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BY H. L. MENCKEN

Revolutions

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF REVOLUTION, by
Lyford P. Edwards. \$3. 7¾ x 5¼; 229 pp. Chicago:
The University of Chicago Press.

REVOLUTION is the sex of politics. All the governments that we know today owe their origin to it, and yet it has been so little studied and discussed, save romantically, that Dr. Edwards' book is the first formal treatise in English upon its anatomy and physiology. The work shows the defects that run with pioneering. For one thing, the facts upon which its generalizations are based lie within a rather narrow range: it is seldom that the author goes outside the French Revolution, the recent Russian Revolution, and the Puritan Revolution in England in the late Seventeenth Century. For another thing, he is somewhat too prone to view all the phenomena of revolution from the standpoint of the revolutionists, and in the light of their acts: there is something to be said, too, about the acts of their opponents, and it is often quite as important. But despite these defects, which may be easily remedied by the next investigator who undertakes the subject, the book remains a valuable contribution to both historical science and the psychology of the crowd. It opens tracks through a jungle of hitherto confused and unintelligible facts, and the author's conclusions, which are set forth in a succinct and unpretentious manner, are almost always persuasive. The book has a brief introduction by Professor Robert E. Park, of the chair of sociology at Chicago, to whom it is dedicated. Its appearance calls attention to the large number of interesting and valuable works that have come out of late under Dr. Park's imprimatur. His interest is in descriptive sociology, and he

seems to have a quite unusual faculty for unearthing contributors to its data in unlikely places. Dr. Edwards comes from a small denominational college up the Hudson, and until 1914 he was in practice as a clergyman.

He begins his study by tracing the signs that precede the beginning of a revolutionary movement—a general unrest, often inarticulate but usually quite palpable, with a tendency toward emigration, and, a bit later on, public disorder. There is what is called a crime wave. The times, somewhat surprisingly, are apt to be good rather than bad, at all events relatively. At the start the powers that be try to put down the turmoil, and as a rule they have the support of what Dr. Edwards calls the publicists—that is, the professional makers of public opinion. But in time some of the publicists join the side of discontent, and in the end many of the most powerful of them go over. Straightway a heavy responsibility falls upon them. The revolution-in-the-making is now in their hands, and its prosperity depends upon how they guide it. They may "concentrate public anger on the wrong institution or class—on a class or institution not really the cause of the repression" complained of. In that case "revolutionary effort runs up a blind alley" and "the whole movement must be redirected, at a great cost of time and effort." On the other hand, they may lead the mob more sagaciously—and the result will presently be a full-fledged revolution, maybe successful and maybe not. If it succeeds, it invariably runs through three stages. At the start, the moderates have control, and efforts are made at compromise. When they fail the extremists take charge of things, and there is a complete overturn. The third stage is one of

Katzenjammer. The new Utopia turns out to be almost as bad as the old Gehenna, and nearly always a reaction follows, and the ideology of the revolution is gradually abandoned. Eighteen years after the Battle of Edgehill, Monk marched upon London and Charles II was restored to his throne. Eight years after Yorktown the United States Senate debated a resolution to provide a throne for Washington in its chamber. Six years after Louis XVI's head rolled in the sawdust Napoleon Bonaparte became First Consul. And six years after the Bolsheviks delivered Russia from capitalism they adopted their new economic policy.

Perhaps the most surprising thing, to the plain man, in Dr. Edwards' book will be his contention that revolutions are always preceded by periods of relative prosperity and good government—that "people become most resistant of oppression when the actual degree of oppression is least." This seems to go against history, and, what is more, against common sense. It is almost universally assumed that revolution is a despairist movement—that what launches it is a universal conviction that reform is impossible by ordinary means, and that to go on would be intolerable. But Dr. Edwards cites an abundance of facts to show that this is not true. The French peasants of 1789, far from being at the point of starvation, "were the wealthiest, the most intelligent, and the least oppressed peasants in Continental Europe." The American colonies, in 1776, were surely not suffering: on the contrary, they were prosperous, safe, and "better governed under George III than they had ever been under any previous king." Nor were the Russians of 1917 in anything properly describable as a parlous state, despite the evils and hardships flowing out of the war. They were relatively well fed, the war itself seemed to be over, and they had a larger measure of political freedom than they had ever enjoyed before. Moreover, Nicholas II stood ready to give them any further measure of liberty that they demanded: he was even willing to abdicate, and let them set up a

republic. Nevertheless, they overthrew him and butchered him, and presently they were wallowing in Bolshevism—and suffering far more appalling hardships than they had ever suffered under the czars, even under Ivan the Terrible. Revolution, says Dr. Edwards, finds its driving power, not in despair, but in hope.

