

Why Political Democracy Must Go

By John Reed

VII.

HAVING in former articles traced the failure of the small property holders, Labor and the Socialists to gain control of the Government in America, it is now necessary to indicate how the few great capitalists are able, in the most advanced political democracy of the world, to withstand the pressure of all other classes, either alone or combined—in other words, just how political democracy fails to assure a government by the majority.

When Karl Marx said that the modern capitalist state was "nothing less than a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and that not less so in a democratic republic than under a monarchy," he made a profound observation, the more remarkable since at that time the origin of political democratic states was still surrounded with a romantic halo of libertarian phrases—which still inspired the Forty-Eighters.

Fortunately, thanks to the work of Beard, McMaster, and others, the origins of the American Republic are today available to all; and they demonstrate with utter clearness that the Government of the United States was designed by its founders to protect the rich against the poor, property against the necessities of life and liberty, and the monopolistic minority against the majority.

Pre-Revolutionary society in America was divided into three very sharply-defined classes: the upper class consisting of the clergy, professional men, merchants, landed proprietors and the great slave-holding planters in the South; the middle class, of shop keepers and farmers; and the comparatively unimportant lower class, of slaves, poor whites in the South, mechanics, indentured servants and apprentices—all of which had no votes. Except among the middle and lower classes, there was no discontent with the political institutions of the British Empire; on the other hand, there was a healthy contempt for Democracy, often expressed, among the well-to-do and educated.

Until the acts of the British Government began seriously to hamper trade—in other words, property—the upper class in the American colonies was not in any sense revolutionary; in fact, many of the framers of the Constitution had been against the Revolution. In any sense, the Revolution, for the Colonial upper class, was favored only insofar as it promised to protect their material interests. Like all Revolutions, however, it was precipitated and expressed by idealists, and carried through by the masses—in this case, the middle class—who saw in it the opportunity to establish a government in their own interests. These interests were expressed in the formula, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness"—which did not refer to slaves and indentured servants at all, but to the vast majority of traders and farmers.

This was the element which wrote the Declaration of Independence, in the heat of the Revolutionary struggle, when, as in all Revolutions, the mass was dictating the slogans of the movement.

The eleven years of the confederation which followed, however, proved that human society was definitely embarked on the capitalist era, which was incompatible with those "natural rights"—that individualistic liberty so fondly embraced by the small property owners, as best suiting their free development in a land of unequalled opportunity.

The middle class whose services in the Revolutionary struggle had made them the dominant class in society, were jealous of their freedom and independence. Already the development of capitalism had begun to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few. Great corporations had already tied up immense tracts of land, and the banking interests in the towns had a monopoly of capital; these conditions had made the petty bourgeoisie a debtor class. The middle class therefore was in favor, as at later periods, of cheap currency, and of the violability of contracts. A small group of capitalists had secured control of the depreciated Congressional and State obligations issued to pay for the Revolution, and the middle class wished to wipe out this debt. And just as the great capitalists were in favor of a strongly centralized government, which would guarantee their speculative investments and mortgages, and protect this property with federal troops and police, so the middle class feared a centralized government, whose actions it might not be able to control as it controlled the separate state legislatures.

Attempts at oligarchy or dictatorship in each separate state might be opposed, if all other means failed, by a popular uprising. In fact, the eleven years of the Confederation saw many such insurrections. It is interesting to note here that these insurrections were directed against the capitalists, who

had got control of the state governments, by the middle class debtors. The culminating insurrection was Shays' Rebellion.

The situation is well described by Mr. Curtis, in his *Constitutional History of the United States*:

"A levelling, licentious spirit," says this old reactionary, "a restless desire for change, and a disposition to throw down barriers of private rights, at length broke forth in conventions, which first voted themselves to be the people and then declared their proceedings to be constitutional. At these assemblies the doctrine was publicly broached that property ought to be common, because all had aided in saving it from confiscation by the power of England. Taxes were voted to be unnecessary burdens the courts of justice to be intolerable grievances, and the legal profession a nuisance. A revision of the state constitution was demanded, in order to abolish the Senate, reform the representation of the people, and make all civil officers eligible by the people. . . ."

It was these revolts which furnished the immediate incentive to the adoption of the Constitution. The work of preparing the country for the capitalist coup d'état had been carried on carefully and tactfully for several years by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison—afterward President of the United States. In calling the Constitutional Convention of 1787, for instance, the leaders did not dare to suggest their real objects; the aim of the Convention, it was stated, was merely "to revise the Articles of Confederation." It was also carefully arranged that the delegates should not be elected by the people, or even by directly representative bodies, as had been done in the case of the Congress which issued the Declaration of Independence; instead, they were either chosen by the legislatures, or, more often, appointed by the Governors of the states. And it should be remembered that property qualification for the franchise existed in all the states, so that in no case was the lower, or working class, represented in the Convention.

