

Evolution and Revolution

Ricardo Mella

1889

The subject with which I am about to deal is of undeniable importance, not only from the exclusive point of view of one party or school, but also in a general sense for all who profess more or less advanced ideas.

The advocates of progressive ideas are generally divided into evolutionists and revolutionists, and I consider such a division to be absurd in every respect, because it does not conform to the facts, nor is it justified and explained by logic. I shall try, therefore, to prove the complete identity which exists between the terms evolution and revolution.

For me the principle of evolution is absolutely certain; for me revolution is a mode, an aspect of evolution itself, and evolution and revolution complement each other and are inseparable by their own natural essence.

What is and what does evolution mean? What is and what does revolution mean?

Evolution is the general unfolding of an idea, of a system, of a series of events, of an order of things of any kind until it is completed and integrated; it is a constant movement by virtue of which everything is modified and changed until it reaches its full development. Revolution is and means in the broadest sense of the word a transformation or a series of transformations, a change or a series of changes in moral ideas, in political systems, in religious beliefs, in the organisation of societies, whether it affects their customs, or their governmental, juridical and economic forms.

And if revolution is a change or modification, is it not obviously a necessary moment in the evolutionary unfolding, is it not a precise moment in the evolution that is taking place?

If not, let us examine evolution in the course of history.

Three main modes of human development comprise the whole of historical evolution: the religious, the political and the sociological.

The primitive religious ideas, the conception which the first men formed of the divinity, were grotesque creations of ignorance, whether inspired by the fear of natural phenomena then inexplicable, or by the need of a superior entity embodying the then synonymous ideas of justice and strength. But as these phenomena were explained and as the human element overcame primitive animality, religious ideas were transformed, acquiring more natural and more aesthetic aspects. Religious evolution, passing through polytheism, pantheism and monotheism, finally produced the incarnation of the divine idea in a being with all the attributes of man, and the god

of vengeance, the terrible Jehovah, the result of the warlike spirit of his times, presided over human destinies until the Christ determined by his doctrines a closer approximation to man himself. But this last idea also raised protests and rebellions. Religious evolution was to lead to the definitive emancipation of reason, and soon a general movement began which carried as its banner the principle of free examination. From that time philosophy opened up new horizons of thought; and, as the last term of evolutionary development, it proclaimed unsanctioned Morality and human Justice without the shadows in which it was enveloped as an attribute of divinity. Thus those who no longer believe in an ultra-worldly existence, and those who appear to believe in it out of expediency or hypocrisy or fear, in fact, deep down in their consciences, worship the new idea, and practice, by their own inspiration, the good, and live by the spontaneous movements of their psychic nature in the relations of universal morality, subordinating all their acts to this innate feeling in man which draws him irresistibly to defend the weak against the strong, even at the risk of his own life. The idea of Justice presents itself to us today emancipated from theology and drags us with a powerful empire to the point that what we did one day out of puerile fear of the unknown, we do today by identification with the good, by the imperative command of conscience, by the impulses of the most beautiful and kindest feelings, obtaining here on earth the glorification that for a long time we have sought in the supposed heavens of unknown spaces.

But has this evolution of the centuries been accomplished without those great upheavals which are called revolutions?

No one among us is unaware of it: terrible struggles, bloody sacrifices were necessary to achieve religious emancipation. Revolution promoted Christ, revolution promoted Luther, revolution promoted philosophy: religious evolution was only integrated into the final formula in exchange for tremendous revolutionary upheavals, without which we would not yet have emerged from primitive slavery.

If we examine the political aspect of the question in the same way, we will come to similar conclusions. In the beginning, absolute kings of divine right rule the destinies of the peoples, already constituted in great groups, and the rights of all men mean nothing and are of no value. One alone has the privilege of ruling us, of disposing of our lives and estates to the best of his knowledge and belief. The despotic tyranny of kings later found a limit in constitutionalism. It then became necessary for kings to be advised of the needs of the people by representatives, and thus parliamentarism was born. But this was not enough. Hereditary powers also came to grief, and the undisputed sovereignty of kings was opposed by the sovereignty of the people. The republican and democratic reform embodies a new aspect of evolution and becomes a new ideal of human progress. And since progress never stops, as the constant movement which gives life to the universe will never stop, the peoples have finally arrived at a very broad conception of the principle of government. In fact, absolutism, constitutionalism and republic meant at the same time, the subordination of one to another, of all to one or of one to all was proclaimed at the same time as collective sovereignty, individual sovereignty, harmonising both sovereignties, always coexistent, by means of contact or pact, the first basis of the federative principle. The government of each individual by himself is the ultimate formula of political evolution. By eliminating and limiting the principle of authority through successive transformations, it leads to the generalisation of liberty, and today men aspire to nothing which does not go directly to the consecration of all autonomies, which does not include in a whole complete freedom of thought, conscience and action.

