

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Agitators and Rebels

(Views and Comments)

Dora Marsden

1914

Dora Marsden
Agitators and Rebels
(Views and Comments)
1914

Retrieved on 9/26/2021 from

<https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr520295/>

Originally published in *The Egoist* Volume I Number 06
(March 16, 1914). Title is unofficial and derived from the text.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Let us speak of agitators. The conviction dawns it were high time we held a few words of prayer together. For nowadays it is counted as being not merely *worthy* to be an agitator: since Oscar Wilde let the mark of intelligence rest on this label, it has become the only smart thing, so much so that not to agitate and be agitated is to be guilty of immoral conduct of the worst brand: to be dowdy, to wit. It is as bad as not eating your father where the correct mode is that you should eat him: or wearing clothes where the fashion is that you shouldn't. So oppressive indeed among the advanced is the weight of authority demanding that you should be a "rebel," so provocative is the air of immutable rectitude which is now petrifying about the brows of the agitator: that we personally find ourselves in the eventful instant when "Moral" conceives "Schism," when "evolution" is as it were suspended in the act: when the procreating power of undocile temper impregnates the "customary" with the germ which, developed, will devour its maternal parent.

The foregoing sentence was tall: let us step down: — In the old days when the "agitator" was wholly without repute, and the common-sense of the people was fed on grandmotherly adages such as "Mind your own business," "Help yourself and heaven will help you," rebellion among the "meaner sort"—those of no possessions—cut no ice at all. Aristocratic and middle-class revolutions have succeeded and failed according as chance circumstances had it: but the record of rebellion among the unpropertied makes a doleful story, and the propertyless rebel has been written down a scurvy knave. When, therefore, opinion turns turtle so rapidly that a reputable thinker can ask whether one is not a rebel in a tone in which one silk-hatted stockbroker might ask another whether it were his habit not to wear shirts; or in which one person might be scandalised by another who walked abroad knowing himself to be infected with smallpox, it is advisable one should assert one's intention to withhold one's neck from the block for such a period of time as will enable the assumptions which are in the minds of persons who call themselves "rebels" to be sized up. Persons who have become enthused under the influence of assumptions are quite liable to become a danger to one's existence if they are permitted to assume in addition that one agrees with them.

One of this week's correspondents, for instance, has been struck by the notion it is possible we are not rebels, and immediately concludes there can be no other adequate reason for our continued existence." "Why not put up the shutters?" it begins, amiably. "If" ... etc., "there seems to be no *raison d'être* for a paper" ... like this one. "Against what is THE EGOIST rebelling? Against Rebellion? Having discovered that you are not an Anarchist am I now to discover you are not even a rebel?" This letter is to us truly revealing. It had not occurred to us that our pampered existence was being prolonged through time on the understanding that we were rebels and always rebels. We had come to regard the foibles of these rebels as part of our native

is likely to stop the struggle: for the simple reason that healthy people can't exist happily without it. What then will happen to those who prove themselves incapable, in spite of much friendly aid and substantial ends thrown, of maintaining their foothold will be that they will be carried out of the way, "employed" in a protected irresponsible position, legislated for and controlled. For such as are useful, a legal status will be guaranteed: they will be well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed, by means of a "legal" minimum wage: of the highest rank among the domesticated beasts of burden. This as long as they remain useful and well-regulated, hard-working and moral, that is. If they become too useless or too troublesome, they will, according to the degree in which they offend, be confined or killed off. The staggeringly rapid increase in the number of indictable offences shows what direction governments and social reformers consider the line of efficiency in the confinement department will take. The eugenics movement on the other hand illustrates the line of efficiency in the extinction department. Segregation, castration, lethal chambers, elimination of "criminal" types along with the "feeble-minded"—these things although their advocates are mostly only sub-consciously aware of it, are the steady bearing out of the "principle" whereby the "tug-gers" despatch the non-strugglers.

The responsible party of course are these latter: and in their arrogant setting towards disaster they are supported by the counsels of rebels, reformers, moralists and masters alike.

sport. As for our reason for existing it was only, to our way of viewing it, to bear true witness—to the extreme limit to which our ability to do so admits—regarding the things and persons and relations between these as our whim and haphazard line of interest suggests. We find that in journalism, as in literature generally and the rest of the "arts" it is the most fertilising, illuminating, provocative and pugnacious thing to do.

