

DSB

I'm not sure how many people may know this, but once in the dim and distant past, when I was a teenager, Dad was an anarchist - in fact an anarcho-syndicalist. His vision was of a society composed of small self-sufficient communities, furnished with their needs by craftsmen, kept together by a commitment to mutual support, and ordered through the individual's conscience and sense of personal responsibility. This responsibility could never be supplanted by the State, as he had argued cogently to the conscription tribunal during the war. He was a self-confessed idealist, a pacifist and a unilateralist at a time when to be these things represented hopeless defiance of (what seemed at the time) established certainties. His ideas had a profound effect on my development.

As I grew up, I began to have doubts about how far some of these ideas related to the reality of the world I was emerging into. As an anthropology student I learnt that Prince Kropotkin's book Mutual aid, the anarchist's bible, which Dad had given me to read around that time, reflected a simplistic and paternalistic view of so-called 'primitive society' which could not stand comparison with reality and which could never serve as a basis for social transformation. Pacifism does not address issues of class and race, and the Palestinian and South African cases, it seemed to me, belied the belief that violence is never justified. And the test-ban treaty narrowed down the arguments in favour of unilateral disarmament.

I think Dad also began to doubt many of his earlier ideas. He even voted on occasion, though always strictly on the criterion of disarmament policy. He began to see anarcho-syndicalism as an aberration of idealistic youth, devoid of reality. To explain this shift, we should remember that at that time, and until very recently, the predominant political reality of the age was the growing might of the State, and the economic and ideological systems that supported it. As we now observe the collapse of the State in Eastern Europe, we should recall that its entrenchment over the last few decades has been a feature of our own society too. It began to seem inconceivable that the tide of history could be halted, or that the individual might ever win out against the tyranny of bureaucracy. The 'Beat' generation, Gully Jimson, Norman Wisdom, 'Arfur' Daley, and many other real and literary characters whom Dad introduced me to over the years, all shout out for the rightness of the 'little man' following his conscience and the light of divine inspiration, but they seemed also a testament to the ultimate futility of challenging the machine.

Now, in 1992, the world looks somehow different. What we once took to be a given - the inexorable global movement towards the monolithic state - has turned out to be nothing more than shifting sand. Devolution, regionalism and federalism - all alternative words for syndicalism - represent an unstoppable trend towards the real new economic order - in Africa as well as in Europe, east and west. We know now that a State which cannot be responsive to its people cannot harness their energy, that the units of political power must coincide with the units of

effective responsibility if the earth's resources are to be husbanded, and that in politics, balance between different interests is, in the long run, everything. Syndicalism, though we may call it by different names, is once again on the agenda, this time born out of real experiences and tailored to match real situations.

The way in which the breaking up of the world into smaller and smaller units is proceeding can hardly have been inspired by idealism. It is mostly crude and often violent. But if we can agree that syndicalism in one form or another is the future of democracy, then we must also accept that faith in the unique worth of the human individual is the cornerstone of democracy. So let us give thanks to David Ballantyne and to all those crankish, self-doubting idealists everywhere who, in spite of everything, couldn't let that idea die.