He notes the fact without attempting to explain it. It seems to me that an explanation may be sought in the conduct of the governing class—that is, in the conduct of what he calls the oppressors. These oppressors, in all states save the most primitive, are constantly menaced by more or less serious threats of revolution. All the preliminary symptoms that Dr. Edwards describes are visible continuously, and often contemporaneously. This is true even in times of the utmost outward tranquility and prosperity, as in the Germany of the years between 1885 and 1914, and in the United States of today. All modern governments devote a considerable part of their energies to detecting and putting down revolutionary movements, and to persecuting persons suspected of a desire to launch them. There are times when such persecutions are few and feeble, but there is no time when they are abandoned altogether. The United States government, at different times, has hunted "monocrats" and democrats, anarchists and Socialists, enemies of the Bill of Rights and friends of the Bill of Rights. My belief is that this hunting, however unpleasant it may be and to whatever extent it may infringe the plain liberties of the free citizen, is necessary—that the moment it is abandoned, revolution, as the Germans say, comes into serious question. One of the essential preliminary steps to every successful revolution, indeed, is weakening and compromise on the part of the "oppressors." The czars were safe so long as they ran Russia like a house of correction, a Southern Baptist "university," or the D.A.R.; they began to move toward disaster the moment they made concessions to liberalism. There would have been no French Revolution, in all

probability, if Louis XVI had not called the States General in 1789, thus yielding to the agitations set up by such publicists as Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau. There would have been no American Revolution if Parliament had not dealt with the grievances of the colonies, real and imaginary, in a feeble and compromising spirit, always seeking to avoid a clash. And it is more than possible that there would have been no German Revolution in 1918, at least from within, if the Kaiser had not weakly abdicated: the election of Hindenburg to the presidency of the new republic six years later showed how little force there was in the democratic movement.

Bolshevism, said Marshal Foch, is a disease of defeated nations. The saying, perhaps, deserves some qualification, but at bottom it is probably sound. A government that has lost self-confidence and vigor is a government doomed to be overthrown. The forces seeking to overthrow it are always in action, searching for weaknesses in its armor. So long as it is competent and willing to deal with them in a forthright and merciless manner it is safe; the moment it begins to compromise with them it is in grave peril. England was safe until the governing oligarchy, taking alarm, began to parley with labor; the General Strike followed almost immediately, and today, despite the frantic efforts of the Tories to restore the old order, it must be obvious that the country is nearer to revolution than any other great state of Europe. If the Tories, as seems likely, are thrown out again and another Labor government comes in, the mob will be on the march. And if the Tories, seeking to avoid that disaster, begin to compromise, they will only bring it the nearer. No government was ever overthrown while it held the offensive against the "oppressed": it is not the fact of oppression that makes successful revolutions, but the confession that oppression is wrong. The first sign of a débâcle is a spirit of conciliation.

Happily, no such spirit is visible in the United States today. Capitalism is not only

firmly in the saddle; it is using its spurs—freely, gaily, and, in a sense, scientifically. There is not the slightest show of yielding to the groups whose projects of reform have a revolutionary smack. Whether they protest against merely legal oppression and propose that the Bill of Rights be restored, or fling themselves against economic oppression and advocate a complete abandonment of what remains of the Constitution, they are alike given short shrift by the constituted authorities. This short shrift, it must be obvious, has overwhelming popular backing. The proletariat, organized into such bodies as the American Federation of Labor, the American Legion and the Ku Klux Klan, supports the campaign of suppression quite as whole-heartedly as the exploiting and parasitic class, organized as Rotary, the Civic Federation, the D.A.R., and what not. Even the farmers, despite their discontents, are true blue here. They march with the Klan and are hot for firing squads for the I.W.W.; they constitute the strength of the Anti-Saloon League and are as well represented as the city mob in the American Legion; no one heard any complaint from them about the butchery of Sacco and Vanzetti; they are unanimously against "foreign agitators." Thus I view the future in America with a considerable complacency. As a member of the parasitic class and a sincere believer in capitalism, I regard my investments as completely safe—at all events, for so long a time as I shall incommode the world with my groans and ribaldries.