But let us return to agitators and rebels. We once defined a rebel as a "Webbite ashamed of the Webbs," and doubtless thought it true enough and smart to boot. Hence what we now suffer in the shape of misunderstanding: the discipline of consequences Spenser would have called it. We imagined that to call a rebel a Webbite would have been effectual not merely in irritating vastly the "rebels," but would have made it clear to the world that the rebels and we were as worlds apart. We prove merely that to the "provinces"—overseas London is provincial, and that its slang like any other slang is limited to itself: that beyond a ten-mile radius from Charing Cross (to which area the "Fabian News" will link up a number of intellectualised crick-necked debating-societies in Manchester and Glasgow) the Webbs are non-existent; and that to the rest of the world a "Webbite" might be a new species of teetotaller or herb-eater. So the task awaits us to define it afresh. A rebel, we take it, is a person who either for himself or others is dissatisfied with the condition of things—especially things connected with the possession of wealth—in which he finds himself situated; one who therefore concerns himself to alter those conditions. An agitator we might add is a rebel either "born" or "made," who from one motive or another takes it upon himself to make persons who are in the conditions to which he objects, also dissatisfied with those conditions with a view ultimately to induce them to alter them.

Well, very estimable: what is there to cavil at in all that? Let us look at it. The characteristic of the "rebel" position is a feeling of angry temper against—something: i.e. conditions, presumably static. Now as a matter of fact "conditions" of a relative degree—precisely in that relative degree under which the agitator conceives them, are an illusion. There are conditions which men would find absolute, as for instance an explorer without food in Arctic territory: but in a "land of plenty" such as these in which the "rebel movement" is trying to make headway: conditions—static—hard and fast—are illusory, and impermanent as the blocking out of light from a room by a night's frost is impermanent. Heat the room and the window-panes clear and the light streams in. Now seemingly-harsh conditions of wealth-acquiring in fertile lands with instruments of production such as we possess are as formidable as an army of snow warriors exposed in the glare of warm sunlight. Conditions dissolve under the thawing influence of human initiative, energy, and temper. What is amiss, in the worst (of these relative) conditions human eye has rested upon, is not the condition: but the conditioning human quantity which has enabled it to take shape. The condition was not there first: it followed in the trail of the human beings who allowed it to settle round them as an aura; and altering the condition is not the first concern: the seat of the agitator's offending lies in his trying to persuade the "poor" that it is: the folly of the rebels is that they believe it so to be.

Consider the "rebel" movement in England, which, one is not unhappy to note, evidently reached its high-water mark some considerable time ago, and is at present rapidly receding. The most spirited and distinguishing feature of its campaign was its

with their eyes in the ends of the earth, the already powerful are using their very theories against them. Under the delusion that in a community of brotherly democrats, each is going to govern all, the "poor" are submitting to a degree of governing which would never have been attempted had it not been glozed over by the fact that it was done *with their consent*. The deluge of powerful men's laws—arrangements to suit the schemes of order which will best suit them, has fallen on the meek little democrats, *by request*. They imagined they were contracting with men of their own weight: that in fact they were all to become equal, before the law. They imagined that having proved themselves inferior in the open lists, they would be allowed to draw up the rules for contests.

The "poor" cannot have it every way: they cannot fail in the fight and then dictate the manner of fighting. How are they going to persuade those who have beaten them all round that the latter's needs are not what they think they are, but what it is right they should be? How are they going to persuade them that the "Morals" which serve them so badly are better ways than the "Immorals" which serve their conquerors so well? By talking, gush, pious sentiment and rhetoric? They delude themselves. They have either to be prepared to tug at the bundle of power and possessions or take what is given them — if anything is given them—and be thankful. Their dislike for tugging is not going to stop it: simply because better men than they like it and intend going on with it. To lay too much count on the sensitiveness which is fretted by their discomfiture is to make an enormous miscalculation, for no man is his brother's keeper except in the sense that he is his gaoler: a fact which the working out of all these philanthropic tendencies most unmistakably reveals. That enjoyment of struggle can be diminished by the awareness that one is trampling on someone is due to a repugnance at the "feel" that one's foot is on something which writhes and not on solid earth; but not even the dislike of the sensation of squelching one's boots into another's vitals

growths, the scales which gather round the senses where they become external. All language is an art-form: much of it a rotten bad form: bad, being untrue to the experience it purports to tell forth. How then should we put up the shutters? It is our pleasure even more than we consider it our business to take them down.

How the misconception regarding what this "problem (forsooth) of the poor" is concerned with, is likely to end—the misconception that its remedy has to be sought in the "system" rather than with the individual "poor" — is becoming clear. It fosters in the weak and hitherto unknown arrogance concerning what they may regard as their just dues which ultimately will lead them into a position they at present are incapable of imagining. Because they are "told" that the powerful have wrongly taken advantage of an "unfair system," the feeble-tempered conceive themselves as holding claims of Right and Justice against them. These claims are the actual instruments of their undoing: they are the stumbling-block in their line of comprehension. They imagine that with these as defenders, ultimately to appear as another Castor and Pollux in the heat of the battle, any mouldering stick is sufficient to fill out their armoury for the struggle. Indeed, with the assistance of "Conscience—working-on-the-other-side"—whom they postulate as necessary to Right and Justice, they have come to a conclusion which suits them: that in a "well-regulated" world there is no struggle: the libertarian trinity, Conscience, Right and Justice, can just conceive how it might be possible to muzzle the powerful in their varying degrees until the "pull" of every member of the community should just equal that of the sickest invalid on the list. "If only the powerful would be persuaded and give the system a run it was for their pleasure as well as for their good!" Meantime, while they are theorising,

