

Bringing up bazarov:  
the origins of  
bazarov's radicalism  
in turgenyev's fathers  
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The genesis of the Russian radical movement is portrayed in Ivan Turgenev's classic novel *Fathers and Sons* as a shock which resonated throughout the Russian public sphere, effecting change within both families and society. Indeed, historian Daniel Brower argues in {em *Training the Nihilists: Education and Radicalism in Tsarist Russia*} that the radical movement changed not only the lives of the university students who were recruited, but also the society around them, by creating a legitimized niche for such counter-cultural activity. He claims further that most recruits for the movement entered not for intellectual reasons, but because of the recruitment process, which proved crucial to the movement's later success: Though ideological questions. . . appeared the major concern of radical journalists whose articles and books set the intellectual tone for the movement. . . much of the writing of the radical journalists was far above the heads of potential recruits. . . Rational analysis was not by itself adequate to generate large-scale, collective recruitment of radicals. Family, peers, church, and state all combined to discourage collective resistance. . . Some of the radicals did follow an individual, intellectual path to dissent. But the evidence suggests strongly that only the institutional force of the school of dissent made possible massive recruitment into the radical movement during the 1860's and 1870's. (Brower 18-19)As a realist novel, *Fathers and Sons* tries to portray details of its historical milieu, particularly forbidden aspects of life, supposedly without bias. Thus, we might indeed expect Turgenev's portrayal of Bazarov to coincide somewhat with a historian's view of a typical radical. Although three of the four young characters in *Fathers and Sons* seem to conform with Brower's description, the character of Bazarov seems to be superficially quite different from the others. Despite appearing to be <https://assignbuster.com/bringing-up-bazarov-the-origins-of-bazarovs-radicalism-in-turgenevs-fathers-and-sons/>

completely intellectualized and unaware of social pressures, Bazarov is often subject to social influence, and cares how he is perceived. Many of his actions appear to be motivated by a desire to please others and thus make a good impression; as scrutiny makes evident, he has clearly developed skills to do this. At first blush, the reader sees Bazarov as independent, and intellectually committed to what he terms nihilism. (footnote – Turgenev actually coined the term nihilism to refer to the beliefs of the radical movement. Finding Turgenev's term overly negative, other authors have used the more positive-sounding intelligentsia to refer to the class of radicals. Brower explains that he chooses to refer to members of this group as radicals, to avoid the debate altogether. I shall use the terms radicalism and nihilism interchangeably.}

Nihilism, as espoused by Bazarov, is largely a mixture of empiricist, utilitarian, positivist, and materialist philosophies; although Bazarov claims to negate even logic in his second argument with Pavel Kirsanov, (footnote – Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. and ed. Michael R. Katz (New York: Norton, 1996), 37-42) Subsequent references to this edition will appear in parentheses in the text.} he exhibits a clear preference for

scientific ideas throughout the book, calling all else

nonsense or romanticism (e. g., 20-1, 26, 35, 51). With

this vague assemblage of scientific philosophies as an operative

definition for Bazarov's radical beliefs, it becomes possible not only to

compare Bazarov with Brower's portrait of the typical student radical, but to

contrast his much espoused attitudes with his behavior. To avoid questions

of changes within Bazarov's personality during the course of the book,

evidence will be limited to indications of Bazarov's personality before he

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visited Odintsova at her estate. The primary concern of this essay is thus Bazarov's impetus for becoming a radical while at university: his subsequent evolution is irrelevant. (footnote – While much interesting speculation about Bazarov's character is possible from observing his interactions with Odintsova, and the way he reacted to subsequent events, this topic is left as an exercise to the reader.) In the characters of Arkady, Sitnikov, and Kukshina, the reader is certainly introduced to radicals who match Brower's description perfectly. Comparing the scene at Kukshina's home with Brower's description of a usual reading circle yields a striking resemblance. Brower explains that students joined "self education" reading circles not only to read and discuss recent intellectual theories, but for an informal atmosphere in which a variety of more personal issues could be discussed, with some amount of emotional involvement. Police records from that time describe some circles as having quite a confused atmosphere, where the "entire conversation turn[ed] on revolutionary themes" interrupted often with "revolutionary songs". . . [and] toasts to "the French republic, the success of the red flag, and revolution in general, which were "triumphantly received" by the participants (Brower 196). The gathering at Kukshina's home doesn't sound much less confused: "You can't do anything with [women]," Sitnikov said. "One ought to despise them, and I do, absolutely and completely! . . . Not a single one of them could understand our conversation; not one even deserves being talked about by serious men like us!" "But they've no need to understand our conversation," said Bazarov. . . "What? Then you must share Proudhon's opinion?" [said Kukshina] Bazarov drew himself up arrogantly. "I don't share anyone's opinion: I have my own."

