
Revolution and Rebellion vs. Stagnation

by Eugene V. Debs

Unsigned article published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*,
vol. 15, no. 9 (Sept. 1891), pp. 777-778.

There are those who cry "peace," but there is no peace, nor will there be until right triumphs. Till then, there will be wars, and rumors of wars. When right, truth, and justice, in holy alliance, rule the world, the reign of peace will begin — not till then.

There are those who deplore war, revolution, and rebellion. Manifestly, war is to be lamented, if it is waged to enthrone or to perpetuate wrong, but it expands to superlative grandeur if it is for the purpose of establishing justice and breaking the fetters of slavery. In such cases every blow struck for the downtrodden sends thrills of joy throughout the world. The covering slave looks up and sees, however dimly, the dawn of a new era when he shall be free.

There are men in the United States who are everlastingly deprecating revolution and rebellion. They prefer stagnation. Had they lived in '76 they would have said to the patriots of the time, "Pay taxes and submit to King George — pay tribute and wear a yoke." They would have been Tories. They would have said, "Peace at any price is better than war."

Such degenerate creatures constitute the extremes. In the one case they are mercenary and mean. They would make sacrifices neither of money, time, nor comfort; they would place neither life nor property in jeopardy, and in the other case, they are degenerate, base born and cowardly. Liberty and independence are meaningless terms to them. In these extremes there is no martyr material, but any quantity of the Judas Iscariot stuff. They never won a battle for the right since Adam was driven out of Eden, nor will they win such a battle while the pendulum of time continues to vibrate. They would as soon be the subjects of a Tiberius, a Caligula, or a Nero as sovereign citizens of a republic, and there are thousands of these burlesques of men in the United States. They are either plutocrats or poltroons, in fact, both.

One is on top, the other at the bottom; one is the dog, the other is the flea. On all sides is seen the moneyed aristocrat and the degenerate sycophant — the crawling dirt-eater. Together they exert a tremendous influence. As yet, they are not in the majority; at least, such is the hope. There is a mighty host who will not cower; who will neither take off their hats, shave off their whiskers, button up their coats, nor do aught else that a slave is expected to do by the command of his master and owner. The forces are not yet in operation that can crush them. They will protest against wrong though every star in the blue vault above them falls. They will speak in spite of the “gates of hell.” Prisons do not intimidate them. The storms of obloquy they meet as fearlessly as veterans meet the storms of bullets, while with the lamented Lowell¹ they sing:

Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.

We see dimly in the Present what is small and what is great,
Slow of faith how weak an arm may turn the iron helm of fate.
But the soul is still oracular; amid the market's din,
List the ominous stern whisper from the delphic cave within,
“They enslave their children's children who make compromise with sin.”

Then to side with truth is noble when we share her wretched crust,
Ere her cause bring fame and profit, and 'tis prosperous and just;
Then it is the brave man chooses, while the coward stands aside,
Doubting in his abject spirit, till his Lord is crucified,
And the multitude make virtue of the faith they had denied.

Count me o'er earth's chosen heroes, they were souls that stood alone,
While the men they agonized for hurled the contumelious stone,
Stood serene and down the future saw the golden beam incline
To the side of perfect justice, mastered by their faith divine,
By one man's plain truth to manhood and to God's supreme design.

By the light of burning heretics Christ's bleeding feet I track,
Toiling up new Calvaries ever with the cross that turns not back,
And these mounts of anguish number how each generation learned
One new word of that grand Credo which in prophetic hearts hath burned
Since the first man stood God-conquered with his face to heaven upturned.

For Humanity sweeps onward; where today the martyr stands,
On the morrow crouches Judas with the silver in his hands;

¹ **James Russell Lowell** (1819-1891) died shortly before this article went to press. The poem quoted is from his 1844 work *The Present Crisis*.

Far in front the cross stands ready and the crackling faggots burn,
While the hooting mob of yesterday in silent awe return
To glean up the scattered ashes in History's golden urn.

The idea of the poet is that sometime “the world, the flesh, and the devil” are to be conquered. Possibly. We treasure the hope, but the outlook is not as cheery as could be desired, nor yet is it alarmingly dubious. Plutocrats will be required to surrender their grasp upon the “iron helm of fate.” When labor is fully equipped and ready, things will move with more satisfactory rapidity. Till then, patience and agitation. The revolution has begun. Rebellion is in the air. Nature abhors a vacuum, and stagnation is equally out of order. Labor, mind, and muscle are in alliance. The world moves, and it is to move at no distant day in the right direction. Let free thought and free speech have full sway and the right will triumph.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · Sept. 2015 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.