

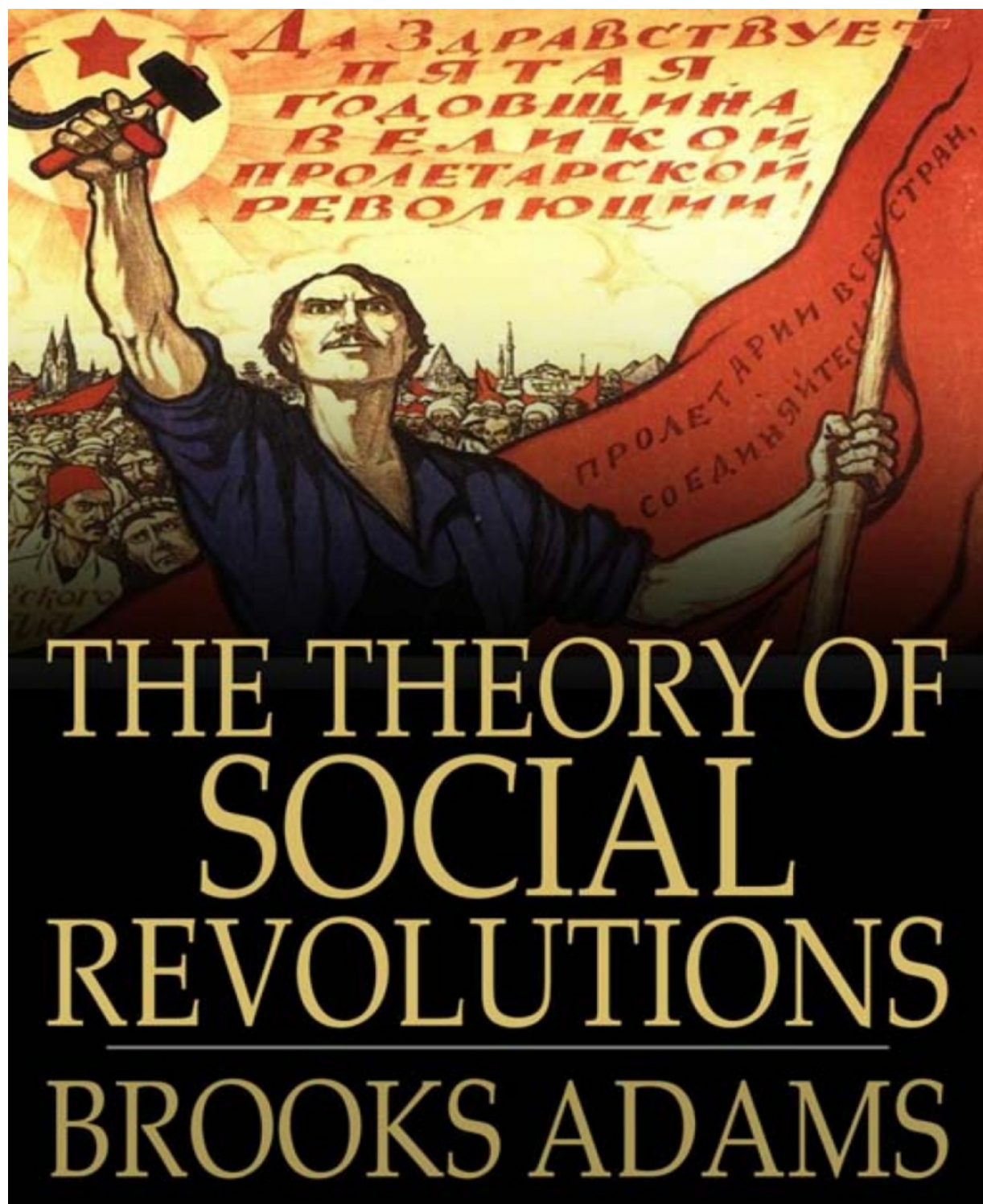


# THE THEORY OF SOCIAL REVOLUTIONS

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## BROOKS ADAMS





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# **The Theory of Social Revolutions**

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# **The Theory of Social Revolutions**