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“Down with authorities!” cried Sitnikov, delighted with the chance to express himself incisively in the presence of the man before whom he fawned. “But Macaulay himself,” Kukshina started to say. “Down with Macaulay!” thundered Sitnikov. (53) In this conversation, as with others in the scene, intellectual discourse drops into the background of the characters’ lively and vacuous banter; instead, a large number of names are dropped and authorities invoked. Both settings are chaotic, and marked by a great deal more attention to seeming radical than intellectual interchange. In addition, it seems that Bazarov’s “disciples,” Arkady and Sitnikov, are committed to him rather than to his ideas. Bazarov seems to exert a social influence on them which makes them consciously evaluate themselves with respect to his ideas. We see this attitude in Sitnikov’s obsequious manner above, as he fawns for Bazarov’s attention, as well as when he first encounters Bazarov and Arkady, and credits Bazarov with his “regeneration” (49). In Arkady, we see a great deal of self-conscious attention paid to radical ideas, such as when he consciously conceals his emotion because “it was not for nothing that he was a nihilist” (46). Arkady’s initial comment to his father about how important Bazarov was to him, though he hadn’t known him very long, shows the degree of confidence he has invested in Bazarov (7–8). He perhaps gives a great deal more credit than is deserved with his comment to Bazarov’s father that “a great future awaits [Bazarov]” (95). From such remarks about Bazarov’s personal qualities, it seems that Arkady is captivated more by Bazarov’s personality than his ideas. However, to place this devotion in perspective, it should be noted that Arkady does not dress in the manner of most radicals, and will not hesitate to show irritation with Bazarov (e. g., 33–34). While <https://assignbuster.com/bringing-up-bazarov-the-origins-of-bazarovs-radicalism-in-turgenevs-fathers-and-sons/>

three of the four young people in this book are relatively typical radicals, according to Brower's description, we are left with the question of Bazarov's conformity to the radical image. We can judge Bazarov's conformity to the Brower's typical radical in several ways: demographically, by his physical appearance, and from his apparent motivations for joining the radical movement (i. e., whether his radical convictions were developed independently, or if he seems overly concerned with social considerations such as fitting into the radical milieu.) As with any question of human motivation, this last criterion is quite difficult to judge decisively. This question is further complicated by the fact that radicals made an effort to appear socially deviant, so their own words must be evaluated for motivations. With respect to dress, Brower notes: The radicals chose their attire to differentiate themselves from their social peers. The unique social position of the radical community created the desire for unique appearance (16). Thus Bazarov's indignant declaration, "I don't share anyone's opinion: I have my own!" (53), can be taken as a true declaration of ideological independence or as an expression of his desire for such originality. To avoid such a dilemma, it is possible to look for indications that Bazarov cares about how he is perceived by others, even if the image he projects is not one which is accepted in mainstream society. We can also examine Bazarov for signs of a desire to be accepted by others at all; such a desire would indicate that Bazarov is not simply a lone intellectual, but actually cares about his social role. Upon investigation, it seems that not only does Bazarov want acceptance, but he is quite good at pursuing it. Bazarov fits well into Brower's demographic breakdown of a typical nihilist.

The son of a doctor, and thus a member of the honorary nobility?

