

The idea is the thing - Berkman



A short essay about the importance of ideas in maintaining Capitalist society.

Did you ever ask yourself how it happens that government and capitalism continue to exist in spite of all the evil and trouble they are causing in the world?

If you did, then your answer must have been that it is because the people support those institutions, and that they support them because they believe in them.

That is the crux of the whole matter: present-day society rests on the belief of the people that it is good and useful. It is founded on the idea of authority and private ownership. It is ideas that maintain conditions. Government and capitalism are the forms in which the popular ideas express themselves. Ideas are the foundation; the institutions are the house built upon it.

A new social structure must have a new foundation, new ideas at its base. However you may change the form of an institution, its character and meaning will remain the same as the foundation on which it is built. Look closely at life and you will perceive the truth of this. There are all kinds and forms of government in the world, but their real nature is the same everywhere, as their effects are the same: it always means authority and obedience.

Now, what makes governments exist? The armies and navies? Yes, but only apparently so. What supports the armies and navies? It is the belief of the people, of the masses, that government is necessary; it is the generally accepted idea of the need of government. That is its real and solid foundation. Take the idea or belief away, and no government could last another day.

The same applies to private ownership. The idea that it is right and necessary is the pillar that supports it and gives it security.

Not a single institution exists to-day but is founded on the popular belief that it is good and beneficial.

Let us take an illustration; the United States, for instance. Ask yourself why revolutionary propaganda has been of so little effect in that country in spite of fifty years of Socialist, I.W.W. and Anarchist effort. Is the American worker not exploited more intensely than labor in other countries? Is political corruption as rampant in any other land? Is the capitalist class in America not the most arbitrary and despotic in the world? True, the worker in the United States is better situated materially than in Europe, but is he not at the same time treated with the utmost brutality and terrorism the moment he shows the least dissatisfaction? Yet the American worker remains loyal to the government and is the first to defend it against criticism. He is still the most devoted champion of the "grand and noble institutions of the greatest country on earth". Why? Because he believes that they are his institutions, that he, as sovereign and free citizen, is running them and that he could change them if he so wished. It is his faith in the existing order that constitutes its greatest security against revolution. His faith is stupid and unjustified, and some day it will break down and with it American capitalism and despotism. But as long as that faith persists, American plutocracy is safe against revolution.

As men's minds broaden and develop, as they advance to new ideas and lose faith in their former beliefs, institutions begin to change and are ultimately done away with. The people grow to understand that their former views were false, that they were not truth but prejudice and superstition.

In this way many ideas, once held to be true, have come to be regarded as wrong and evil. Thus the ideas of the divine right of kings, of slavery and serfdom. There was a time when the whole world believed those institutions to be right, just, and unchangeable. In the measure that those superstitions and false beliefs were fought by advanced thinkers, they became discredited and lost their hold upon the people, and finally the institutions that incorporated those ideas were abolished. Highbrows will tell you that they had "outlived their usefulness" and that therefore they "died". But how did they "outlive" their "usefulness?" To whom were they useful, and how did they "die"?

We know already that they were useful only to the master class, and that they were done away with by popular uprisings and revolutions.

Why did not old and effete institutions "disappear" and die off in a peaceful manner?

For two reasons: first, because some people think faster than others. So that it happens that a minority in a given place advance in their views quicker than the rest. The more that minority will become imbued with the new ideas, the more convinced of their truth, and the stronger they will feel themselves, the sooner they will try to realize their ideas; and that is usually before the majority have come to see the new light. So that the minority have to struggle against the majority who still cling to the old views and conditions.

Second, the resistance of those who hold power. It makes no difference whether it is the church, the king, or kaiser, a democratic government or a dictatorship, a republic or an autocracy -- those in authority will fight desperately to retain it as long as they can hope for

the least chance of success. And the more aid they get from the slower-thinking majority the better the fight they can put up. Hence the fury of revolt and revolution.

The desperation of the masses, their hatred of those responsible for their misery, and the determination of the lords of life to hold on to their privileges and rule combine to produce the violence of popular uprisings and rebellions.

But blind rebellion without definite object and purpose is not revolution. Revolution is rebellion become conscious of its aims. Revolution is social when it strives for a fundamental change. As the foundation of life is economics, the social revolution means the reorganization of the industrial, economic life of the country and consequently also of the entire structure of society.

But we have seen that the social structure rests on the basis of ideas, which implies that changing the structure presupposes changed ideas. In other words, social ideas must change first before a new social structure can be built.

The social revolution, therefore, is not an accident, not a sudden happening. There is nothing sudden about it, for ideas don't change suddenly. They grow slowly, gradually, like the plant or flower. Hence the social revolution is a result, a development, which means that it is evolutionary. It develops to the point when considerable numbers of people have embraced the new ideas and are determined to put them into practice. When they attempt to do so and meet with opposition, then the slow, quiet, and peaceful social evolution becomes quick, militant, and violent. Evolution becomes revolution.

