

Freedom

(Views and Comments)

Dora Marsden

1914

Now that one may hear "freedom" applauded loudly in high places, one may speak a few words in mild reason about it and its friends—those loquacious "wee frees." The world is composed of these, plus the freedom resisters: The difference by which one may know them is that while both may shout "Freedom" on the ecstatic note, the resister will say "'Freedom'! And we are it," while the friends of freedom can merely say "Freedom! Ah, would that it were ours." Resisters keep their references to freedom for rare occasions when stirred to emotion by their own greatness, goodness and general self-satisfaction—as now. The friends of freedom, however, never cease from their crying: the wail after that freedom which is not theirs, is their meat by day and night: if one may be generous and call a smell of a roast—meat. Did one not know the sickening effects of satisfactions deferred, one could humorously jeer at these ineffectual desirers, who have come to regard the attitude of supplicants as a credit and an ornament. Instead of jeers, therefore, one accords them pity: whereon their pride is in being pitiful. Their relation to "Freedom" is like that of some humble admirer who adores from afar, endowing the unfamiliar one with all the charms of the unknown, though wholly unconscious of their character: even of the qualities which make their charm for those familiar with their ways.

It would not seem that the foregathering of supplicants would be able to offer many very great attractions: yet, oddly enough, the "cause of freedom" wins much capable youth to its flag. Misunderstanding must exist somewhere: a clamour which is the adult equivalent of the infantile howl, requiring no ability beyond lung-power and pertinacity, is not attractive in itself, yet "freedom" attracts, and nothing will suffice to shatter its attraction, until one can stand outside the "Cause" and weigh up its meaning. That alone, damages the veil. Strictly, "I am free to" means "My power is able to," and this meaning, in accuracy, is pertinent to every phase of "free" activity, whether of acquisition, domination, suppression or abandonment. "Being free" is a matter of possession of power, therefore: why then has the "cause of freedom" resolved itself into an onslaught—into endlessly reproachful tirades—against the iniquities of the possessors of power? A most wasteful expenditure of energy on fruitless means? For at what do they aim? They want power, and instead of husbanding carefully what they have, while it grows from little to more,

they spend their all in a reproachful demand for the favours of those already in power: in making claims for favours which they call "Rights."

Hear one of their most spirited on the subject "All men are entitled to that equality of opportunity, which enables them to be masters of their own lives, and free from rule by others...all men are called on to resist invasion of their equal rights..." and this, if duly carried out, we are told, "will kill monopoly." Doubtless! Here then is to be found the basis of reproach. Freedom lovers—those desiring a power, not theirs, believe they are "entitled" to the same. Probably the five virgins, whose lamps had no oil, thought they were entitled to the oil in their companions'. This matter of entitlement is the subtlest delusion ever conceived for the confusion of ineffectuals. What can entitle save power—competence? And what can others do to one's competence save ratify its relative effects by their acquiescence? The reproach of the advocates of freedom is that the powerful do not confer on them their power or use it in their interests. This, they believe themselves entitled to demand, and are injured when they are not gratified—these imaginary rights. Looking about for something to base them on, they have hit upon: Consensus of opinion, the opinion of the mob: that multitude of units with powers similar to their own. Consensus of opinion is a very useful thing: a good bludgeon in the hands of the simple, and an easy subject to exploit under the manipulation of the powerful. It frightens the already frightened: the frightful—those whom the freedom-lovers hope to scare off by it—know the very narrow limits of its horrific powers, since they are constantly making use of them for themselves. Consensus of opinion is not going to be of much service to the seekers after grounds of entitlement. On what then do they fall back? They fall back on bluster and the sentimental.

An infant tries to get what it wants by howling vociferously for it. The fuss and inconvenience which it is thus able to make constitute its power. This power is competent, however, only on account of a prior competence: its hold on the affections of its guardians. Howling would receive very short shrift without that: a howling dog would very soon be put out of the way. Now the friends of freedom make bold to raise their clamour, almost wholly on the strength of its inconvenience, unbacked by a corresponding hold on the affections of those who have to put up with it, and under these circumstances the lot of the emancipators, so-called, speaks volumes for the patience and forbearance of the empowered. Perhaps there is a modicum of caution in this too—a faint apprehension that in spite of the evidence to the contrary, the clamour may not limit itself merely to the aggravation of sound: the wailers may have a more adequate competence in process of evolving. Certain it is, however, that the latter have been permitted to clamour for so long, unmolested, that the recognition of their "right" to do so has become one of the main planks of their platform. Any infringement of the "rights" of "free speech," or free assembly is now regarded as sacrilege against freedom. At any attempt to interfere with them there is no end of bluster; yet it is obvious that the bluster must be patently empty. A man stands on a stump on a public place, anathematises the State, in so doing possibly rousing the wrath of most of his audience, as well as the suspicion of the officials of the State. Now his claim for "free" speech is this: the officials of the State against which he is haranguing, shall in the first place protect him from the anger of the populace, and in the second, shall refrain both from preventing him continuing his harangue, and from retaliating with any form of punishment on the count of its own vilification. It is, of course obvious bluster, though, if one carries it off with an air, as one usually can in these word-sodden days, who shall say a word against it? Not we at any rate. Merely, to youths who are interesting and earnest, one would point out that to rely on power of this sort is to rely on the fifth-rate variety, which will let them in at one point or another.

