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# Why I Am a Social Revolutionist

Dyer D. Lum

October 30, 1890

Before answering the inquiry propounded to me, it were well to first define terms. In one sense whoever desires a radical change in our social conditions, who advocates principles at utter variance with those now maintaining, may be said to be a Social Revolutionist; in this sense the Quakers were religious revolutionists. But the accepted meaning of the term does not embrace revolution and evolution as identical words, but ascribes to the former active resistance by overt acts to the powers that be. It is in this sense that the term is here used, and I at once proceed to give some of the chief reasons why I defend such a course and array myself with those who do not make the assertion of principle subordinate to the lines of legality as laid down by their enemies.

1. *Historical progress has been along these lines.* Civilization consists in the constant modification of past militant direction, and the evils against which we protest are incarnated in institutions. These being fixed, buttressed by laws requiring compulsory acquiescence under penalties, can only be changed by arousing a sentiment sufficient to secure their modification.

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But however modified, fixity again results, protest becomes social blasphemy, a barrier is set up against further advance, and reform becomes an uphill effort against established order, which ever tends to repress agitation as dangerous. The question hereupon arises, if established order be not accepted to its logical exclusion of all change, as in Asiatic despotism, how can such sentiment be best aroused?

Established order, being an instituted fixity, excludes reform, and whoever advocates change by that very act becomes an enemy to it. He may seek to be "practical" and compromise by only urging a slight modification, but principle cannot. Every change involved in social progress illustrates the folly fixity for ever-changing human needs; hence discontent gains ground, faith is weakened, until at last, the barriers remaining immovable, that which at first had birth as an idea in the brain of the reformer works down to the muscles of the less theoretical and overt acts result. Power is by its very essence stationary; it deprecates reform as a weakening of its position; hence, in all ages governments tend to arrest social growth. The phrase "wise government" can only be applied to supernatural direction, which does not obtain in state councils. The wisest government is that which but responds readiest to the demand to which its own establishment had given birth, and for this reason will yield only as forced by fear to give something rather than risk losing all. In other words, reform is the expression of progress; government the institution of what time ever determines to be infantile conditions. The one possesses the fluidity of water, ever seeking through the mutuality of (atomic) interests free scope to arrange relations in even flow; the other, the dam erected before its course and against which the rising waters, constantly pressing with increasing momentum, call out repressive measures for safety, before gathering danger leads to sluiceways to relieve immediate fear, said sluiceways being known in history as reforms. As all wisdom comes but by experience, and government not possessing prescience, we might

a few hours before his unforgotten death: “Hail to the Social Revolution!”

as well predicate wisdom to the dam, and say that the “wise” dam would ever keep just ahead of the flowing waters; in other words to cease to be what the word “dam” implies.

2. *Active resistance is the essential element of human nature.* Upon the accepted axiom that “self-preservation is the first law of nature” the whole argument might be rested. In nature rights are mights, being the exercise of that which is necessary for self-maintenance; the right of one fish to prey upon another being its might. In social life self-preservation is seen best maintained where rights are regarded as equal. Hence, in demanding certain rights we are but negatively asserting that our equal rights are being abridged. So in resistance to aggression, to curtailment of equal *rights* (to still use that word which is after all but the expression of the necessary conditions of existence), we are but exercising self-assertion, asserting self-preservation within the lines of equal freedom. The demand for reform, like that for rights, is but protest, called out by denial of free scope to mutual action. My right to life is that of free scope to maintain existence, while the social organism determines this to be within the lines of equal freedom.

Hence, the Social Revolutionist, find the plasticity of free contract denied by the fixity of status, to use Spencer’s terms, the assertion of the first logically denies regard for the second, which being founded upon law leads us to cry, “Throttle the law!” or compromise for temporary advantage, which is ever incipient suicide. Self-preservation demands active resistance in physical existence to whatever threatens or curtails it; in social life freedom of contract being the essential condition, whatever prevents this directly invades and calls into action all the functions necessary to maintain life. Such resistance is defensive, self-preservative, for the law of equal freedom positing contract as the essential condition of social existence, its limits are defined.

3. *Passive resistance is but a theoretical illusion of “rainbow chasers.”* However beautiful in theory it never obtains in prac-

tice. Under free conditions, or on some other planet, it might hold good; but under present conditions, as set forth in the first part of this article, it would either be the passive bleat of the sheep to the attack of the ravenous world, or prevented from materializing by appeals to ambition or cupidity from that fount of favors—Government. We see this illustrated in the “No Rent” movement in Ireland. The scheme was both well conceived and organized, but organization ever involves variance, and the Irish were fooled into looking to an English Parliament for Irish justice, and they have attained—Balfour! Garrison was a consistent, passive resistent; but in launching a revolutionary idea Garrison’s brain logically led to John Brown’s muscles; it was the connection of parent and offspring. The throwing a cargo of tea into Boston harbor intensified feeling, and Lexington and Bunker Hill followed. In Ireland active resistance (it would be but irony to allude to Russia) has accomplished more than all the eloquence wasted in Parliament. Gladstone admitted that the Clerkenwell explosion disestablished the Irish Church. The recent brutal outrage in Tipperary has called forth a storm of indignation and the armed constabulary laugh. The judicious present of a good-size bomb, and fortunately scores of Irishmen now know how to prepare it, would change that laugh into consternation and fear, and though scores of them were hurled to sheol it would still be within the limits of self-preservation. All that parliamentary agitation has accomplished for Ireland has been because of the aroused thought owing to the dynamite hints given at London, Liverpool, Glasgow, etc.

The whole century has been characterized by the discussion of economic questions, yet that there was a labor question was gravely denied by statesmen in 1877, and like lightning out of a clear sky came the lurid glare of the Pittsburg conflagration and thousands by its light began to study the new problem. In 1886, an armed attack was made upon workmen in peaceable assembly at Chicago, and an indignant hand justly resisted, and

lo! the Twentieth Century is here to publish this article. Do you tell me that in all these acts and countless others the cost was too great in noble lives, in tears shed and sorrow felt? The Church mourns its martyrs, yet wish not that they had been more “discreet” and lived to vegetate in peaceful obscurity. The world over patriot dead are held in grateful remembrance, yet it is to the “folly” of their self-sacrifice that we are what we are. Scaffolds have been erected often, and in all great crises men and women have been found willing to grace them. is not the whole long career of the proletariat but the “Martyrdom of Man” strewn with whitened bones, cemented with scalding tears welling up from broken hearts, and stained with the bleeding feet of countless millions?

Events are the true schoolmasters, and smarting under the White terror which yearly sacrifices its millions the Social Revolutionist does not hesitate to invoke the Red terror, knowing that here the words apply that “he who loseth his life shall save it.” But how? By words of rodomontade? By inviting *others* to do by simply preaching the gospel of discontent? No; but by deeds. The Social Revolutionist is not moved by revenge nor by mere impulse. When Alexander II was killed, when Cavendish and Burke were sent to judgment, when John Brown shot men he had never before met, the world understood the full significance of each act. When an occasion arises in this country where the intent is equally apparent, the social problem will against be studied with still greater interest, though every telegraph pole be made a gallows. With this end in view our eyes are dry, though others may weep. Thousands have sighed over the fate of Louis XVII, reared in luxury and silk-diapered, and she tears over the sorrows and death of his prostitute mother, but would they rather have had the continuance of the old régime? Whatever may be the answer vouchsafed to prayer, it has never taken the guise of Liberty.

For these reasons I, with my comrades, heartily subscribe to the last words written by Albert R. Parsons, in his letter to me