Nevertheless, there are signs that the remoter future may bring some surprises. All the preliminary symptoms of revolution that Dr. Edwards describes are now visible in the United States. There is a widespread sense of oppression—so far not coördinated and given a voice, but very real all the same. The peaceable citizen feels a heavier weight of government every day; the army of professional regulators and oppressors grows at a dizzy pace. Moreover, publicists of a sort begin to beat their warning tom-toms, and their

number tends to grow. The farmers of the land, as I have said, were not disturbed by the Sacco-Vanzetti obscenity, and neither were the proletarians of the towns, but among the *intelligentsia* it had painful effects, and there are a great many more highly vocal parlor Reds today than there were before the Lowell committee brought in its historic verdict. Yet more, the country is prosperous—a sinister sign, and unnoted, I believe, before Dr. Edwards began his investigation. On some unfortunate tomorrow a liberal President may get into the White House, and before his term ends there may be a Supreme Court made up wholly of Brandeises and Holmeses. When that day comes it may be well to consider moving to Switzerland, or even to England—or Russia!

Literary Shock Troops

THE AMERICAN CARAVAN: *A Yearbook of American Literature*, edited by Van Wyck Brooks, Lewis Mumford, Alfred Kreyenborg and Paul Rosenfeld. \$5. 9¼ x 6¼; 843 pp. New York: The Macaulay Company.

THE idea behind this formidable tome is the idea behind all the *Tendenz* magazines that come and go, to wit, that a great deal of profound and high-toned literature is choked off by the hunkerousness of American editors and publishers. There is, it must be granted, a certain superficial plausibility in this notion. Obviously, there is no room in the *Saturday Evening Post* for the lamentations of such advanced Radicals as Michael Gold and Upton Sinclair, nor is *Harper's Bazar* likely to print a 2000-line poem by Isidor Schneider, nor is the Oxford University Press apt to welcome a volume of incoherent indignation by Dr. William Carlos Williams, or Gertrude Stein, or Wallace Gould. But that is as far as it goes. One does not attend a funeral wearing plus fours, nor a dinner of the Iron and Steel Institute clad in sandwiches denouncing Judge Webster Thayer. Once these revolutionists abandon the cry-baby notion that dissent from their dogmas amounts to a conspiracy to silence them, they must

confess that they are treated to quite as much hospitality as their genius deserves. Even such a chronic martyr as Dr. Williams certainly cannot allege that he has gone unprinted and unhymned. On the contrary, no less than four different publishers, one of them unquestionably solvent, have brought out his books, and he has been represented in almost every number of every *Tendenz* magazine ever heard of. His published work, indeed, must almost match in quantity that of Arthur Brisbane or Sir Walter Scott. More, it has been praised, and in gaudy, voluptuous terms. But here, clad in his familiar white chemise, he bobs up again—and with the same old highfalutin puerilities, as devoid of actual ideas as a college yell.

I have gone through this vast collection with great diligence, but can find no support in it for Dr. Rosenfeld's belief that "the passive and recessive attitude of the leading magazines toward new and racy American work" is blocking "a great variety of national developments." There are some interesting things in the volume, but not many, and all those of genuine merit might have been printed in any one of a dozen highly respectable magazines, every one paying cash on the nail. What is there in Paul Green's one-act play that would have barred it from *Vanity Fair*, or in Eugene O'Neill's—save its dullness—that would have alarmed the editors of the *Yale Review*? I can find nothing. As a matter of fact, most of the revolutionary authors here represented have been printed in the orthodox magazines, and to universal applause. Ernest Hemingway is a contributor to both *Scribner's* and the *Atlantic*, Edna Bryner and Elizabeth Madox Roberts are in extensive practice as short story writers, and some of the others have actually got into the *Saturday Evening Post*. That the poems of Miss Babette Deutsch, Allen Tate, Josephine Strongin, Robert Hillyer, Louis Untermeyer and Carl Rakosi are in "The American Caravan" instead of in the *New Republic*, the *Nation* or the *Century* is surely not due to anything subversive