

DAILY PEOPLE

VOL. 9, NO. 350.

NEW YORK, TUESDAY, JUNE 15, 1909.

ONE CENT.

EDITORIAL

“REFORM” (AND) (OR) “REVOLUTION.”

By DANIEL DE LEON

A CORRESPONDENT makes the following inquiry:
“Are reform and revolution the same, or are they different? Is it right for a revolutionist to say he is a reformer also? Is Socialism a reform and a revolution, or is it a revolution only?”

In the pithy language of Edgar Allan Poe, all things are easily understood to him who approaches them step by step, from below up. Difficulty and confusion spring up only when a subject is approached from the surface.

What is “reform”? For that we must go to the reformer himself. He is perfectly explicit in his definition of what he is not. The reformer firmly objects to revolution. He holds the thing to be harmful in theory, still more harmful in practice. The history of the reformer confirms his theory. He holds tenaciously to the essence of what is. The reformer is not wholly blind. He does not live wholly in a fool’s paradise. He sees evils; he also sees good things, which his aesthetic sense suggests might be better. Without upsetting the essence, the reformer seeks to improve details.

The history of reform and reformers establishes that the reformer with his reforms may or may not be a sensible thing, according to the season. A house just built and still strong is open to reforms untold that would perfect and beautify it. The reformer would then be in season.—The same house, a hundred and odd years old, with roofs leaking, foundations sagged, walls cracking, and floors overrun with rats, requires more drastic treatment than reform. No patching up of roof, or walls, or planking, or papering, or painting will stead. There the reformer with his reforms would then be out of season. Temperament disqualifies him from recognizing facts. Attachment to the old blinds his mental vision. He still would tinker and patch.

Tear down the old, rickety thing, and build a new house, up to date, that is revolution to him. He wants none of that.—Reform is not revolution.

The history of reform and reformers makes clear, by contrast, what revolution is.

Like the reformer and his reforms, the revolutionist, or revolution, may or may not be a sensible thing, according to the season, and for identical reasons. Sticking to the analogy of the house, a revolutionist would be out of season when the house was still strong and habitable. He would, however, be pre-eminently in season when the house ceased to be habitable. Reform propositions at that season he would spurn.—Revolution is not reform.

No reformer is a revolutionist; no revolutionist is a reformer. From the history of the two it is clear reform contemplates the continuance of the thing to be reformed, regardless of the utopianism of such a purpose; revolution, on the contrary contemplates the overthrow of the thing to be revolutionized.

But all is not said when this has been said, important though the saying of it is to the establishment of fundamental principles. There is more involved in these principles than would appear on the surface.

From the very nature of revolution, the revolutionist is spared the dangers that ever lie ahead for the reformer. The house is still new and strong. Hence he eventually tumbles into the irrational groove of thought which causes him to believe his methods are ever after sane. Otherwise with the revolutionist. The law of revolution guards him against the irrational thought of contemplating the demolition of the recently built and strong house. He is the product of facts, together, of course, with all the uplifting pulsations that facts, recognized, set in motion. He does not, he cannot, arise until the facts warrant him. It follows that social evolution casts the revolutionist in a larger mold.

Differently from the reformer, who merely preserves, the revolutionist is a builder. The builder is a man of thought. From his programme nothing is excluded as “little.” Great and little things combine in producing large results. But with him the great and little things stand orderly, in proper perspective. A true architect, the builder will not reject props to keep the tumbling walls from falling over the heads of the men at work, while the wall is being torn down; on the other hand, not being

a bungler, he never will either himself indulge in the delusion of considering the props to be end-alls, or allow the delusion to take hold of others’ minds. In other words, the builder is no reformer, he is a revolutionist.

Using terms in the only way in which they may be used, if confusion is to be avoided, Socialism is a revolution only. For a Socialist to say he is “a revolutionist and a reformer also” is as imbecile a lisp as for an architect to say he is “a builder and a bungler also”; or for a physician, who wisely alleviates pain while attacking the disease, claiming he is “a physician and a quack also,” because quacks alleviate pain, although thinking they thereby attack the disease.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded September 2010

slpns@slp.org