turned against the alienating imperatives and forms of capital accumulation, promises to spring humanity loose from the Newtonian trap of disenchanting mechanistic rationality. For Goldner, communism is both the beginning of a truly global culture and a 're-cosmization' of existence.

Here, Fabian Tompsett offers a brief response to the book and looks at the potential for carrying Goldner's insights further, specifically into an engagement with the past and future of the Pacific as arena of revolutionary republicanism and nascent global anti-capitalism

I am surprised no one has made a film of it. Perhaps one day they will? The historical accounts are patchy, allowing us to fill in the gaps with our imagination. Here's how I picture the scene: it is the Wild East, Yokohama, Japan, 1861. Macauley, the African-American waiter is behind the bar quietly polishing the glasses while his two fellow Americans confront each other across the green baize of the billiard table - a novelty in Japan. The quiet click of the billiard balls is about to be disrupted as Mick, a giant of a man, joins Bill and Joe, the two Americans, in this remote location.

Bill is probably more of an American than Macauley, even though he has only recently become a naturalised citizen. In these days prior to the American Civil War, the status of African Americans was generally less than that of the freshly formatted naturalised citizen. Bill, or Wilhelm Heine, to give him his full name, was an artist who had come to the USA following his involvement in the 1848 Uprising in Dresden. He had fought alongside Bakunin at the barricades, but whilst Bakunin had been handed over to the Tsar in chains, Heine had fled to New York where he set up his artists studio. After a sojourn in Central America, he had gained a commission to accompany Commodore Perry in the opening up of Japan. With this he had established his career, and had in fact been instrumental in lobbying his native Germany to dispatch an emissary to Japan themselves. As a result he had accompanied the Eulenberg Mission, which was how come he was back in Japan.

His compatriot, Joseph Heco, had perhaps an even more curious background. Japanese by birth, he had the misfortune to be a castaway at the age of thirteen. Picked up by an American ship, he had wound up in San Francisco. Offered the chance of returning to Japan with Commodore Perry in 1853, he eventually turned it down and returned to America where he received a Western education and became a naturalised American citizen. After failing to get a job with the government in Washington he was now back in Japan on business. His status as an American was very important - at that time the punishment in Japan for visiting overseas was death. Yokohama was one of a handful of places where foreigners - as he had become - were allowed to remain. Even so the place was very violent and unruly, with xenophobic samurai ready to strike down foreigners on the slightest pretext.

So, upon this scene, the door bursts open and in walks Mike, like a Russian bear with his straggly beard. In fact it is none other than Mikhail Bakunin, the fiery Pan-Slav nationalist who had just escaped from Siberia. Bakunin had been one of the key figures in 1848, accepting 2,000 Francs from the French government to promote revolution in Germany (this was long before the 'father of anarchism' had developed his distaste for the state). A boldly charismatic figure, he had hithered and thithered across central Europe, before being captured in Chemnitz, narrowly escaping execution to be handed over to the Tsar to suffer eight years in prison before his mother's entreaties to the Tsar led to his sentence being commuted to Siberian exile.

Perhaps creating this fictionalised scene of two veterans of the 1848 barricades meeting in a bar on the other side of the world is an odd way to start a review of Loren Goldner's book *Herman Melville, between Charlemagne and the Antemosaic Cosmic Man: Race, Class and the Crisis of Bourgeois Ideology in an American Renaissance Writer* (Queequeg Publications, 2006) – but the book is very far from being an ordinary book, being neither a work of literary criticism nor new age waffle, but a significant text for the strange times in which we live. I feel that many of the issues underlying Goldner's work have become enmeshed in postmodernist/multicultural orthodoxy leading to a situation where critical thought is stifled precisely at the moment of becoming socialised.

Goldner takes Melville as an American counterpart to Marx, with a more intuitive approach to the working class – seen as something truly 'multi-cultural' albeit subjugated by the overarching strictures of the capitalist economy. And here fiction provides a more suitable vehicle than theory, using the closed world of the ship, which was after all a prototype of integrated collective working in the emergent industrialisation of this period, as a microcosm of capitalist production.