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(Brower 44), he was also the son of upwardly mobile ancestors: his paternal grandfather was a peasant (39). While such students were not as well represented within the radical movement as were hereditary nobility, they still comprised a fair proportion, according to Brower. Bazarov was a student at the medical school, a center for the radical movement. (footnote – This central role played by the Petersburg medical school can also be seen in radical literature, such as Chernyshevsky's {em What is to be Done?} which used medical students as central characters, and models for the "New People".) Bazarov's appearance and manner also differs quite drastically from those around him: he wears a Slavophile jacket, long hair and side whiskers, and has a "lazy" voice (6). When he fails to offer his hand immediately to Nikolai Kirsanov (6), Arkady explains that Bazarov is "simple" and not one with whom to "stand on ceremony" (7). Bazarov thus essentially concurs in appearance and manner with that of Brower's radicals (Brower 16). (footnote – A difference worth some note is that Brower describes radicals as generally wearing working class clothes, such as coveralls; however, Bazarov's long tasselled jacket conveys essentially the same show of solidarity with the Russian people, as well as shock value.) To address the question of Bazarov's motivations for joining the radical movement, it is best to start by examining his attention to social dynamics to determine whether he actually was a lone intellectual; Brower's typical radical cares more for social matters than ideology, and should thus seem socially conscious (Brower 18–19, and others). At first blush, Bazarov simply seems maladroit: he manages to dominate every scene unintentionally, interrupting Arkady's conversation with his father to ask him for a light for his pipe (11) and becoming the center of attention upon his

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entrance, his intellectual powers overwhelming everyone around him. At first meeting, Bazarov is portrayed as unquestionably intelligent and self-confident, even from the phrenological evidence of the â€” prominent bulges in his capacious skullâ€” (6). Except with Odintsova, he wins all of his arguments by using much fewer words than his opponent, as Arkady complains of (35). Similarly, during an argument with Bazarov, Pavel becomes visibly intimidated, as his lip trembles (37). It seems that Bazarov lacks both a sense of tact and the ability to use social situations to his advantage. On several occasions, he pushes his points with Arkady, even after it is obvious that the latter has become angry: in criticizing Arkady's father's lack of practicality (14), laughing at the fact that Arkady's father plays the cello at the age of 44 (34), and remarking upon the sad state of the family farm (33). Bazarov continually disparages Arkady on points of disagreement, with leading comments such as â€” So you still attach significance to marriage; I never expected that from you. â€” (33). Arkady seems so obviously intolerant of these remarks that one wonders why Arkady wanted Bazarov as a friend at all. Bazarov's treatment of Pavel and Arkady seems initially puzzling, as though he were either unaccustomed to argument, or didn't much care about the opinions of Pavel and Arkady. The first possibility seems unlikely, as we know that Bazarov has at least two â€” disciplesâ€”, and so must have â€” convertedâ€” them through persuasion somehow. The second possibility seems more likely; Bazarov might realize that Pavel Kirsanov is a lost cause, and might take Arkady's allegiance to him for granted. We see here an elucidation of Turgenev's use of Arkady and Pavel, as foils for Bazarov. Arkady plays the role of the â€” faithful side-kickâ€” who will remain loyal to Bazarov to the end,

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regardless of the latter's treatment of him, or so the reader might believe. Pavel, meanwhile, is a man of the 1840's; like Bazarov, he portrays himself as having been formed from the dominant philosophy of his youth, Sentimentalism, and yet is not as entirely committed to it as he professes. A former social lion, he would have likely played a role quite to Bazarov's dominant one; their roles, parallel in time, explain much of their intense rivalry, as Pavel becomes insecure that his jokes have started to fall flat (19, 20) and that Bazarov might dare dislike him (34). (footnote – The parallels between Bazarov and Pavel are manifold, and would alone provide enough material for a paper. Additional parallels become evident later in the book, such as their eventual tragic love for a mysterious or inscrutable woman.) Bazarov's attitude to those he respects but who do not agree with him is quite different, as he appears to ration his tact for them. He regards Nikolai Kirsanov as quite a pleasant man, but one with too many romantic tendencies (14, 32). Rather than confront him directly, as he might have with Pavel, he tells Arkady to try to alter his father's behavior, such as recommending the materialist book {em Kraft und Stoff} instead of Pushkin (35). Bazarov also rations his attention, choosing one social encounter over another: he chooses to visit Odintsova who he is quite intrigued by, despite his promise to his parents that he would return that very day (62). Rather than being universally undiplomatic and socially gauche, Bazarov instead makes decisions about which people are worth his tact, and acts accordingly; in the latter case, his decision was even motivated by desire for Odintsova, as opposed to a rational basis. While this rationing of diplomacy may seem unnecessary, it certainly shows Bazarov to be more socially savvy in this respect than one might imagine. One might even argue (without any