onslaught on "Fat." Even its artist—one whose ability to English rebels must have appeared almost incredible, Mr. Dyson the cartoonist, spent his virtue in picturing the foibles and physical protuberances of the "Man of Wealth," thereby putting the "rebels" in great fettle. At the same time it must have been a source of the most genial diversion to the "Fat" themselves. The traditional gibe at the girth of an imaginary waistband can only be a piquant addition to the satisfaction of those who are well aware that it is a symbolic, what though envious, acknowledgment of the stoutness of their purse—an acknowledgment of their importance from a source which they could well understand being the most loth to furnish it. The hypothesis upon which the rebel leaders—the agitators—press their propaganda is that "something" is amiss: therefore that it is a "duty" for those of us who are not pleased with things, to be prepared to attack persons and institutions. An egoist would say that such an hypothesis is erroneous and that hopes built on working it out will end in failure and disappointment. He would regard the "poor" man (whom later we shall perhaps be able to distinguish further) i.e. the man who cannot engineer his abilities to the point where what he can get comes within measurable distance of what he wants, one analogous to the sick man in a community. Now for a sick man the first obvious necessity is to get well. If he were to spend what little vital power is left him in raging against those whom he sees around him who are well it would be concluded that his sickness had affected his brain as well as the less sensitive part of his person. If the sick man sees that a man in full health is getting ahead of him in the attaining of the things which the former wants, he may conclude that partially it is because the healthy man had a walk-over. Again, the only obvious thing for the sick one is—to get well.

Where the analogy between the sick man and the poor man is particularly important and altogether parallel and sound is in this point. The first necessities of both respectively, i.e. health

and power, are not limited quantities: they are not monopolies in the gift of someone else: only in a very remote degree and under exceptional circumstances can they be conferred: they must in some mysterious manner—in the mysterious and miraculous manner which is the way of all life, be culled from within one's self. What the way is for each individual, he finds out not by rebelling but by acquiescing in the "make-up" of his own nature and in that of those with whom he will be in competition. Just as a student in a laboratory could get no way by being a rebel, by asserting that it would be better and safer all round if nitrogen became oxygen, if mercury and gold sank their differences and in the interests of the larger Unity became identical, so social rebels will get no way until they acquiesce willingly in men and women being what they are: accept their oddities and wayward differences and then make the best and most of them to serve their individual ends. It is comical that it should appear necessary to say things so elementary and obvious: one feels like the advocate of the lady anent whom Carlyle ejaculated "Egad, she'd better," when told that after due deliberation she had decided that "for herself, she accepted the Universe." Modern rebels are that lady's intellectual descendants. The "poor" man is the one who lacks the power to get what he wants. This definition should meet the objections of a correspondent in this current issue, who points out that a non-aggressive man who does not desire wealth and power is quite as likely to be aware of what he wants and of getting it as is the aggressive person who desires "wealth and power." The confusion is caused by putting wealth and power together as though they were terms of equal weight: whereas they are quite other. "Wealth" takes its place alongside a thousand other things desired, which "power" can attain if its desires are set in its direction. Power is the first requisite no matter what the "want." Even to lead the quiet non-aggressive retired life, one must have power to insist on these conditions coming into being. Unless a man—even the most peaceful—has power to re-

sist, one kind of spy or another with an armed force to support him will invade his privacy—the tax-collector, the sanitary inspector, the school attendance officer, and in the predictable future the recruiting-officer, the state-doctor and so on from little to more. The necessity for power can never be laid aside, if there be any wants left: aggressive wants or peaceful wants. With it, peace or aggression are available at will: without it, one must accept what is given. Which explains the speaking difference in the positions of Sir Edward Carson and his Ulster handful, and the nine South African "leaders" with the working population of South Africa behind them. The situation is plain as a pikestaff: explaining it is like "explaining" the fact that most persons have noses somewhere near the centres of their faces: the basis of all concessions, whether from men, governments, or nature itself rests on the power to compel them. The "concession" is the mere act of grace which prefers to assume the pose of giving something, which withheld, would be taken. "Sing a song of liberty," forsooth! Every one is at "liberty" to do what he can. A man's "liberty" is always at his elbow: always as much of it as he has of "power." Then what is the value of rebelling? It is an irrelevance, a waste of attention, time and energy.

"Why not put up the shutters?" The query emanates from Mr. Tucker. Our view of course is that the shutters, i.e. those things which a friendly neighbour can handle in the interests of another, are just these catchwords of the "rebel" army: liberty, justice, what not. By removing their influence, we remove the obstruction which separates the mind from the light, of one who has eyes to see. The growth of the eye is beyond any external power to effect: but something can be done—always has been done since men became self-conscious—became artists, that is—to remove the uncouth