And when the Convention finally met, it did its work in secret, behind closed doors, like the Peace Conference in Paris; and like the latter, in order to prevent the public from knowing what was going on, it even forced its members to promise not to talk to anyone outside. So that when the Constitution was finally completed, it was issued to the world in such a form that its real meaning, and the forces which produced it, were absolutely unknown to the colonists.

The majority of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Revolutionary leaders, men representing the small property holders; while the majority of the framers of the Constitution were the bankers, speculators in the land and money, and the merchants. Many delegates to the Constituent Convention who had signed the Declaration of Independence refused to sign the Constitution, denouncing it as a "conspiracy"; among these was Benjamin Franklin.

James Madison, afterward President of the United States, who was chiefly responsible for the Constitution—which he described as having "the form and spirit of popular government while preventing majority rule"—expressed in 1785 the theory of economic interpretation in politics. He wrote:

"The most common and durable source of factions (parties, classes), has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, grow up of necessity in civilized nations and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views. The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government."

It will be seen by this that before the end of the eighteenth century the American capitalist class had discovered, and applied for its own advantage, what Karl Marx discovered more than sixty years later.

Listen once more to Madison, speaking before the Constitutional Convention, advocating that the vote be given to the propertied classes alone:

"In future times a great majority of the people will not only be without landed, but any other sort of property. These will either combine under the influence of their common situation; in which case, the rights of property and the public liberty will not be secured in their hands, or, which is more probable, they will become the tools of opulence and ambition. . . ."

Elbridge Gerry declared that all the evils experienced by the Confederation flowed "from the excess of democracy." Edmund Randolph said, "that the general object was to provide a cure for the evils under which the United States labored; that, in tracing these evils to their origin, every man had found it in the turbulence and follies of democracy;

that some check therefore was to be sought for against this tendency of our government. . . ." Alexander Hamilton, in urging a life-term for Senators, said that "all communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well-born, and the other the mass of the people who seldom judge or act right." Gouverneur Morris, of New York, wanted to check the precipitancy, changeableness and excess of the representatives of the people, by the ability and virtue of "great and established property-aristocracy; men who from pride will support consistency and permanency. . . . Such an aristocratic body will keep down the turbulence of democracy." Gouverneur Morris showed the capitalist viewpoint of the Convention, when he boldly stated, "Life and liberty were generally stated to be of more value than property. An accurate view of the matter would, nevertheless, prove that property was the main object of society. . . . If property, then, was the main object of government, certainly it ought to be one measure of the influence due to those who were to be affected by the government." And finally, Mr. Madison again:

"An increase of population will of necessity increase the proportion of those who will labor under all the hardships of life and secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of its blessings. These may in time outnumber those who are placed above the feelings of indigence. (The poor may outnumber the rich.) According to the equal laws of suffrage, the power will slide into the hands of the former. No agrarian attempts have yet been made in this country, but symptoms of a levelling spirit, as we have understood, have sufficiently appeared, in a certain quarter (Shays' Rebellion), to give notice of a future danger."

Madison further advised the Convention that in framing a system which they wished to last for ages, they must not lose sight of the changes which the ages would produce in the forms and distribution of property.

The Convention did not. It finally framed a Constitution, which, while appearing to preserve popular government, in reality secured the rights and property of the minority against "the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority."

Liberals and "parliamentary" Socialists in this country are always pleading for the "minority rights" guaranteed by the Constitution. But the "minority" which the Constitution guarantees is not the one they are talking about; it is the permanent capitalist minority, and it is guaranteed against the will of the majority.

This is accomplished through the so-called "check and balance system", by which the President is indirectly elected, the members of the House of Representatives are elected in one way, the Senate in another, and finally, the most powerful body of all, the Supreme Court, is not elected at all, but appointed. These various bodies check each other's action, so that no popular majority can control the processes of legislation, except after a long and tedious process. Today even this possibility is removed, by the fact that the colossal financial interests absolutely own and control the government.

It is fascinating to study the history of these times—to discover, for instance, that most of the signers of the Constitution derived immediate personal wealth from its proclamation; that there was a conspiracy among the upper class of the colonies, in case the Convention failed, to organize an insurrection to overthrow "democracy" by force of arms; that out of the sixty-odd delegates elected, only thirty-nine signed the document, many withdrew from the Convention altogether, and an immense anger shook the middle class when it discovered, too late, what the Constitution meant; that the middle class had to threaten to refuse ratification before the first ten amendments, which constitute the Bill of Rights, were added to the document; and that the different state legislatures were persuaded to ratify the Constitution through the most shameful corruption by the capitalist interests—even going to the extent of bribery.

The first act of the new Government established by the Constitution, as was to be expected, was the "funding" of the public debt—that is to say, an arrangement to pay the badly depreciated state and Congressional obligations at their face value. This debt amounted to more than \$76,000,000. The holders of the depreciated bonds and notes—most of which they had purchased for a song—were given in exchange bonds of the new Government of the United States, which then proceeded to levy taxes upon the middle and working classes to pay the interest and principal. Thus at the very beginning of our Government, the little clique of bankers and speculators who framed the Constitution were given a vast fortune, the payment of which reduced

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