

The Democratic Idea

On the 150th anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, fighters for democracy recall past struggles for man's liberty. Joseph Freeman traces an historic development.

REACTION has its own ruthless logic. In fighting what is new and healthy, fascism cannot simply try to restore the status quo ante. It must open the graves of history and deck itself out in the shrouds of monstrous skeletons from the remotest times. So Julian the Apostate, attacking the democratic Christian movement of his day, attempted in vain to revive a paganism long dead. So the eighteenth century Tories, combating the Declaration of the Rights of Man, tried to restore a feudal order that had essentially perished long before they were born. So, too, fascism, seeking to halt the advance of democracy in the twentieth century, cannot simply go back to the days before 1917. It must seek to destroy the work of 1776 and 1789. It must attempt the impossible job of undoing the American and French Revolutions.

On July 14 the democratic forces of the world celebrate the 150th anniversary of the French Revolution. They celebrate it with an acute awareness that the ideals for which it stood are once more the center of worldwide conflict. Never have the principles of democracy been more important than they are today; never was it more important than now to understand the circumstances under which democracy was born.

Democratic practices came into the world because men were willing and able to struggle for them. The modern democratic idea contains many ingredients. It has within itself, among other things, the belief in reason and freedom developed by the Greeks; the faith in popular government developed by the Romans; the idea taught by Jesus that all men are equal not in capacity but in value; the freedom of conscience upon which the Puritan revolution insisted; the rights of man put forward by the American and French revolutions of the eighteenth century; the rights of labor developed in the nineteenth; the ideal of a classless society based upon common property put forward by scientific socialism; the belief advanced by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment that knowledge and art are indispensable to man's growth and happiness and must be given the fullest opportunities for development if civilization is to advance.

All these social goods are the result of unremitting struggle. In every age the democratic aspirations of the people have met with violent opposition from the dying, reactionary forces of the period. Every democratic aspiration had to be defended vigorously and without compromise. That is a law of history. You cannot destroy social evil without re-

sisting it, or achieve social good without fighting for it. Our democratic heritage comes to us out of the great labors and sacrifices and sufferings and battles of countless generations of men and women.

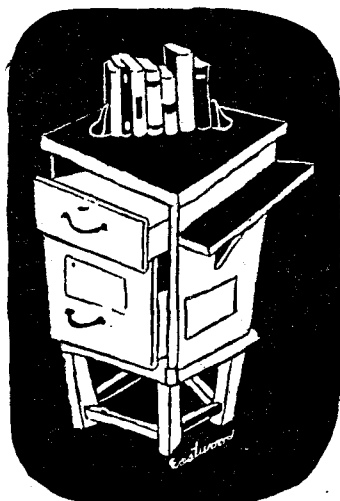
The French Revolution was inspired by the American Revolution, which in turn was inspired by the Puritan Revolution in seventeenth century England. Our historic memories are short, and we tend to think of the democratic idea wholly as the product of the past three centuries. Actually, it took eight hundred years—eight long centuries—of struggle to achieve the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. From the tenth century on, the progressive bourgeoisie fought out step by step the tenets of its democratic gospel. Slow gain alternated with crushing failure. The bourgeois revolution was defeated in the Albigenses of thirteenth century France; in the Lollards of fourteenth century England and in Rienzi of fourteenth century Italy; in the Taborites of sixteenth century Bohemia; in the peasant followers of Muenzer of sixteenth century Germany.

Not until the seventeenth century did the democratic idea based on private property score a victory under the Puritans in England. And if anyone still thinks of the writer as a shrinking violet who wants the fruits of democracy without the struggle, let him remember that beside the heroic figure of Cromwell there fought, as an active member of the revolutionary government, the sublime figure of Milton. The work of Milton, in pamphlets as in poetry, is part of our democratic literary heritage. That tradition was developed and enhanced by the eighteenth century Enlightenment, which removed from men's minds the accumulated cobwebs of the ages, and asserted the supremacy of reason.

But when we think with gratitude of the revolutionary writings of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot, let us not forget that the democratic vision of the Enlightenment went even further. For nearly a century before the destruction of the Bastille, French writers poured out novels describing ideal republics in which there was no private property, in which the community owned everything in common. Even after the revolution was in progress, Condorcet urged the eighteenth century democratic dream intact. No limit, he insisted, could be set to the human faculties. Progress might be swift or slow but the ultimate end is sure. The indefinite advance of mankind presupposes the elimination of inequality among peoples, classes, and the sexes. Science would make endless progress. Wars would end forever. Finally, mankind would unite in a permanent federation of the peoples of the world.

