

Principles

(Views and Comments)

Dora Marsden

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By now, in these hard times, the Government might have been expected to be thoroughly alive to the difference between what some elegant person has described as "Blowing your nose and blowing it off," but they still appear to think that they can go to any lengths along the path of obliging their friends. It turns out that the coal strike was allowed to come about just to oblige an old fossil which some member of the Government keeps warm in his pocket. This person's job is theorizing on the subject of "Abstract Right," and the coal strike being the apt illustration he was in need of at the moment it was of course engineered. And the world is at war! There is, of course, nothing left for the unprivileged public to do, but deplore as usual the subversion of Public Interest to Private Ends and pick up any profitable intelligence there may be among the spoil. And if the coal strike be not due to the fact that this old gentleman required the suspension of the resources of a coalfield in war-time in order to "boil an egg for himself," what other adequate reason is there for permitting such a catastrophe with such a "moral" to occur at such a time. We can think of none. The "moral" of this strike for recalcitrant labour appears to be that they should henceforth cease disparaging their opponents' methods and morals for the plainly demonstrated reason that though these beat no "noble" sound they are by far the better ones for winning. From the fact that the miners have won in this strike the workers should be able to cast aside their brand of "Ethics": the essential feature of their position as "the workers." If they have the intelligence to grasp the importance of this fact, the period of war between Classes and Masses is now at an end, and the war between parties very nearly approaching Equals, will have begun.

I see a correspondent objects to the word "should" in *The Egoist*, because it is redolent of coercion I suppose. It would be nearer the mark to consider it redolent rather of Purpose, and an Egoist—yea even an Anarchist—must have a Purpose or two, so it "should" be in its place. Having a Purpose merely means that you aim at arriving at a destination by way of one route or other. What "should" implies is that, having fixed the destination and the route towards it, you should occasionally remember that you actually are aiming at some spot in particular, and that arrival there necessitates a certain sense of direction. We cannot, for instance, arrive and yet sit

by the roadside permanently. Accomplishment in its very nature is coercion. One has to coerce oneself and many other people and things in order to carry out quite a small undertaking, and that necessitates one's saying "should" quite a number of times. The importance of any change in the brand of the "Ethics" for the Masses has all to do with this word "should." "Should," as we have implied, has the function of a signpost: it is important as indicating the direction one should take relative to our desired destination. The "ethical" position of the Masses is in this bewildering state: while they aim at arriving at Power for themselves, the persons responsible for the setting up and the marking of the signposts desire them to arrive at a destination in a quite opposite direction: at Absence of Power. And they hopefully trust to the signposts and expect to arrive. It is true that they see all the powerful moving past them in the opposite direction despite the signposts, but even this strong "tip" appears to tell them nothing: their faith is fixed in it and they loudly scold all such as are making strides in a contrary way. Hence the importance of "should," and the importance of testing whether these all-valuable indicators are set in accordance with their Purposes and not those of others. Whichever end one wishes to take there exists the corresponding "should": tyranny everywhere it seems.

"Democracy and Conscription" are twin tyrants, one is informed. But then there are so many tyrants: as many as there are sparks of life it seems: all established in proportion to their strength and unobtrusively in proportion to their subtlety! Why, out of such a myriad of tyrants, these two—one a mere way of speaking and the other a course of physical training should be placed together as the tyrant-twins is not apparent. Democracy, as has been reiterated here so often, is a method of sparing the pride of the tyrannized by dint of politeness: a convention misleading only to the unintelligent. And to save the unintelligent from their unintelligence is not within the power even of tyrants. Conscription is a different affair. Coupling Conscription with Democracy is like comparing learning to earn a livelihood with knowing how to raise your hat to a lady. It is difficult to understand why people who are not the mouthpieces of some fixed "Principle" like that of maintaining the "wrongness of coercion" can maintain an objection to National Training. It is based on the understanding that it is best for the Interests of a group—the instruments of aggression being what they are—that each of its members should be as capable as may be of effectual self-defence. It is surely against no one's interest to be as efficient in self-defence as possible. The powers of self-defence are always useful: for aggression as well as defence: at home as well as further afield. Men who cannot fight with a fair chance of competing with the rest of their fellows are—even though they possess true hearts of gold—rabble. They fall back like a pack of sheep before a mere handful. One thinks of the spectacle of Ben Tillett and his Ten Thousand on Tower Hill in the Dock Strike. That spectacle revealed more than a whole century of talk. Unarmed, untrained, undisciplined, men—though they can call upon the heavens to witness their Righteousness and to encompass the destruction of their enemies—are "shoved and shoo'd" from their ground—by a few policemen. It is worth while reminding the inheritors of the "spiritual" Principles of Democracy that these same "Principles" (Politeness or Hoax, just as one pleases to regard them) were largely the outcome of the temper of the soldiery which emerged from the last great European War. It was the experience and training of the returned soldiers which put stamina into the Reformist movement and which put a corresponding fear into the hearts of the "Arch-Tyrants" as then Established. If the movement ultimately went awry

and broke its temper struggling for nearly a century through a bog of words, this does not dim the fact that it sprang from firm substantial quality. And rebellion apart, the stout truth stands that tyrants can tyrannize only "so far" among comparative equals, and they are alert enough to know when a situation makes caution a necessary virtue. The recognition moreover that "Peace and a quiet life" necessitate violent and acrid forms of guaranteeing, in no way reflects on the former's attractiveness. It merely recognizes that it is the power to retaliate with adequate violence which virtualizes any claim to enjoy and possess "Peace" even as also "Rights," "Property," "Free Conscience," "Anarchist Opinions," and the rest.

There are so many of these "blessed words" about, so many "spiritual principles." It would purge the world of much unintentional Cant if the word "spiritual" could be once and for all attached to its accurate meaning: that of "verbal." This would make it more possible to give a sensible meaning to "Principle" as that of "Customary mode of behaviour"; and so effect a clearance invaluable in a community disease-ravaged by Principles which are allowed to bolt madly like wild horses harnessed to all kinds of valued Purposes, because the "creations," being "Principles," are Sacred. It would also set free the word "Spirit" for use in the important sense of Vital and therefore Purposive Energy. Associated with purpose, Spirit would accurately connect itself with the embodiments of Purpose: which embodiments would cease to be underrated as valuable evidence of the working and intention of a powerful spirit, just because they failed to fit into the verbal conventions current at the time. War would be realized for what it is—a colossal struggle of brains. It would become impossible to conceive of the sort of governing intelligence which condescendingly allows that, after all, brains are not altogether negligible, and which, just as it has arrived at this interesting discovery, proceeds to appoint as Minister of Education—yea Education—we will refrain from naming him. The act proves this country an invincibly moral nation. It gets into the way of doing things after "a certain fashion, and kill or cure, it insists on continuing thus to do them. It has despised education: and it does despise it and it will continue so to do, for ever, Amen. That is the spirit of Morality: a true adherence to "Principles."

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