Perhaps this enigmatic book can more easily be approached if we use the subtitles as a hermetic key to the mysteries enclosed therein: Goldner's text highlights the difference between North America and Europe, in that the landscape of the latter was not festooned with picturesque ruins of a former feudal glory. Goldner reads *Moby Dick* as, among other things: 'a socio-political treatise on the tradition of cosmic kingship in Western History'. The French king, Charlemagne, founder of the First Reich, for Melville becomes the mythic embodiment of the idealised Cosmic King. Goldner cites Frances Yates in a footnote:

Through the use of 'cabalistic hieroglyphs', the Knight's Templar, 'Freemasons signs' and astrology, Melville is referring to the 'esoteric science' of the renaissance that was displaced by the 'white and turbid wake' of 'Newton's sleep' (as Blake called it): by his association of such symbols of 'cosmic kingship' in its Egyptian, ancient Near eastern, Greco-Roman or medieval forms, and the continuities and discontinuities of symbols of pseudo-sacred mythical power (Napoleon), Melville is linking the demise of that apprehension of nature to the cosmic state in the modern bourgeois era. (pp.51 – 52)

Goldner elucidates, pausing briefly to use Plato's *kosmokrator* ['world lord'] as a stepping stone towards the more satisfying goal of tracing the notion of the cosmic king back to its 'ultimate source' in the black soil on the banks of the Nile where the Egyptian pharaoh 'was considered simply as a living deity.' (p.53). Goldner skillfully links this notion of kingship to Orientalism, whilst the figure of the Ante-Mosaic Man features more as presenting a critique of Primitivism. *Moby Dick*'s Native American protagonist Queequeg (honoured in the naming of Goldner's publishing project) illustrates the point: Goldner stresses that this sailor is a highly skilled worker whatever his 'uncivilised' or oriental origins. As a young man he had hitched a ride on a Christian ship and earned his keep as sailor ever since. His skills as a harpooner squeezed premium wages from the cautious puritans who own the

Pequod, the ship which is the central character of *Moby Dick*.

As someone who had approached Melville through the prism of C.L.R. James's classic *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* (1953) I was interested to see how Goldner negotiated the author of *The Black Jacobins*:

[His] attempt to depict Ahab as a forerunner of the "managerial revolution" described by James Burnham in the 1940 book of the same title which, while having its merits, strikes the contemporary reader as somewhat overblown (though by no means false) must be seen against the immediate context in which the book was written.

No doubt in fifty years time someone will make a similar remark about Goldner's "take" on Melville. So perhaps we should consider the *primitivism* and *orientalism* which Goldner counterposes throughout the book. As the question of primitivism has been dealt with at length in *Green Apocalypse* (Richard Essex, Luther Blissett and Stewart Home) and associated texts, I would prefer to look at the issue of orientalism in this review. Goldner examines how the vision of the reconciliation of the individual with the cosmos through the image of the Cosmic king is projected onto the "East", quoting Melville's depiction of Ahab, the captain of the Pequod as "the Khan of the planks".

Coming shortly in the wake of Benedict Anderson's *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-colonial Imagination* (2005), Goldner's *Herman Melville* marks the growing impact of the world of the Pacific on the minds of Anglophone critical thought. And very welcome for that. One wonders what other rich material is to be found here. To illustrate this point, I would like to dip another toe into the political realities of the far East, the political currents which existed in Siberia, prior to Bakunin's flight from Siberia and following his departure.[1]

Far from acting out the stereotypical role as the Pater Familias of European Anarchism, here Bakunin accepted a government sinecure from the Governor General of Eastern Siberia, Count Nicholas Muraviev-Amurski - one of Bakunin's kinsmen. Muraviev was a pioneer of Russian imperialist expansion in the East, successively gaining more and more territory from the Chinese Empire, and establishing the Russian city of Vladivostok. Bakunin defended his patron in Alexander Herzen's liberal magazine *The Bell*. Another Anarchist, Prince Kropotkin was to describe Muraviev as being:

... very intelligent, very active, extremely amiable, and desirous to work for the good of the country. Like all men of action of the governmental school, he was a despot at the bottom of his heart; but he held advanced opinions and a democratic republic would not have quite satisfied him. He had succeeded to a great extent in getting rid of the old staff of civil service officials, who considered Siberia a camp to be plundered, and he had gathered around him a number of young officials, quite honest, and many of them animated by the same excellent intentions as himself. In his own study, the young officers, with the exile Bakunin among them (he escaped from Siberia in the autumn of 1861), discussed the chances of creating the United States of Siberia, federated across the Pacific Ocean with the United States of America.