Based on a clever word-trick it will succeed here and there, and particularly so when nothing of importance depends on it: but when anything really vital is at stake, the swagger will crumble out and it will shrink to its accurate dimensions. It will then reveal how illusory its former triumphs were.

For instance, when a State does allow the "right" of the various "frees," it is for reasons of interest—its own. Perhaps it realises that discontent, like a rash, is better out than in. It reveals its nature all the better. So, moreover, discontent is given the chance to run itself off in talk. And the stronger the State the more "liberty" it can allow: it need not shatter the first tiny little fist that shakes itself against it. To appear generous tactfully veils the fact how "just" it can be: and when a great State is just to its enemies they realise their lives are not their own: how little then their liberties. It would, therefore, ill accord with a body whose power is so overwhelming to be fussily sensitive in regard to the indiscretions of its wilder members. Free speech forsooth: allowed speech, and allowed on the balance of considerations which have nothing whatever to do with the fanciful "rights" of the permitted one. The only speech which could be "free," in the accurate sense, is that of the all-powerful ones: Napoleon might have spoken freely—but he had too much sense. The Kaiser might have accepted a tip in this direction with advantage. And any man who invested his entire interests in the "cause" could be quite "free" in one speech before he died—in his last. In brief speech, press, assembly, love, are all "free" when they have power enough behind them to foot the bill, when the consequences fall due.

Apart, however, from the deluding assumptions based on the word "free" in the popular instance cited in the foregoing, it remains to be pointed out that the word is one of which the actual meaning forbids its being allowed to roam at large. It is meaningless unless limited by a qualification. It is worth while detailing the main features existent in the attitude of mind which makes use of the word "free." Rhetoric apart, when it is used spontaneously, it is always in relation to certain specific spheres of activity in which one considers oneself "free." One is not "free" as regards the "universe," but free in relation to this and that: where this and that represent specific circumstances which can be regarded as potential obstacles. The notion of an obstacle is a salient feature in the state of mind which makes use of the term "free." In the second place, but constituting a still more salient feature, is the notion of possession of power in a degree competent to make the obstacle of non-effect. And in the third there is the element of comparison between the present actual condition where power more than equates obstructions and another condition remembered or imagined in which the powers possessed were not adequate to the effective degree. Now it is because of the fact that anyone of these features can be emphasised to the exclusion of the rest which explains the otherwise puzzling phenomenon which the presence of persons of spirit and intelligence in hopeless entanglement with one or other of the "Freedom" propagandas offers. It explains, moreover, the genesis of these highly differing propagandas. By the features which they chose to ignore or emphasise their relative spiritedness may be gauged. It is, for instance, by a rigorous ignoring of the first feature, i.e., the particularity of application requisite to the meaning of "free," that the numerically strongest battalions of freedom-lovers are recruited. For, by ignoring it, they are enabled to make the meaningless abstraction of which the result is the concept "freedom" itself. They have poured out the precise meaning, and are left with any empty vessel constructed out of the mere label-Freedom: which, like Mesopotamia is a word of good sound.

The sentimental, the gushers, the rhetoricians, orators of all sorts, hypocrites, hangers-on, every brand of human, provided they run easily to slop, rally to augment this goodly lot.

By ignoring the second feature—the actual possession of power as the condition of the “free”—those who are rallied to freedom’s cause by the aggrandisement of the “whine” are roped in. They are won by the prospect of apotheosizing “talky-talky”: by the big sound of Inherent Rights. The democrats, socialists, humanitarians, anarchists—embargoists of all sorts—row in this galley. This ignoring of the second feature leads naturally to a special emphasising of the third: the emphasis on “conditions.” Thus, the particularised character of obstacles which the first variety of freedom-lovers find it attractive to ignore, receives from this last class their entire attention.

A parentally-anxious removal of obstacles becomes the ideal of the modern saviours of society: in fact, the only articulate theory of modern social and political activity works out at just this. What are “democratic” leaders, the “emancipators,” concerned with but with their lists of “obstacles to be removed,” and the successful invoking of the assistance and assent of the more powerful in the job, for which the power of the masses is inadequate? The essential thing—power in oneself— is waved aside as tainted with the soulless harshness of feelingless drivers. These indulgent, freedom-loving, social grandmothers have not been satisfied with a mere sparing of the rod: they have persuaded the children that it is inhuman to use rods or harbour them. When, for instance, an effective rod appears—as now—in powerful hands, a mellow-tongued friend of freedom—that popular leader of popular causes, emancipator of the people, what not: Mr. Lloyd George tells the people how he has military authority for it that such a rod could only appear in the hands of one possessing the “Soul of the Devil” : the retort to which is, of course, “Mind of a Midge!”—argument of kind with kind.

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