

**THE HISTORY AND THEORY
OF REVOLUTIONS;
FROM THE PRINCENTON
REVIEW FOR APRIL 1862**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649193400

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Cover @ 2017

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JOSEPH CLARK

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From the PRINCETON REVIEW for April 1863.

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PHILADELPHIA:
WILLIAM S. & ALFRED MARTIEN,
No. 606 CHESTNUT STREET.
1862.

931369
U.S. 5475.17

1868, Jan. 17.
City of
Commodore Geo. Henry Preble,
U. S. N.



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HISTORY AND THEORY OF REVOLUTIONS.

THE present generation in this country have heretofore known revolutions only as matters of history, or as events occurring in some distant part of the world. We have read of them, heard of them with the hearing of the ear; but now a revolution, or an attempt at one, has become to us a present and most visibly real fact. The word has always had, for the public ear, a portentous and startling sound. We have been accustomed, and justly so, to connect with revolution the idea of civil war, as the world has known it hitherto, with all its atrocities and horrors; its wild, uncontrollable phrenzy, setting man against man, and community against community, with all the ungovernable fury of a tempest; its fratricidal hate and bloodshed; its unleashing all the worst passions of the human heart, which, in their wild and lawless revel, respect not the rights of man or the virtue of woman; its smoking and ruined cities, its pillaged towns, its deserted and untilled fields, and all its sanguinary paraphernalia of dungeons and scaffolds, guillotines and gibbets, armies and battle-fields. Perhaps we have generally derived our ideas from the French Revolution of 1792, which was a familiar fact to our fathers in their younger days, and of which some fragments of the nameless horrors, and wild excesses, and almost incredible atrocities, were wont to be rehearsed in

youthful ears round many a family hearthstone, and to be perused as amongst the earliest lessons in history.

And now *we* are in the midst of a revolution! *We*, in this republican America, in this lauded nineteenth century,—*we*, devoted to the arts of peace, engrossed in the pursuit of gain, covering the seas with our commerce, dragging forth the treasures from the mountains, chaining the continent together with our iron bands, tilling the broad acres of our wondrous and fruitful country,—*we*, in the midst of a revolution? It is even so! And have we before us the *possibility* of an experience such as other nations have tasted when overtaken by revolution? No man can say that we have not! When once the social structure moves upon its deep foundations, upheaved by the throes of civil convulsion, no prophet's ken can unerringly foretell where the movement will stop. All our predictions and confidences have failed us. In the very hour of our youthful and boastful self-glorification, when we were proclaiming on every hand our confidence in our republican experiment, and demonstrating its stability and permanence, we are called to go down into the very valley of the shadow of death, to have the thick mists settle upon our path, and the ground to quake and gape beneath us, and the very air to be filled with discordant voices of alarm and doubt, of malediction and terror.

It is well, then, that amid the fearful possibilities with which we are environed, we can look back, and calmly, in the light of history, study the general laws and workings of such national exigencies in the case of other nations. For history, whilst it never exactly repeats itself, is a perpetual prophecy of its own evolution. It is well that we can look back and see other nations, much weaker than our own, survive much worse disasters than ours, as yet, appears to be, and even flourish in the midst of them. It is well that we are permitted to observe how the turbulent and brutal passions of men, let loose like hellhounds of havoc and lust by the tocsin of war, are allayed by the gentle wand of peace, and how in due time all the virtues, and graces, and amenities of social life resume their accustomed channels. It is well for us that, amid our fears, we can look

back and see, through the wildest surgings of national convulsion and deadly strife, the genius of freedom, both civil and religious, rising radiant and beautiful, like beams from the ocean spray. It is well that we can announce to ourselves, as a clear deduction of history, that no great vital interest of mankind, pertaining to Christianity or civilization, has ever been harmed by the ravages of war, or the heavings of civil commotion. The pole-star of human destiny always clear above the storm and tempest. God has provided, infallibly, that no local disturbances, as they seem to us, shall interfere with the essential facts or grand results of his moral government. To suppose otherwise, would be to suppose that creation was a freak, and providence a jumble of accidents.