This was the lofty promise with which the French Revolution began. That revolution was the most liberating event in history until the year 1917. For all its limitations, it advanced mankind a long way on the road toward democracy. And so the reactionaries of Europe made war upon revolutionary France. From 1789 to 1815, a long period of twenty-six years, the history of Europe was the history of the resistance of revolutionary France against the attempts of the reaction to crush it by force of arms. And the literature of Europe was dominated by that gigantic struggle on which hung the destinies of men and their highest hopes. When we consider our literary traditions, we always come back to those writers who, pro or con, romantically or realistically, centered their thoughts and feelings and creative energies around the hopes and problems raised by the French Revolution. We always come back to Byron, Shelley, and Hunt; to Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge; to Chateaubriand, Nodier, and Stendhal—and to heirs of the Enlightenment like Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola.

The relation of the writer to the central historic events of his age is of vital importance to us, and, if we avoid mechanical analogies, we may learn a few things from the reactions of various writers to the French Revolution. The case of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey is a classic. These poets at first hailed the French Revolution with romantic joy. But great social change appears romantic only when you understand it and believe in it. When you become confused, romance changes to horror. Wordsworth and his friends were horrified first by Robespierre



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because they did not understand that he was ridding France of traitors and counter-revolutionaries. Then they were horrified because France, resisting invasion since 1789, took the military initiative against its foes. As a result of these two necessary events, Wordsworth and his circle discovered that revolutionary France had become despotic France. This so outraged their democratic sensibilities that they went down on all fours and licked the boots of the most loathsome English Tories, who were waging war on democracy at home and abroad.

Significantly enough, Wordsworth and Coleridge underwent a literary change of life after they turned against the French Revolution. They lost their poetic elan, and though they lived for three more decades, they wrote nothing as vital as their early revolutionary poetry. It seems that history does not permit anybody to stand still. You either go forward or backward. No longer inspired by the democratic struggle, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey could not remain neutral. They had to become reactionaries. And since no one can write deeply who does not believe deeply, they paid for their political sins with literary sterility.

Other English poets saw the situation more clearly. To the end of his life, Byron stood by the French Revolution, Napoleon and all. After Waterloo and the victory of the ultra-reactionary Holy Alliance, the liberals of Europe had a chance to learn in the most painful way the real alternatives which history offered them. They had called the revolution despotic. Now the system of Metternich suppressed all free speech and free thought, hounded and exiled progressive writers, drowned popular democratic movements in blood—and taught the world what despotism really is and who exercises it. And so in the thirties, you find the democratic people of France and democratic poets like Victor Hugo and Heinrich Heine invoking against the Holy Alliance the memory of 1793, which Walt Whitman called the great natal year.

The necessary limitations of the French Revolution and its defeat by the Holy Alliance led to literary movements which the textbooks indiscriminately lump together under the heading of Romanticism. But not all the Romantic writers saw the world with the same eyes. What they had in common was the insistence on the original prophecies of the bourgeois democratic revolution. They wanted the nineteenth century to pay off the promissory note of the eighteenth. That was historically impossible. Instead of universal liberty, equality, and fraternity, the world now had capitalism.

Disappointed in the outcome of the bourgeois revolution, Wordsworth and his circle consoled themselves with Nature. Disappointed French writers like de Senancourt preached suicide as the one action in a despotic world in which a man was wholly his own master. Others, like Chateaubriand, became ardent Catholics, finding solace in an idealized

church. Other writers, steeped in the great rationalism which had just preceded them, yet desperately in need of some faith to sustain them in a world they could neither understand nor control, made a religion of their art; and endowed the brush of the painter and the pen of the author with the ineffable qualities of the Holy Ghost. Clear-sighted Shelley, on the other hand, saw mankind emerging from its trance, in "a slow, gradual, silent change." As a matter of fact the world was at that very moment undergoing a change which in its consequences for human destiny and human liberty far transcended all the political revolutions from the days of Akhenaton to the days of Jefferson.

Recorded history began some five thousand years ago with man's discovery of agriculture; and down through the ages, all the way to the nineteenth century, agriculture remained the basis of man's life. The roots of every democratic dream eventually went back to the land. And as long as man existed by the old means, as long as he continued to make his livelihood with a wooden plow and produced goods by hand and traveled by horse as the Babylonians had traveled, every democratic dream was bound to remain in practice the limited privilege of a small group of property owners. The reason was simple enough. There could be no complete democracy without economic democracy; and there could be no economic democracy until a way was found for vastly increasing the wealth of the world. That way was found. The Industrial Revolution closed that five-thousand-year-old epoch which the agricultural revolution had opened. Science and invention, even under capitalist restrictions, fabulously increased the material goods of society. Properly distributed, there was enough wealth, actual and potential, for a genuine, all-embracing democracy.