**By Brooks Adams**

## CHAPTER I

### THE COLLAPSE OF CAPITALISTIC GOVERNMENT.

Civilization, I apprehend, is nearly synonymous with order. However much we may differ touching such matters as the distribution of property, the domestic relations, the law of inheritance and the like, most of us, I should suppose, would agree that without order civilization, as we understand it, cannot exist. Now, although the optimist contends that, since man cannot foresee the future, worry about the future is futile, and that everything, in the best possible of worlds, is inevitably for the best, I think it clear that within recent years an uneasy suspicion has come into being that the principle of authority has been dangerously impaired, and that the social system, if it is to cohere, must be reorganized. So far as my observation has extended, such intuitions are usually not without an adequate cause, and if there be reason for anxiety anywhere, it surely should be in the United States, with its unwieldy bulk, its heterogeneous population, and its complex government. Therefore, I submit, that an hour may not be quite wasted which is passed in considering some of the recent phenomena which have appeared about us, in order to ascertain if they can be grouped together in any comprehensible relation.

About a century ago, after, the American and French Revolutions and the Napoleonic wars, the present industrial era opened, and brought with it a new governing class, as every considerable change in human environment must bring with it a governing class to give it expression. Perhaps, for lack of a recognized name, I may describe this class as the industrial capitalistic class, composed in the main of administrators and bankers. As nothing in the universe is stationary, ruling classes have their rise, culmination, and decline, and I conjecture that this class attained to its acme

of popularity and power, at least in America, toward the close of the third quarter of the nineteenth century. I draw this inference from the fact that in the next quarter resistance to capitalistic methods began to take shape in such legislation as the Interstate Commerce Law and the Sherman Act, and almost at the opening of the present century a progressively rigorous opposition found for its mouthpiece the President of the Union himself. History may not be a very practical study, but it teaches some useful lessons, one of which is that nothing is accidental, and that if men move in a given direction, they do so in obedience to an impulsion as automatic as is the impulsion of gravitation. Therefore, if Mr. Roosevelt became, what his adversaries are pleased to call, an agitator, his agitation had a cause which is as deserving of study as is the path of a cyclone. This problem has long interested me, and I harbor no doubt not only that the equilibrium of society is very rapidly shifting, but that Mr. Roosevelt has, half-automatically, been stimulated by the instability about him to seek for a new centre of social gravity. In plain English, I infer that he has concluded that industrialism has induced conditions which can no longer be controlled by the old capitalistic methods, and that the country must be brought to a level of administrative efficiency competent to deal with the strains and stresses of the twentieth century, just as, a hundred and twenty-five years ago, the country was brought to an administrative level competent for that age, by the adoption of the Constitution. Acting on these premises, as I conjecture, whether consciously worked out or not, Mr. Roosevelt's next step was to begin the readjustment; but, I infer, that on attempting any correlated measures of reform, Mr. Roosevelt found progress impossible, because of the obstruction of the courts. Hence his instinct led him to try to overleap that obstruction, and he suggested, without, I suspect, examining the problem very deeply, that the people should assume the right of "recalling" judicial

decisions made in causes which involved the nullifying of legislation. What would have happened had Mr. Roosevelt been given the opportunity to thoroughly formulate his ideas, even in the midst of an election, can never be known, for it chanced that he was forced to deal with subjects as vast and complex as ever vexed a statesman or a jurist, under difficulties at least equal to the difficulties of the task itself. If the modern mind has developed one characteristic more markedly than another, it is an impatience with prolonged demands on its attention, especially if the subject be tedious. No one could imagine that the New York press of to-day would print the disquisitions which Hamilton wrote in 1788 in support of the Constitution, or that, if it did, any one would read them, least of all the lawyers; and yet Mr. Roosevelt's audience was emotional and discursive even for a modern American audience. Hence, if he attempted to lead at all, he had little choice but to adopt, or at least discuss, every nostrum for reaching an immediate millennium which happened to be uppermost; although, at the same time, he had to defend himself against an attack compared with which any criticism to which Hamilton may have been subjected resembled a caress. The result has been that the Progressive movement, bearing Mr. Roosevelt with it, has degenerated into a disintegrating rather than a constructive energy, which is, I suspect, likely to become a danger to every one interested in the maintenance of order, not to say in the stability of property. Mr. Roosevelt is admittedly a strong and determined man whose instinct is arbitrary, and yet, if my analysis be sound, we see him, at the supreme moment of his life, diverted from his chosen path toward centralization of power, and projected into an environment of, apparently, for the most part, philanthropists and women, who could hardly conceivably form a party fit to aid him in establishing a vigorous, consolidated, administrative system. He must have found the pressure toward disintegration resistless, and if we

consider this most significant phenomenon, in connection with an abundance of similar phenomena, in other countries, which indicate social incoherence, we can hardly resist a growing apprehension touching the future. Nor is that apprehension allayed if, to reassure ourselves, we turn to history, for there we find on every side long series of precedents more ominous still.

