

Parliamentary Rule

Charlotte Wilson

February 1887

One of the most mischievous prejudices we have to get rid of in order to begin the new life of Socialism, is the belief in parliamentary rule. Parliament has in this country rendered so many services in the struggle against the rule of the Court, and the nation has been so much accustomed to connect with Parliament its reminiscences of struggle for political liberties, that even among Socialists some vague belief in Parliament still lingers; a fancy that it may in future become an instrument for ridding the nation of the rule of Capital.

Not that such a belief is always held consciously. Much has hap, on the contrary, during the last twenty years to weaken to some extent the old faith in Parliament. The intelligent workman already often asks himself whether Parliament, which has been so powerful an instrument in substituting the rule of the middle-classes for that of the aristocracy, can possibly be utilized as an instrument for demolishing the rule of those very classes ? Nevertheless, many Socialists, directing their chief attention to the economic aspect of the Social Question, overlook its political aspects.

They do not ask themselves whether some new form of social organization must not be called into being in order to permit a new departure in economics ; and therefore they continue to act as if they were persuaded that parliamentary rule really is the hind of political organization with which a society liberated from the yoke of Capital can set about such a new departure. What, in fact, has been advocated by our Social-Democratic friends, in this country and on the Continent, beyond the ancient parliamentary rule, with occasional recourse to the referendum, popular vote by yes or no- which has already been in action for so many years in Switzerland ? What do they indicate as the, goal of our endeavors beyond the parliamentary rule of a Democratic Republic: that is, the same sort of political institution which has so admirably favorised the growth of Capital-rule in the United States and Switzerland, and so admirably adapts itself to capitalist exploitation, capitalist wars, and capitalist oppression in France?

They argue, of course, that in a society where there will be no individual owners of land and capital, parliamentary rule will be no longer a failure ; that it will not check the free development of a free society of workers without capitalists or middle-men. But in the meantime Life is taking another direction, and is already elaborating 1 new forms of political organization, which will be as different from 1 parliamentary rule as parliamentary rule is different from Absolute Monarchy.

Throughout our history we may see that a new form of political organization has corresponded to each new form of economic organization. When the peasants were reduced to economic, if not to personal serfdom ; when the city workman was a factor of no importance ; when the richest and most powerful class were the landed aristocracy, -then Absolute Monarchy was the corresponding form of government.

And as soon as trade and commerce began to enrich the middle-classes, they refused to be ruled by a few courtiers taken from the aristocracy. They revolted-from the middle of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth in this country, in 1789-93 in France, in 1848 in Germany. And, by cunningly taking advantage of the support they found among the peasants and workmen, they reduced the monarch and his courtiers to obedience, and substituted the rule of parliament. More than that. Parliament was the instrument with which they succeeded in accomplishing this revolution and rendering it permanent in its effects.

Further, if we revert to an earlier period we see that the cities when freeing themselves, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, from the rule of their lay and ecclesiastical lords and of the Crown, also started a new form of political organization, based on the independence of the city and the organization of the guilds. These guilds were not like the trades'-unions of our time, but were independent corporations, having their own laws, their own forms for the administration of justice, their own arrangements for self-defense, etc-in short, they were political organizations as well as trades' organizations. The cities conquered their independence, and maintained it by producing a new kind of political organization. A new phase of economic life brought about it new phase of political life. Without the latter, the former would have been impossible.

Again, going still further back, we find, after the fall of the Roman Empire, the common possession of the soil going hand in hand with clan organization, the gathering of all villagers for the discussion of the affairs of the village, and the federation of villages and clans for the discussion of business common to them all.

In short, throughout history we see that each change in the economic relations of a community is accompanied by a corresponding change in what may be called political organization. These two are so closely connected with one another that they cannot be separated. The freed citizen, beginning a new life on a new basis, proclaims the free commune as the middle classes in similar circumstances convoke a parliament. The free city in one case, the parliament in the other, are instrumental in accomplishing the revolution. They render its results stable and permanent, and afford scope for its further development.

Thus, too, it will be with Socialism. If it contemplates a new departure in economics it must be prepared for a new departure in what is called political organization. And this new departure cannot be the parliamentary rule of a past era.

Many symptoms show that in Europe there is already a strong tendency in men's minds towards the elaboration of this new Socialistic form of political organization.

Nowhere is the belief in parliamentary rule so strong as in this country. But even in this country the old faith has of late received many a severe blow. Those who know what parliamentary rule is, are agreed that some new departure must be made. "Things can no longer go on as they have done,"-such is the growing opinion. In fact, as soon as the necessity of Home Rule for Ireland was recognized, the idea rapidly spread that Home Rule for Scotland, Home Rule for Wales, and Home Rule for London are also necessary. But this movement is only a preliminary. It dates but from yesterday. Let it grow, and the necessity of something less parliamentary than a Scotch, or Welsh, or Cockney Parliament will soon be recognized.

On the Continent the anti-parliamentary movement is still more pronounced. In France, among those who reason instead of merely clinging to what exists, you will hardly find one man in a thousand who still believes in the National Parliament of the Republic. As to the workmen, if they cherish any expectations for the future, it is from the Commune—the autonomous Commune federated with other autonomous Communes, and not from any National Parliament or Convention. —Nay, since the defeat of the Paris Commune, the Communalist idea has become the idea of modern France.

In Spain, the only political party of any consequence, besides the International Working-men Association, which is Anarchist and not political, is the "Cantonalist" party of Pi-y-Margal, the party of communal and cantonal autonomy. It is the only party besides the Anarchist International which the Republicans themselves consider worth speaking of.

In Italy, as soon as the Monarchy shall be overthrown and the central government be reduced to impotence (and that will shortly happen), each province, each ethnographical portion of a province, each city, will start upon its own independent career; each will try to find by its own endeavors a solution for the social question.

In Switzerland, where they have Home Rule for each small separate Republic (or canton), where they have thoroughly democratic institutions, and, moreover, the use of the referendum, they are discussing at this moment how to modify their political organization; and it is a serious question with the democrats of Lausanne if it would not be better, even in the larger cities, to revert to the forum, still in use in smaller communes. All the institutions which inspired so much faith in 1848 are pronounced a failure.

Germany alone seems to be an exception to the rule. Its Radicals and Socialists seem still to see their ideal in Robespierre's Jacobinism, i.e., in a Republic strongly centralized. But this turn of mind is easily explained by the historical phase that Germany is now going through. The first shock will, however, loosen it to the foundations. Something towards the destruction of Capital Rule will certainly be done in Germany by the next revolution, but this something will not be accomplished by the prescriptions of a German Parliament. It will be done by the revolt of isolated centers, where Socialist life and thought are growing rapidly.

We are deeply persuaded that if anything is to be done in a Socialist sense in this country, it will be done in the same way. It will be accomplished outside Parliament, by the free initiative of British workmen, who will take possession for themselves of capital, land, houses, and instruments of labor, and then combine in order to start life on the new lines of local independence.

Parliamentary rule is Capital rule. It has served its time. No Parliament, however noisy, will help to accomplish the Social Revolution. And it is not to parliamentary rule that the revolted workmen will look for the economic and political re-organization of the People.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Charlotte Wilson
Parliamentary Rule
February 1887

<https://www.revoltlib.com/anarchism/parliamentary-rule/view.php>

theanarchistlibrary.org