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substantiative evidence) that Bazarov is intentionally undiplomatic and brusque in order to further his image as being independent of social conventions. The idea that Bazarov is a lone intellectual is compelled by his reduction of everything to a rational basis; he even opines that he can't stand a stroll without a purpose (35). On the subject of love, he uses a physiological basis to describe the phenomenon, denigrating Pavel for throwing his life away after he is denied the only woman he really loved because one should simply be able to rationally override such feelings (26). (footnote – This is, incidentally, a clear foreshadowing to Bazarov's loss of interest after he is rebuffed by Odintsova.) Treating beauty as objective, he remarks after meeting two females, "There was only one pretty girl?" (32). Throughout the novel, he makes many remarks objectifying women, who he claims (as in the conversation quoted above) are useful only for their beauty, in his rationalistic intellectual calculus. Examples of his objectification about: he sees no point in visiting Kukshina if she is not good-looking (49) (footnote – Although he ends up demurring, because he is told that there will be champagne); he claims that he does not like women free-thinkers because "they're all ugly monsters?" (58); even after a long conversation with her, he describes Odintsova as having "a delectable body — perfect for the dissecting table?" (61); he tells Arkady that Katya is the real prize rather than Odintsova, because although Odintsova "has a real head on her shoulders?", Katya is malleable "fresh, unspoiled, timid, taciturn, anything you like?" (67). Although these comments are made on a "rational?" basis, they belie Bazarov's ultra-rationalist pose, by reflecting his desires for these women; Bazarov's "rational?" standard is thus nothing more than his personal taste. Upon closer

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examination, Bazarov's further sensitivities to the intricacies of human life are revealed, contradicting his pretense of intellectual independence: others find him attractive, and he can selectively apply social charms as needed. This social adroitness makes it seem unlikely that Bazarov is a lone intellectual, but is instead accustomed to being part of a social network. As Brower notes, radicals joined reading groups less for ideological reasons than to seek fraternal companionship while away from home (Brower 192); a typical radical might thus, when away from university, seek acceptance without discrimination by ideology, desiring companionship from even non-radicals. His attractiveness to others is unquestionable. Despite not having known him very long, Arkady remarks to his father, "I can't tell you how much I value [Bazarov's] friendship." (7-8) Fenechka's young son Mitya, who is often shy with strangers and backs away even from Arkady, is completely unafraid of Bazarov (32); the servants of the Kirsanov household feel as though "he was almost one of them" (34); Dunyasha, a young servant girl, flirts with him whenever she sees him (34). It also appears that he holds an attraction for a variety of women. From her first impression, Odintsova remarks that he's the only guest at the ball who interests her (57). Kukshina seems to pay him special attention, at one point moving closer to him and suggesting that the group discuss love (52, 54). Bazarov's bedroom in the Kirsanov household even becomes filled with his essence: a mixture of the odors of a medical-surgical setting and cheap tobacco (26). Even in unbecoming situations, Bazarov makes a graceful entrance and adapts his behavior to fit social norms. When meeting the admired Fenechka, Bazarov alters his personality and manners to charm her, saying things which he would not have otherwise allowed himself to say, and would in fact have