Were all other evidence lacking, the inference that radical changes are at hand might be deduced from the past. In the experience of the English-speaking race, about once in every three generations a social convulsion has occurred; and probably such catastrophes must continue to occur in order that laws and institutions may be adapted to physical growth. Human society is a living organism, working mechanically, like any other organism. It has members, a circulation, a nervous system, and a sort of skin or envelope, consisting of its laws and institutions. This skin, or envelope, however, does not expand automatically, as it would had Providence intended humanity to be peaceful, but is only fitted to new conditions by those painful and conscious efforts which we call revolutions. Usually these revolutions are warlike, but sometimes they are benign, as was the revolution over which General Washington, our first great "Progressive," presided, when the rotting Confederation, under his guidance, was converted into a relatively excellent administrative system by the adoption of the Constitution.

Taken for all in all, I conceive General Washington to have been the greatest man of the eighteenth century, but to me his greatness chiefly consists in that balance of mind which enabled him to recognize when an old order had passed away, and to perceive how a new order could be best introduced. Joseph Story was ten years old in 1789 when the Constitution was adopted; his earliest impressions, therefore, were of the Confederation, and I know no better description of the interval just subsequent to the peace of



1783, than is contained in a few lines in his dissenting opinion in the Charles River Bridge Case--

"In order to entertain a just view of this subject, we must go back to that period of general bankruptcy, and distress and difficulty (1785).... The union of the States was crumbling into ruins, under the old Confederation. Agriculture, manufactures, and commerce were at their lowest ebb. There was infinite danger to all the States from local interests and jealousies, and from the apparent impossibility of a much longer adherence to that shadow of a government, the Continental Congress. And even four years afterwards, when every evil had been greatly aggravated, and civil war was added to other calamities, the Constitution of the United States was all but shipwrecked in passing through the state conventions."[1]

This crisis, according to my computation, was the normal one of the third generation. Between 1688 and 1765 the British Empire had physically outgrown its legal envelope, and the consequence was a revolution. The thirteen American colonies, which formed the western section of the imperial mass, split from the core and drifted into chaos, beyond the constraint of existing law. Washington was, in his way, a large capitalist, but he was much more. He was not only a wealthy planter, but he was an engineer, a traveller, to an extent a manufacturer, a politician, and a soldier, and he saw that, as a conservative, he must be "Progressive" and raise the law to a power high enough to constrain all these thirteen refractory units. For Washington understood that peace does not consist in talking platitudes at conferences, but in organizing a sovereignty strong enough to coerce its subjects.

The problem of constructing such a sovereignty was the problem which Washington solved, temporarily at least, without violence. He prevailed not only because of an intelligence and elevation of character which enabled him to comprehend, and to persuade others, that, to attain a

common end, all must make sacrifices, but also because he was supported by a body of the most remarkable men whom America has ever produced. Men who, though doubtless in a numerical minority, taking the country as a whole, by sheer weight of ability and energy, achieved their purpose.

Yet even Washington and his adherents could not alter the limitations of the human mind. He could postpone, but he could not avert, the impact of conflicting social forces. In 1789 he compromised, but he did not determine the question of sovereignty. He eluded an impending conflict by introducing courts as political arbitrators, and the expedient worked more or less well until the tension reached a certain point. Then it broke down, and the question of sovereignty had to be settled in America, as elsewhere, on the field of battle. It was not decided until Appomattox. But the function of the courts in American life is a subject which I shall consider hereafter.

If the invention of gunpowder and printing in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries presaged the Reformation of the sixteenth, and if the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth was the forerunner of political revolutions throughout the Western World, we may well, after the mechanical and economic cataclysm of the nineteenth, cease wondering that twentieth-century society should be radical.