Let us look, then, if possible, a little into this matter of Revolutions. Let us examine their facts, find out if possible their theory, and trace some leading outlines of their history—keeping in view always the special relations of our investigations to the case of our own civil troubles. And it is no affectation to say, that when a man ventures to attempt such a theme, at such a time as this, it behooves him to gather all his best thoughts about him; to weigh well the theories he presents, and the judgments he renders; and to point the eye of inquiry and hope to that only which will not finally deceive.

What, then, is Revolution? What is its definition? What its theory? What has been its history? When is it justifiable? When probably successful? These are questions which may indicate the general drift of inquiry which is before us.

And, first, as to the *definition*. Revolution may be defined to be a radical or organic change in the constitution of government, accomplished either peacefully or violently. Or it may be defined to be the successful resistance to established authority, by which a new form of authority is instituted and established. Or it may be defined to be the passing away of an old form, a worn-out institution, and the uprising of a new one, to enter on its career of development and history. In all these definitions, the fundamental conceptions are the same. They are those of destruction or decay, as preceding new-creation, or new-formation of the dissevered elements. In the idea of revo-

lution, the most prominent conception is that of overturning or overthrowing, by which society is, to a certain extent, resolved into its original elements, and made to take new shape and form new combinations. The idea is derived from the motion of a wheel, in which every particle is constantly returning to the point whence it started—suggesting the fact, that in the great movements of history, and the life of nations and civilizations, as in the astronomical universe, there is a constant tendency in all things to return, at least in the direction of the point of departure.

Revolution, to be proper and legitimate, and fulfil the part assigned to it in history, must be a movement against that which is old, worn-out, unnatural, unreasonable, or oppressive. When a government or an institution which may have met the wants of men in other ages or other circumstances, is no longer able to adapt itself to the changed circumstances and larger wants of another age, but has become, on the contrary, oppressive and burdensome, brooding, like a horrible nightmare, upon the rising energies and aspirations of a new-born era, then has the moment come for the great tongue of time to strike the hour of revolution, and suddenly armed men spring from the earth like the dragon's teeth of Cadmus, a shout of defiance and vengeance rends the air, and the new-born giant rushes on to his work of destruction.

Revolution must not be confounded with *rebellion* or *insurrection*. Rebellion, as the term indicates, is merely armed resistance to authority. Insurrection is merely a rising up against authority. Neither need necessarily lead to revolution; although they are often the first symptoms of its coming, the first stages of its progress. But rebellion or insurrection may be the result of caprice, of passion, of ambition, of jealousy, or of mere local causes, and they speedily perish. They may be like the mad tiltings of Quixotic knights against windmills and airy giants, in which they get only scars and bruises in return. But when rebellion is successful, and insurrection puts down the authority against which it rises up, then they attain to the dignity of revolution. Rebellion is often revolution begun, revolution is rebellion accomplished.

Having thus defined the term and the thing, it may aid us in examining the theory of revolutions. What is the philosophy of these great throbs in the life of every nation, these convulsive struggles and throes, which form so marked a feature in the life of every people who have attained a nationality since history began? And how comes it that the race does not seem to be outgrowing these portentous phenomena, even with the aids of the highest civilization and the purest Christianity? Whenever we find a fact so universal and perpetual as this, we may be sure that its cause lies deep, and its theory is bound up with the organic laws, and perhaps the very vitality, of the race.

Let us turn to nature, and study her lessons. Everywhere revolution—according to the fundamental conception of it as defined above—appears as an essential and healthful part of her vital processes. In all the universe, so far as man knows it, there is nothing at rest. Everything is in motion. As the gentle Cowper beautifully expresses it,

“Constant rotation of the unwearied wheel
That nature rides upon, maintains her health,
Her beauty, her fertility; she dreads
An instant’s pause, and lives but while she moves.”

All nature is a perpetual circulation of matter, and in this perpetual motion the leading factors are the antagonistic forces of life and death, growth and decay. Old forms fade, wither, die, dissolve, that new forms may start into life and beauty, only to fade, wither, die, dissolve again. The fruit ripens, decays, falls to the earth, and carries with it the vital seed, which, under favourable conditions, springs up a new, fruit-bearing tree. Life, death, birth, decay, beauty, deformity, growth, dissolution, are the alphabet with which nature makes up her wondrous story—the figures which move in her mysterious drama.

“My heart is awed within me when I think
Of the great miracle which still goes on
In silence round me; the perpetual work
Of thy creation finished, yet renewed
For ever.”