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Free Speech in Philadelphia or Anywhere

Horace Traubel

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August 1909

Retrieved on 26th April 2021 from
www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
The Conservator 20 no. 6 (August, 1909): 88–89.

theanarchistlibrary.org

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can stand the police administration of Philadelphia better than the State of Pennsylvania can stand the police administration of Philadelphia. In the arena of free speech the last idea is as good as the first. The idea of one is as good as the idea of all. The ideas of minorities are as good as the ideas of majorities. It would be as much right for the one rebel to gag all the conformists as for all the conformists to gag the one rebel.

The police administration of Philadelphia stands for the club. We stand for thought and love. The police are always given the choice of weapons and sometimes they choose the weapons of barbarism. The man who trusts his brain and his heart so little that he appeals to the club in contests of the brain and the heart retains the vision of the savage and can enjoy no prestige in the courts of the soul. The trouble in Philadelphia is not so much the policeman as the police consciousness. And I may say that I am less interested in getting the people out of the hands of the policemen than in getting the police consciousness out of the brains of the people. And I may say that it's not half so sad to see the liberties of Philadelphia threatened as to see that there is no general protest against the threat. Not half so sad to see a few men misusing a few clubs as to see a whole community misusing a lot of brains. Not half so sad to know that a handful of misguided officials make a mockery of justice as to know that many thousands who would like to dare not join us in this protest. Not half so sad to have a little woman stopped by a big bluff from speaking as to have a whole city stopped by a little bluff from hearing. No half so sad, my brothers. Not half so sad.

I.

I am glad that in speaking of Emma Goldman today you took high ground for free speech and shooed off the dogs of war. There's no sense in trying to kill ideas with brickbats and guns. The policeman's club is never an argument. It always vulgarly and brutally remains a policeman's club. To suppress Emma Goldman is not an evidence of power but a confession of weakness. Imagine a whole nation put on edge by a little woman a few feet high who says a few things with which majorities do not agree! If the majorities were really majorities they would smile and pass her by. Or, maybe, if they were wise majorities and not fool majorities, they would not pass her by before they had stopped to listen. But they are not real majorities. Majorities of oppression are never real majorities. They are only impotent humbug majorities. They are not sure they have the truth. If they were they would not tremble and run when the truth is blasphemed. They are the victims of their own skepticism. They become cruel because they are impotent. I don't need to say such things to you —you know them as well as I know them. But there are a lot of people to whom they do need to be said over and over again as long as there are people who threaten and storm and snarl against free speech in our Republic.

There was a time in the heat of the anti-slavery fight in this country when Theodore Parker was rejected by all the pulpits of New England. Then a body of devoted men and women, only a few of them—sacred forever be their names!—came together and organized in his behalf, with this simple platform of religion: “Resolved, That Theodore Parker be given a chance to be heard in Boston.” They didn't all in all things agree with Parker. But they wanted to give him a chance to be heard. Emma Goldman has friends. These friends don't all in all things agree with her. But these friends in effect have passed a resolution. It may be said to read like this: “Resolved, That Emma Goldman be

given a chance to be heard in America.” Being against that resolution is being barbarous. Being in favor of that resolution is being civilized. I’m glad to see you are in favor of that resolution.

II.

Foolish people who can’t see beyond their noses imagine that the police administration of Philadelphia this week has had a quarrel with Emma Goldman. That is a mistake. The fight is not O’Leary and so forth versus Goldman and so forth. The fight is O’Leary and so forth versus the State of Pennsylvania and so forth. The fight is not between law and anarchy but between lawlessness and the Constitution. And the conformist today is not the police administration but the woman whom that administration has assailed. If the club of the policeman is right then the traditions of the State of Pennsylvania are wrong. Yes, then the Constitution of the State is wrong. Tuesday night there was a victor and there was a victim. The victor was Chaos and the victim was the State of Pennsylvania. Every time a policeman’s club was raised on Tuesday night it landed on the sacred body of the law it pretended to protect. Nothing happened that night to injure Emma Goldman. Everything happened that night to hurt the State of Pennsylvania. All the spiritual honors of that night went to Emma Goldman. No club ever beat down or destroyed an idea. If an idea is false no institution can save it. If an idea is true no physical force, however formidable and impressive, can harm or destroy it.

It was grotesque to see all that display of arrogant governmentalism Tuesday night. What evoked it? Broad street and the court yard of the City Hall and the alleys adjacent had the air of an armed camp. The constabulary swarmed there like bees. But they were ludicrously wasted. Nobody was out that night to do anybody any harm. Nobody but the police themselves.

No citizen of Philadelphia, drawn for one reason or another to the center of excitement, had any notion of disobeying laws or provoking quarrels. Everything was at peace. Everything but the guardians of the peace. Emma Goldman was at peace. The people who filled a hall to hear her speak were at peace. The thousands outdoors watching the curiously anomalous parade of administrative arrogance were at peace.

What, then, was all the official fuss and fury for? It must have been summoned and displayed for the purpose of scaring an idea. But ideas are never scared. The idea for which Emma Goldman is supposed to stand was never so lively as that night in Philadelphia. Ideas are always liveliest when attempts are made to suppress them. The very worst way to suppress an idea is to attempt to suppress it. For, if an idea is true, you can’t suppress it, and if it is false it does not need to be suppressed—it will suppress itself. If we all agreed finally and for good talking would be nonsense. But because we disagree talking is the part of wisdom. The men who made the Constitution of the State of Pennsylvania wise knew this. So they advocated free speech. The men who today in Philadelphia make the administration of the laws foolish do not know it. So they advocate a despotism.

III.

I am glad you are to preside at the meeting tomorrow night. Our meeting is not called as a protest against the State of Pennsylvania but on behalf of the State of Pennsylvania. The victim of last week’s mistake in Philadelphia was not Emma Goldman but the State of Pennsylvania. We know that Emma Goldman survived that incident unhurt. But who can say that the State of Pennsylvania survived that incident unhurt?

Our meeting is not inspired by an interest in one person or one idea. It belongs to all persons and all ideas. Anybody can stand oppression easier than the oppressor. Emma Goldman