Never since man first walked erect have his relations toward nature been so changed, within the same space of time, as they have been since Washington was elected President and the Parisian mob stormed the Bastille. Washington found the task of a readjustment heavy enough, but the civilization he knew was simple. When Washington lived, the fund of energy at man's disposal had not very sensibly augmented since the fall of Rome. In the eighteenth, as in the fourth century, engineers had at command only animal power, and a little wind and water

power, to which had been added, at the end of the Middle Ages, a low explosive. There was nothing in the daily life of his age which made the legal and administrative principles which had sufficed for Justinian insufficient for him. Twentieth-century society rests on a basis not different so much in degree, as in kind, from all that has gone before. Through applied science infinite forces have been domesticated, and the action of these infinite forces upon finite minds has been to create a tension, together with a social acceleration and concentration, not only unparalleled, but, apparently, without limit. Meanwhile our laws and institutions have remained, in substance, constant. I doubt if we have developed a single important administrative principle which would be novel to Napoleon, were he to live again, and I am quite sure that we have no legal principle younger than Justinian.

As a result, society has been squeezed, as it were, from its rigid eighteenth-century legal shell, and has passed into a fourth dimension of space, where it performs its most important functions beyond the cognizance of the law, which remains in a space of but three dimensions. Washington encountered a somewhat analogous problem when dealing with the thirteen petty independent states, which had escaped from England; but his problem was relatively rudimentary. Taking the theory of sovereignty as it stood, he had only to apply it to communities. It was mainly a question of concentrating a sufficient amount of energy to enforce order in sovereign social units. The whole social detail remained unchanged. Our conditions would seem to imply a very considerable extension and specialization of the principle of sovereignty, together with a commensurate increment of energy, but unfortunately the twentieth-century American problem is still further complicated by the character of the envelope in which this highly volatilized society is theoretically contained. To attain his object, Washington introduced a written organic law, which of all

things is the most inflexible. No other modern nation has to consider such an impediment.

Moneyed capital I take to be stored human energy, as a coal measure is stored solar energy; and moneyed capital, under the stress of modern life, has developed at once extreme fluidity, and an equivalent compressibility. Thus a small number of men can control it in enormous masses, and so it comes to pass that, in a community like the United States, a few men, or even, in certain emergencies, a single man, may become clothed with various of the attributes of sovereignty. Sovereign powers are powers so important that the community, in its corporate capacity, has, as society has centralized, usually found it necessary to monopolize them more or less absolutely, since their possession by private persons causes revolt. These powers, when vested in some official, as, for example, a king or emperor, have been held by him, in all Western countries at least, as a trust to be used for the common welfare. A breach of that trust has commonly been punished by deposition or death. It was upon a charge of breach of trust that Charles I, among other sovereigns, was tried and executed. In short, the relation of sovereign and subject has been based either upon consent and mutual obligation, or upon submission to a divine command; but, in either case, upon recognition of responsibility. Only the relation of master and slave implies the status of sovereign power vested in an unaccountable superior. Nevertheless, it is in a relation somewhat analogous to the latter, that the modern capitalist has been placed toward his fellow citizens, by the advances in applied science. An example or two will explain my meaning.

High among sovereign powers has always ranked the ownership and administration of highways. And it is evident why this should have been so. Movement is life, and the stoppage of movement is death, and the movement of every people flows along its highways. An invader has only to cut the communications of the invaded to paralyze him,

as he would paralyze an animal by cutting his arteries or tendons. Accordingly, in all ages and in all lands, down to the nineteenth century, nations even partially centralized have, in their corporate capacity, owned and cared for their highways, either directly or through accountable agents. And they have paid for them by direct taxes, like the Romans, or by tolls levied upon traffic, as many mediaeval governments preferred to do. Either method answers its purpose, provided the government recognizes its responsibility; and no government ever recognized this responsibility more fully than did the autocratic government of ancient Rome. So the absolute régime of eighteenth-century France recognized this responsibility when Louis XVI undertook to remedy the abuse of unequal taxation, for the maintenance of the highways, by abolishing the *corvée*.

Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, the application, by science, of steam to locomotion, made railways a favorite speculation. Forthwith, private capital acquired these highways, and because of the inelasticity of the old law, treated them as ordinary chattels, to be administered for the profit of the owner exclusively. It is true that railway companies posed as public agents when demanding the power to take private property; but when it came to charging for use of their ways, they claimed to be only private carriers, authorized to bargain as they pleased. Indeed, it grew to be considered a mark of efficient railroad management to extract the largest revenue possible from the people, along the lines of least resistance; that is, by taxing most heavily those individuals and localities which could least resist. And the claim by the railroads that they might do this as a matter of right was long upheld by the courts,[2] nor have the judges even yet, after a generation of revolt and of legislation, altogether abandoned this doctrine.

The courts--reluctantly, it is true, and principally at the instigation of the railways themselves, who found the