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Among Barbarians

Emma Goldman

February 1907

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The difference between a barbarian and a truly civilized being is this: While the former sets up his own opinion as the universal criterion, the latter recognizes no stagnation in the world of ideas; the barbarian condemns; the civilized man endeavors to understand.

The barbarian says, "We live in the most progressive land; we have achieved all that is possible." He considers contrary opinions as criminal and disturbing the harmony of things.

Barbarism is a stagnant swamp; intellectual liberty is the flowing river, the raging torrent carrying away the riff raff of old, decayed institutions.

This barbarism is the great foe of the libertarian and revolutionary element in America. Not the revolutionists only, but also the innovators in the fields of art and literature have no less to endure from the barbarians, though in different form.

The Anarchists are persecuted by absurd legislation; the revolutionaries in art and literature, by our public opinion and moral standards. Anarchists are the victims of police brutality; the artists, dissatisfied with the art conceptions of parlor estheticists, suffer the condemnation of Mrs. Grundy.

Woe to the American artist who will not be the slave of Puritanic hyprocisy. He would die of starvation were he to depend upon his art for the means of subsistence.

It would be difficult to find a judge in the United States who could see in Anarchistic defendants the representatives of a new conception of life; a new world-philosophy, intimately related with the social, scientific, artistic and economic currents of past generations.

In this respect the revolutionists of Europe have the advantage. The authorities of France, Germany, Italy and Russia lack the spirit of the American parvenu, whose most characteristic trait is conceit. Worldly successful, he considers himself perfect; but the self-made man is usually a god-made ass.

European civilization has outgrown the spirit of the parvenu. World-changing revolutions have taken place; and where these lacked, deep-rooted currents developed the consciousness that humanity cannot remain at a standstill.

There, even the powers that be have to some extent fallen under the broadening influence of a higher civilization. Naturally, their interests will determine their inimical attitude towards the heralds of new ideas; still, their antagonism is not of a character to stamp the revolutionists as criminals and degenerates, as is the case in this country.

A Parisian judge, daily passing the site where formerly stood the Bastille, or the Place de la Concorde, the Tuileries Gardens—each and every stone loudly proclaiming the historic mutability of all that is—must necessarily awaken to a clearer appreciation of revolutionary ideas than his American colleague. The latter firmly believes that the path of our social and intellectual growth has been finally and irrevocably marked out by the revolutionary fathers of the republic.