Just as religious evolution ends in the negation of divinity, so political evolution ends in the negation of power and government, of the State, in short. Full liberty and liberty alone must be the indispensable instrument for the realisation of all human ends. Not only peoples and nations, but also production, exchange and consumption, life, in short, in all its manifold forms, are to be organised by means of a free and completely free pact, so that the day may come when mankind, forming a harmonious universal federation, will realise through freedom the supreme ideal of living without government, Anarchy.

The generalisation of these very modern ideas has been achieved by philosophy and politics at the same time. While the French revolutionaries declared themselves anarchists through the mouth of Proudhon, the republic was denied by Pi y Margall, and English positivism affirms that humanity tends irresistibly towards the suppression of government, and these teachings, becoming popular day by day, will very soon determine the revolutionary moment of the total emancipation of mankind.

But is it possible now, as before, to ask whether this laborious evolution has reached its final limits without those great upheavals which are called revolutions?

It has taken such formidable explosions as that of the end of the eighteenth century in France; it has taken tremendous revolutions in Europe and America, feverish movements of the people in all nations and at all times. The conquest of freedom has cost, and will still cost, torrents of blood, thousands of victims, heaps of ruins, for without these necessary sacrifices, evolution would never be realised in all its fullness and extent.

And what shall I tell you of the sociological revolution?

What shall I tell you of the economic movement contained in it? The organisation of primitive societies was based on the subordination of the individual to the group, and as social and individual needs became more complex, their warlike spirit and their tendency to despotism also grew. How many efforts had not to be made to arrive at the present state in which militarism still weighs us down and impoverishes us! The evolution is, however, along the line of least resistance, towards the replacement of militarism and forced co-operation by industrialism and voluntary co-operation, as Spencer has clearly shown.

Already in our own day many acts of life are carried out within the new circle of action. Governmentalism is alien to much of the business of citizens, and when it intervenes it is forced to compromise, Evolution here, as in everything else, presupposes the negation of the starting point.

And if slavery has been succeeded by serfdom and then by the proletariat, is it not to be expected that the present state of things, which is substantially identical with the former, will also disappear and give way to a society of equals, just as in the political order it will give way to a society of free men? If this were not so, all our ideas would have to be declared false, our principles erroneous, the facts of experience uncertain, our most intimate aspirations absurd! No, the principle of evolution cannot be denied, the law of progress cannot be limited, and the end of social and economic evolution is necessarily the complete equality of conditions of life, the present tendency is necessarily to abolish privileges and monopolies in order to arrive at the universalisation of the enjoyment of the means of production. This is clear from the character of the struggles of our days, from the tremendous social problem which no one denies and which today is more formidable than ever before, and from the attitude of the working classes who are demanding at every step and with ever greater force the satisfaction of their urgent needs.

Social evolution includes not only political and religious forms, but also economic forms, and therefore the so-called institution of property, the real cause and origin of all our struggles. Who is unaware today that the appropriation of land is due to war and conquest? Who is unaware today that the immense work of all generations is monopolised by a privileged minority? Who is unaware today, in short, that property is the plunder exercised by a few over all the other members of society? For if the theory of evolution, in the name of which all sorts of aberrations and injustices are to be justified, is to be proved in fact and fulfilled, it will be on condition that the soil is free for the farmer and the tool and the machine and the workshop for the industrial worker; it will be on condition that property, becoming generalised, becomes the domain of all without any exclusion whatsoever.

And that, I repeat, has the social evolution which makes us conceive of the possibility of a better world where ignorance and misery, the two terrible scourges of humanity, have disappeared, developed without those revolutions so dreaded by the defenders of vested interests? History shows us that it is precisely thanks to these revolutions, revolutions which were already recorded in ancient Greece and the ancient Roman Empire, history shows us, I say, that thanks to these revolutions, evolution has been able to overcome the resistance which opposed it in every way, modern history shows us even better. What have the latest revolutions, political in a sense, been more than de facto social revolutions? What was the mighty uprising of the workers of Paris in proclaiming the Commune, more than an economic and social movement?

You see how religious, political and economic evolution has understood tremendous revolutions as mere modes of general evolution, and how consequently the division into evolutionists and revolutionists is absurd.