Bear in mind, then, that evolution and revolution are not two separate and different things. Still less are they opposites, as some people wrongly believe. Revolution is merely the boiling point of evolution.

Because revolution is evolution at its boiling point you cannot "make" a real revolution any more than you can hasten the boiling of a tea kettle. It is the fire underneath that makes it boil: how quickly it will come to the boiling point will depend on how strong the fire is.

The economic and political conditions of a country are the fire under the evolutionary pot. The worse the oppression, the greater the dissatisfaction of the people, the stronger the flame. This explains why the fires of social revolution swept Russia, the most tyrannous and backward country, instead of America where industrial development has almost reached its highest point -- and that in spite of all the learned demonstrations of Karl Marx to the contrary.

We see, then, that revolutions, though they cannot be made, can be hastened by certain factors; namely, pressure from above: by more intense political and economical oppression; and by pressure from below: by greater enlightenment and agitation. These spread the ideas; they further evolution and thereby also the coming of revolution.

But pressure from above, though hastening revolution, may also cause its failure, because such revolution is apt to break out before the evolutionary process has been sufficiently advanced. Coming prematurely, as it were, it will fizzle out in mere rebellion; that is, without clear, conscious aim and purpose. At best, rebellion can secure only some temporary alleviation; the real causes of the strife, however, remain intact and continue to operate to the same effect, to cause further dissatisfaction and rebellion.

Summing up what I have said about revolution, we must come to the conclusion that

- 1) a social revolution is one that entirely changes the foundation of society, its political, economic, and social character;
- 2) such a change must first take place in the ideas and opinions of the people, in the minds of men;
- 3) oppression and misery may hasten revolution, but may thereby also turn it into failure, because lack of evolutionary preparation will make real accomplishment impossible;
- 4) only that revolution can be fundamental, social and successful, which will be the expression of a basic change of ideas and opinions.

From this it obviously follows that the social revolution must be prepared. Prepared in the sense of furthering the evolutionary process, of enlightening the people about the evils of present-day society and convincing them of the desirability and possibility, of the justice and practicability of a social life based on liberty; prepared, moreover, by making the masses realize very clearly just what they need and how to bring it about.

Such preparation is not only an absolutely necessary preliminary step. Therein lies also the safety of the revolution, the only guarantee of its accomplishing its objects.

It has been the fate of most revolutions -- as a result of lack of preparation -- to be sidetracked from their main purpose, to be misused and led into blind alleys. Russia is the best recent illustration of it. The February Revolution, which sought to do away with the autocracy, was entirely successful. The people knew exactly what they wanted; namely the abolition of Tsardom. All the machinations of politicians, all the oratory and schemes of the Lvovs and Milukovs -- the "liberal" leaders of those days -- could not save the Romanov Régime in the face of the intelligent and conscious will of the people. It was this clear understanding of its aims which made the February Revolution a complete success, with, mind you, almost no bloodshed.

Furthermore, neither appeals nor threats by the Provisional Government could avail against the determination of the people to end the war. The armies left the fronts and thus terminated the matter by their own direct action. The will of a people conscious of their objects always conquers.

It was the will of the people again, their resolute aim to get hold of the soil, which secured for the peasant the land he needed. Similarly the city workers, as repeatedly mentioned before, possessed themselves of the factories and of the machinery of production.

So far the Russian Revolution was a complete success. But at the point where the masses lacked the consciousness of definite purpose, defeat began. That is always the moment when politicians and political parties step in to exploit the revolution for their own uses or to experiment their theories upon it. This happened in Russia, as in many previous revolutions. The people fought the good fight -- the political parties fought over the spoils to the detriment of the revolution and to the ruin of the people.

This is, then, what took place in Russia. The peasant, having secured the land, did not have the tools and machinery he needed. The worker, having taken possession of the machinery and factories, did not know how to handle them to accomplish his aims. In other words, he did not have the experience necessary to organize production and he could not manage the distribution of the things he was producing.

His own efforts -- the worker's, the peasant's thethe soldier's -- had done away with Tsardom, paralyzed the Government, stopped the war, and abolished private ownership of land and machinery. For that he was prepared by years of revolutionary education and agitation. But for no more than that. And because he was prepared for no more, where his knowledge ceased and definite purpose was lacking, there stepped in the political party and took affairs out of the hands of the masses who had made the revolution. Politics replaced economic reconstruction and thereby sounded the death knell of the social revolution; for people live by bread, by economics, not by politics.

Food and supplies are not created by decree of party or government. Legislative edicts don't till the soil; laws can't turn the wheels of industry. Dissatisfaction, strife, and famine came upon the heels of government coercion and dictatorship. Again, as always, politics and authority proved the swamp in which the revolutionary fires became extinguished.

Let us learn this most vital lesson: thorough understanding by the masses of the true aims of revolution means success. Carrying out their conscious will by their own efforts guarantees the right development of the new life. On the other hand, lack of this understanding and of preparation means certain defeat, either at the hands of reaction or by the experimental theories of would-be political party friends. Let us prepare, then.