Out of this tremendous economic change in the life of man the socialist movement came into being, and it came consciously as an extension of earlier democratic ideas. Writers of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, thinkers like Kant, had envisioned the classless society, but they could not see how such a society could be attained. In fact, the elements for its attainment were not there. The Communists saw the means. They saw the economic and historic conditions were there; they saw the revolutionary class was there; and they developed a science for achieving socialist democracy.

The founders of that science, Marx and Engels, said that Communists have no interests apart from the interests of the people: they paid homage to the democratic ideas of the Enlightenment out of which socialist democracy emerged. When Communists attack the limitations of capitalist democracy, it is not because they want no democracy, but because they want more democracy; they want that complete democracy which socialism alone can give by establishing the indispensable economic foundations. But the Communists retain the democratic heritage of the



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past. That is the conservative aspect of Communism. While the fascists want to revive only the poison of the past, we want to retain all that is good in the past, all that is progressive in the present. With the help of these the future can be created.

We can see this process in the development of American literature. Out of the Great Tradition which gave us Whittier and Whitman there grew that American socialist literature which gave us Jack London, Upton Sinclair, and John Reed. The writers of this movement saw the direct connection between democracy and socialism long ago. "Americanism is an idea," Julian Hawthorne wrote in 1902, "and that idea is socialism." It was the socialist writers of America, who, more than any others, maintained the memory and influence of Walt Whitman as the great poet of democracy.

The Industrial Revolution speeded up not only production, but history itself. Things moved fast. It took seven hundred years to produce the first successful bourgeois revolution; it took less than a century to produce the first successful socialist revolution. The Soviet Union has shown what an emancipated people can do with modern science, machinery, and socialism. Unlike the French Revolution, the October Revolution has carried out its promises. It has abolished private property in the means of production. It has eliminated unemployment, economic crises, and exploitation. It has given 170,000,000 people economic security, education, health and leisure, access to knowledge and art. In ten years it has planned and carried out the greatest economic advances and placed their results at the disposal of the people.

This is a kind of democracy which the reactionaries in the capitalist countries cannot tolerate. The crusade against socialism is far more brutal and barbarous than the crusade against early nineteenth century bourgeois democracy. The fascists launched this crusade with the approval of non-fascist powers. These imagined that fascism would stop with the destruction of labor organizations at home, and proceed with ease to the destruction of the Soviet Union. But it soon became evident even to the most stupid Tories that the Soviet Union is no easy thing to destroy. Socialism makes a people not only free but also strong.

Meantime, to exist at all, fascism must seek to destroy every social good at home and abroad. It must devour lands and peoples, thought and art. It can exist only by enslaving its own people, by assaulting everything that is free and healthy in the world around it. In order to prevent democracy from reaching its full growth, its highest level of development, fascism must try to annihilate every vestige of democracy which has ever existed. It must try to prevent the fruit by killing the seed.

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some writers think. It's a great task, and its successful fulfillment would liberate the world from a terrible blight.

More than that: every time we set back fascism, we weaken it and advance democracy. The more thoroughly we defeat fascism, the more easily we can continue the onward march of democracy toward socialism. Through this release of vision, will, and energy, the world can take advantage of the economic, political, and social possibilities inherent in our epoch, and give reality to the highest aspirations of democratic mankind.

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STEP and Ed were working stiffly who turned up wherever there was fruit to be picked or land to be made ready for planting. They knocked around the Southwest mostly, always looking for what they called a "job of work." They were hard workers, too, but the depression had made them, like millions of other itinerants, footloose and jittery.

Step was big and strong, with too much pride and temper. Ed was able to control his temper. In Las Cruces, N. M., they picked up a Mexican kid whose only English phrase was Hi Boy. Step and Ed called him Hi Boy. The kid could shoot and smoke and ride the freights as well as his companions. Step and Ed loved Hi Boy and made him one of their foot-weary crew. The three shared excitement and misery. Step brought them lots of misery which even Ed's coolheadedness couldn't mend.

In the Yakima Valley in California they got jobs with a small, friendly planter, a sort of philosopher who had gathered up all the valley's folk and Indian legends. Sampson, the planter, had a naive, adventurous daughter, who fell in love with Step as soon as she saw him. Step, to whom all women were the same, took her offers at face value. Meanwhile, Sampson developed a tremendous affection for Hi Boy. The tangles of human relations, distorted out of sensible proportion by the crazy existence of these people, brought misery to the four adults and death to the chirpy little Mexicano, Hi Boy.

That is most of the story of *Let Me Breathe Thunder* (Doubleday, Doran & Co., \$2) by a young Negro writer, William Attaway. The publishers and other reviewers have made a great deal of the interesting fact that this is perhaps the first novel about whites by a Negro. The fact is significant, I suppose, but it is not freakish. Attaway lived the life he writes about, and there is no reason why he should not deal with whites. These migrant workers and small farmers know little of prejudice.

The book is in many ways similar to Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Step and Ed are



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