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# Democracy and the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat.”

by Joseph Gollomb

Untitled article published in the periodic “Party Tactics and Things” column in the *Milwaukee Leader*, v. 8, no. 262 (Oct. 13, 1919), Home Edition, pg. 2.

“Political democracy must go! Dictatorship of the proletariat!”

It has become the fashion among the scribes and prophets of the Left Wing to decry Jeffersonian democracy, old fashioned free speech and free press, and so on. It is dictatorship now that is the fad with them. Read Max Eastman and John Reed for the latest in slogans. For instance, Max Eastman in *The Liberator*:

“Aside from what anyone may thing ‘ought to’ be the fact, it is the fact that a dominant class will always suppress the propaganda that seriously threatens its dominance. We see this in America, and we see it also — although, I believe, in a more moderate form in Russia. Where there is class rule there can be no fundamental freedom of speech. This is the truth.”

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From this and other utterances you will get convincing proof to the effect that Max Eastman and his followers are through with democracy. True, they qualify by prefixing “political.” But they are honest about it. Democracy is a broken idol. “Dictatorship of the proletariat” is the new doll for them. John Reed goes back something like a century of history in this country to show in *The Liberator* why political democracy must go and why the “dictatorship of the proletariat” must take its place. And the rest of their set follow the fashion most rigorously.

I don’t want to sneer. Issuers are too grave and I lay no claim to a monopoly on sincerity. Nor do I impute that Eastman, Reed & Co. are insincere in their new worship. But I can’t help feeling that when I call their new cult a fashion, I do fashion an injustice. For

after all, most fashions last at least a year.

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Let us see how far goes the Eastman-Reed Co. fetish. In 1916, only 3 years ago, both Eastman and Reed believed so heartily in democracy that they urged the re-election of a Democratic President in this country, evidently confusing the name of the party with the fact it violates. Only about a year ago Max Eastman hailed Wilson as a great statesman who “cooperates with evolution.” Wilson took us into war to “make the world safe for democracy,” and Max highly approved.

Now I don’t hold against a man’s convictions the fact that in the past he knew less than he does now. But after all, a growing minds is one phenomenon. And a spinning top is another. We call a woman’s preference for a certain cut of skirt a fashion because a year from now she will turn to some other cut. We feel a certain amusement at the fickleness of her taste. What then shall we say of a mind which has had the benefit of costly training which turns in *less than six months* from a worship of democracy to a worship of dictatorship in America?

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On Oct. 4, 1918, Max Eastman, in an address to a jury, said among other things:

“The Socialists believe in liberty and democracy. They believe in all the liberty and democracy that is possible in an organized busy community like ours. And they believe in liberty and democracy exactly in

the same way that Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry and Samuel Adams and all the rest of the true revolutionary fathers, whose hearts are in the Declaration of Independence, believed in liberty and democracy. \* \*

\* It is very important that democracy should exist in politics, and that everybody should have the right to vote, and Socialists believe in it."

In the January [1919] *Liberator* he repeats:

"We demand that the right of free speech, free press and assemblage, as they existed in the days of Thomas Jefferson, be restored to the American people without delay."

And in May [1919] he rejoices in an editorial that The Left is Right; that "a great deal of healthy life and logic has been injected into the Socialist Party by the organization of a Left Wing." A logic whose premises 4 months before he would have rejected in his worship of Jeffersonian democracy!

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In the same way John Reed in the November 1918 *Liberator*, only 7 months ago, protested against his arrest and indictment for making a speech against intervention in Russia. Why did he consider his arrest serious? Because "it directly involves the conduct of the war by the governments of the United States and the allies for democratic aims," and because "the sovereign American people cannot rightly dictate a democratic foreign policy to their servants in Congress and the White House."

I have looked carefully into these words to see whether they were "writ sarcastik." It does not seem so to me. I may be wrong. Perhaps even as far back as last November, John Reed was convinced of the futility of political democracy. Certainly there is no mistaking Max Eastman's favorite fashion at that time. And surely John Reed, himself, believed in political democracy 3 years ago, when he advocated Wilson's re-election.

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I submit, then, that a change in a few months or even years from a conviction of the beauty of political democracy to a contempt for it suggests less a growing mind than a spinning top. One can't help wondering what the next 4 months will do to the present fashion.

And a year or two from now?

I will admit at once that what I have said does not invalidate any proposition that Left Wingers set forth. It only brings history as proof that their present worship may be little more than a fad. Let us then look into the phrases itself and see what it holds for us here and now.

A phrase is what it means. Some weeks ago John Reed tried to demolish me with his latest phrase.

"I'll bet you're not for the dictatorship of the proletariat over here," he thundered.

"I'll have to see the meaning behind the phrase," I said. "Suppose you applied it, and took the vote of the masses today. Wouldn't they be likely to vote the Republican Party into power as they did last November? And would you accept such a dictation of the proletariat?"

"No," he said. "Because the masses as yet are not class-conscious and don't know what's good for them. But if we Socialists take the lead, they will follow."

"I see. Dictatorship of the proletariat, then, means practically dictatorship by the Socialists."

"Practically," he admitted.

"Fine. But you will admit reactionaries like me and others who are fighting you Left Wingers to share in that dictatorship by the Socialists?"

"No, because you folks are really petty bourgeois."

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There you are. We have brought the meaning of the phrase then to mean dictatorship by the Left Wing. And suppose there should develop within the wing itself another Left, with as bitter a difference as that which makes John Reed exclude the rest of us from the nice dictatorship he favors? Would not there be a still greater shrinking of the mantle of the dictator with only room enough to cover Reed, Larkin, and their court?

Which is why many of us distrust this polysyllable phrase the Left Wing hawks about. For lo, these many years we have fought dictators and dictatorships until the very name makes our neck feathers stand on end. For years we have cried and agitated that the cures for the ills of democracy is more democracy and still more democracy. It has long been our faith that when

the masses gain the ascendancy they will show the world the fairest democracy it has ever known; that then there will be the fullest measure of human liberties; that even the rogue will be given his chance to have his plea heard; that we shall see at least the sensible tolerance shown which the Britisher shows in Hyde Park, where any man and any creed is allowed free speech.

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"But how about Russia?" smirk my friends of the Left. "You would, then, scorn the dictatorship of the proletariat there?"

Russia, the bankrupt legacy of centuries of tsardom, and of years of monstrous war; starving; beset on all sides by enemies; infested in her very vitals with counterrevolution. And America, the most prosperous camp of capitalism; with a swaggering victor psychology; with only a small percentage of the proletariat organized even into the mild community of unionism; and with a countrywide hue and cry against "Bolshevism"—

And our peddlers of the phrase would try to vend here and now what the Russians have resorted to only in the most desperate of their emergencies!

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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