That this movement for Siberian autonomy - called *oblastnichestvo* - should clothe itself in the ideological livery of the American Revolution should not be surprising. It is just another of the forgotten false starts of political development. We can likewise look to John Ross, the Cherokee

slave-owner and politician who tried to organise the Cherokees into a nation with a constitution modeled on that of the USA, becoming the first Principal Chief in 1828. Following forced migration West on the "Trail of Tears", by 1861 the Cherokees were divided by the American Civil War, with Ross at one time throwing his lot in with the confederacy, before military realities forced him to rejoin the Union cause. Likewise, back in Japan a few years later in 1868, British and American commercial interests armed Japan's rebellious military clans to rise up against the Tokugawa Shogun. Despite their military supremacy on land, the Shogun's forces maintained the strongest navy, led by Enomoto Takeaki. Together with their French military advisor, Jules Brunet, they founded the Republic of Ezo in what is now Hokkaido, once again modeled on the American model, which introduced the first elections in Japan.

I am using these examples to take Goldner's points beyond his text to illustrate how his insights into Melville and *Moby Dick*'s cosmo-historical motifs are very much applicable to a broader understanding of world development in the post-1848 period on which he focuses. Goldner sees 1848 as central for Melville, but in a way which breaks with eurocentric history. Just as much as Goldner uses Melville to break down a linear view of history, so he exposes the collapse of the bourgeois ego, an equally fictional construct designed to inhabit the pre-determined linear world of Louis Napoleon's Second Empire. This was also the scene for the advent of mass marketed consumer goods which helped materialise these interlinked ideologies. Goldner sees this process as the realisation of a pseudo-sacred world view (and a precursor of fascism with its latter-day Napoleons and petty-bourgeois Charlemagnes). I would like to see this taken further into the mythological world of revolutionary freemasonry which played such a strong role in this period. For example, revolutionaries from Louis Blanc to Garibaldi were involved in the Egyptian rites of the Philadelphians, who encompassed both occultist mysticism and revolutionary republicanism before these tensions pulled the First International apart in the years following 1848.

The contradictions of revolutionary republicanism outside the European context effectively shatter any linear conception of enlightened radicalism leading to an amelioration of the life of the masses. Enomoto placed a Chrysanthemum on the republican flag a symbol of imperial rule, and his diplomacy with the emergent Japanese Empire was as much concerned with defending the Tokugawa clan interest as integrating Hokkaido into the main islands of modern Japan. William Heine was to fight for the Union against slavery with thousands of other veterans of the 1848 Revolution in Germany not to mention other units made up of Irish Fenians and Scandinavian democrats who regarded the civil war as a revolutionary war. And Joseph Heco was to play an important role working for Thomas Glover, the Scottish entrepreneur who helped arm the Chosu and Satsuma clans in their overthrow of the Shogun. In fact, he was involved in explaining the American constitution and political system to representatives from these clans, although they went on to opt for the restoration of direct rule by the Emperor.

This digression on far western and far eastern political realities indicates a context in which Goldner's book makes more sense. If America is usually treated as a European development, for Melville it is as much defined by its Pacific as its Atlantic side. I find myself drawn to looking at precisely the post-1848 period which Goldner focuses on to better understand how the world in the 21st century is developing. Whilst Goldner focuses on the orientalist image of the Cosmic King, linking it to Louis Napoleon, we could just as easily look at the emergence of Japanese Imperial loyalism during the same period.

Goldner's book isn't always an easy read, but for those who have a purpose to read it, it is well worth the effort.

FOOTNOTES

[1] In fact this is taking up a debate which started in 1976, the centenary of the death of Mikhail Bakunin. This was started by the veteran anarchist militant Henmi Kichizō with *Nihon ni Tachiyotta Bakunin (Bakunin's Stopover in Japan)* which led to the publication in English of *Bakunin in Japan* by Libero International in 1978. Twenty years later Philip Billingsley took the whole debate further with his *Bakunin in Yokohama: The Dawning of the Pacific Era* which explores Bakunin's political career in Siberia.