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criticized others for. He acknowledges her superstitions good-naturedly, when after praising Mitya's appearance, he remarks, "Don't worry, I haven't given anyone the evil eye. ? (32). In echo of her statement that she was in good health "thank God", he begins his next statement with "Thank God" ? (32). Together with the above evidence of his low opinion of the female intellect, it seems that Bazarov does know that simply echoing Fenechka's chief beliefs is the most effective way of winning her respect. This decision was not simply made rationally; it was his desire for Fenechka which caused him to alter his manner towards her. Splattered with mud and carrying a writhing bag, Bazarov encounters the Kirsanov men having tea on this first morning of his visit; he greets them and excuses his appearance with a flourish worthy of Pavel Kirsanov (19). Had he not responded so well to smooth over the situation, he may have looked foolish before Nikolai's and Pavel's opinions of him were fully formed; with his smooth greeting, he managed to finesse this potentially awkward situation into looking almost normal. This example also demonstrates that Bazarov alters his normal mode of speaking when speaking with both women he wants to impress and men whose admiration he wishes to win. At some points, we see Bazarov regretting his behavior, further compelling the argument that he is concerned with others' perception of him and, like one of Brower's typical radicals, desires respect from those around him, even (and perhaps especially) non-radicals. In his second argument with Pavel Kirsanov, for instance, his face turns a coppery color (39) and in the middle of it, he realizes that he has been too expansive with Pavel (40); in other words, Bazarov finds it necessary to remind himself to restrain himself to one line answers. Bazarov is hyper-sensitive to his peers' perception of him.

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While he pays more attention to the champagne than the conversation at Kukshina's (55), when he feels that his validity as an independent thinker has been questioned (in the conversation quoted earlier), he feels the need to interject, "I don't share anyone's opinion: I have my own" (53). His profound concern with others' perception can be seen in his first meeting with Odintsova. Although, as with Fenechka, Odintsova first intrigues Bazarov with her physical attractiveness (56, 58), and causes him to make insinuating remarks about her to Arkady (58), his first meeting with her is quite unlike that with Fenechka and is, in fact, a departure from his usual mode of interaction; he notices his embarrassment and thinks in astonishment, "Well, I'll be. Afraid of a woman!" (59). Bazarov makes a great deal of effort to interest her, and rather than start an argument about nihilism, speaks with her about less controversial matters (60). At his departure, Bazarov blushes and bows (61). Here we see a marked change from Bazarov's usual attitude: not only does he seem to care about Odintsova's reaction to him, but he is ingratiating to her. As with Fenechka, he does not discuss nihilist ideas, but with Odintsova, he seems even to respect her intellect, discussing botany and other scientific subjects; his treatment of Odintsova does not take on the same condescending tone he shows with Fenechka. This reversal of his usual treatment of women demonstrates that Bazarov recognizes that social context and goals can predominate over ideology. Bazarov optimizes his strategy for interaction with Odintsova, allowing his goal of attracting Odintsova to determine his interactions with her, rather than being driven by his intellectual convictions about how an encounter with a woman should proceed, as expressed in his conversation with Sitnikov quoted above. Contrary to his claim that

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“People are like trees in a forest; no botanist would study each birch individually.” (64) this encounter shows that Bazarov must indeed believe something to the contrary. (footnote – This comment does, in fact, come during Bazarov’s first conversation while visiting Odintsova’s estate; it is nonetheless typical of his views.) A realist novel, *Fathers and Sons* tries to portray details of its historical milieu supposedly without bias; we might accordingly expect Turgenev’s portrayal of its young characters to coincide with a historian’s view of a typical radical. Comparison with Brower’s description of a typical radical reveals that all four young characters conform fairly closely with their historical model. Although the character of Bazarov appears to be superficially more ideologically committed to radicalism than his cohorts, deeper examination shows him to be subject to social pressures, despite his attempt to appear completely intellectualized and unaware of such influences; many of his actions appear to be motivated by a desire to please others and make a good impression, without apparent discrimination by their ideology. In fact, the effort he expends towards impressing women indicates that he is guided by desire in choosing the objects of his attention. Based on his attention to social dynamics, his hypersensitivity to how he is perceived by others, and evidence that his rationalism is merely part of a pose, it seems more likely that Bazarov would have joined the radical movement due to the institutional force of the school of dissent, rather than from the independent ideological motivation he attempts to convey to others.

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