If we ask science — and forgive me for speaking of science when I have scarcely saluted it — if we ask science for its irrefutable data, we shall also see how it confirms the thesis here sustained.

Sound, light, heat and electricity, simple modes of the universal motion which agitates cosmic matter, offer in their particular unfoldings extraordinary phenomena which are true revolutions of matter, and these phenomena are an integral part of the functionalism proper to each of these forms of motion.

If we imagine a force acting in a certain direction or direction and a series of obstacles in its path, is it not true that this force will, on pain of annulment, overcome everything that stands in its way? Is it not true that each of these actions necessary to remove each obstacle will have the character of a true revolution? And are the sudden actions and reactions of this force something different from its slow and continuous daily action? Are they not, on the contrary, necessary moments of the permanent movement of the said force, working and recovering at each step? Are not evolution and revolution one and the same thing?

Revolutions are, on the other hand, as necessary in nature as in society. In the middle of a plain a mountain rises unexpectedly; in the middle of a mountain range there is a volcanic eruption which destroys everything in its path; in our own atmosphere a terrible storm breaks out which ravages, kills and annihilates; and these great natural phenomena are nothing but necessary revolutions of matter, nothing but the inevitable absolutisms of latent forces which in their process of development overcome the resistances which oppose them and act with formidable force and dominate everything. And who can deny that these natural revolutions are manifestations of the evolution of matter and force?

For what happens in nature happens in a similar way in human societies. Ideas work day by day on the collective reason, they make their place in our consciences, they gradually undermine

the whole of social existence until they become a necessity and determine the precise moment when, without pause for thought or consideration, the popular elements throw themselves into those formidable explosions of contained sentiments, into those grandiose revolutions which have achieved all our progress and will achieve still greater progress. And it is not to be supposed that, revolutions being the product of evolution, it is enough to sit back and wait for the moment when they must inevitably break out. A simple sophism would do so much to demolish all that is rational in the evolutionary theory. Social evolution has men as its organ; they are the medium in which it takes place, and just as natural phenomena depend on the forces from which they originate, so human revolutions depend on the living beings through whose mediation they are effected. If any force is increased a hundredfold, it is clear that in working it will increase either its power or its rapidity a hundredfold. For if the men who work for progress increase their noble efforts and their activity a hundredfold, it is equally clear that the result will be either a hundred times greater or a hundred times nearer. Revolution is therefore a fatal moment in evolution, A moment which takes place in spite of all antagonisms and oppositions, but all the nearer the sooner antagonisms and oppositions are destroyed. And now allow me, in view of the similarity and correlation of facts and ideas, to remind you of the great falsifier of the evolutionary theory, of the tribune who once sang with inimitable harmony of public liberties and today is admired by all the nincompoops in love with his word and by all those who have or think they have something to preserve. And allow me also to remind you at the same time of those other great counterfeiters of revolutions, those who in the secrecy of the cabinet prepare seditions with the sole object of power for power's sake, those who move battalions and generals as they please, taking good care to restrain the people and to restrain them. The sirens of order and freedom falsify everything in order to silence the popular clamour and faithfully serve the powerful. The conspirators of office corrupt everything, pretending to set themselves up as the liberators of humanity, as if such an immense work should be the exclusive preserve of a few and not of the whole of the popular forces. Some work to preserve their individual positions, others to win them for themselves. Neither the one nor the other wants or seeks the truth.

No, evolution is not the slow, rhythmic movement that the former teach us. No, revolution is not what the little Mazzinis of the wardrobe want. Evolution is slow or rapid according to circumstances, places and times; evolution overcomes all resistance and because it overcomes it produces revolutions, those revolutions of ideas which involve something essential, and not those pretended revolutions which only lead to a further aggravation of the omnipotent Caesarism of governments. Evolution and revolution are, in the end, one and the same thing, and whoever is an evolutionist must necessarily be a revolutionary.

I am, therefore, a revolutionary because I am an evolutionist; I want evolution with all its consequences; I want the revolution which will substantially modify the conditions under which we live at present, the revolution which will give us freedom, all freedom, and complete equality of economic conditions; I want the revolution which, by putting an end to all forms of power and social inequality, will enable us to organise the peoples on the basis of human solidarity; I want, in short, the revolution which will emancipate us politically, socially and economically, and I understand, my dear friends, that this great revolution, which is the revolution of the near future, we must all want.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Ricardo Mella
Evolution and Revolution
1889

Retrieved on 23rd May 2023 from a translation of www.ricardomella.org
Originally published in *La Solidaridad*. Original translation.

theanarchistlibrary.org