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FEED BACK

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Bird in a Cage

Dear Folks, Leopold Kohr, in his book 'Development without Aid', says basically that if a country wants to develop, it should get itself a strongly authoritarian leader, break up into small, 'translucent' areas, turn its back on the destructive trade and aid that the rich nations seek to impose on it, and get on with the good hard work of building up the land.

Michael North, in his review 'Coca-Cola Culture' [Vol.4,no.6] finds the most worthwhile aspect of the book not the advocacy of smallness, or the call to go it alone, both of which I find commendable, but Kohr's espousal of frankly authoritarian government. This reviewer reckons to be valuable because it clears away 'liberal dross', which in its 'sponge-rubber' way protects the values of a so-called democracy that reduces everyone to porridge. (A delicious food, it might be said.)

It could be that he is just getting a kick from annoying the mythical 'liberal', who comes in for such a bashing these days. But if he's serious, then I'm seriously worried. Democracy as we experience it is obviously only a partially developed creature. It's clearly nowhere near any real 'rule by the people', and it is even in danger at the moment of subsiding into a coalition state rule without even a pseudo-opposition. The hope of all radicals must be that democracy must evolve, with or without revolution, into its fully mature adult form, with great or total regional autonomy, and representation, where it is needed, based on the neighbourhood, the school, the village, etc.

Obviously, any society can develop in a most impressive way if everyone is willing to jump when a dictator says jump. And to anyone who has seen British party-style democracy in action in an Indian community, it is equally obvious how disastrous it is. The politicians do their utmost to divide the community, to bribe, promise or cajole their votes from them, and then they go away, never to be seen again. Meanwhile, back in Delhi, or wherever, the politicians wax fat.

But it's as unimaginative to assume that these are the only two possibilities for developing nations as it is to assume that the British citizen can only act politically by voting for one of two or three pre-chosen candidates whenever there's an election. Michael and Leopold should both take a good look, for instance, at the proposals for Gram Sabhas — Village Assemblies — that would act as the political voice of Gramdan villages in India. There, the whole adult community would meet, and discuss and decide on issues as one body, knowing that they had to reach some sort of mutual agreements. When a representative was needed, to attend a regional assembly, candidates would be put before the village as a whole, and one would then be chosen, by consensus. This promises to be one possible example of

a vital and dynamic democracy.

Leopold Kohr seeks a society that is self-sufficient, secure, tranquil, and independent. Economically, he's got the right ideas. But what is more important than national independence and vitality is individual independence and vitality. And in the process of gaining the former, by authoritarian rule, the latter is inevitably sacrificed. You can never learn to fly while locked in a cage — and the hope that the despotism might simply 'wither away' as its need was fulfilled is surely fairly well disproven by history by now. And what is positively dangerous is that a people who have had to submerge their own personal identities and aspirations into those of the nation will also cling to the same nation and its state apparatus in their personal uncertainty, their fear of freedom. And so the hoped for swan will be in danger of becoming an extremely ugly duckling. The way we can learn to fly is by insisting on our right to fly, every day, and by going ahead, and flying.

Best wishes, Guy Dauncey, Gulls Rest, Solva, Pembrokeshire. 16.2.74

Small Talk

Dear Editor, Those of us who read Resurgence are presumably agreed as to the beauty of things small — and from then on we are beat. Seeking a solution only in incessant small talk or at best the retreat to one's own small and personal bolt-hole.

I'm not sure where or what is the common ground. Of one thing I am sure it is a mistake to attempt to marry ideologies, or to erect communities under one ideology. Let the loftier ideas wait, or better still, evolve from experience. The practical considerations are difficult enough — there is no place, at least within the United Kingdom — where people can found a community without satisfying the laws of a society with which they almost certainly largely disagree.

There could be I think, solutions. Planners cast a wary eye on rural development where the applicant is applying beyond his own personal requirement, although they will often consider buildings within a farm 'bloc' — and there are possibilities here. Agreement is usually forthcoming, too, to application for a farmworker's cottage. And even if the usual labour-acre ratio these days is around 1:100, I cannot see how the planners can object to six or ten applications for fifty acres, if the farm is to be run on a labour-intensive, self-supporting and organic basis. Obviously, there's much more to it than this, and in particular, the more the proposed dwellings were planned individually to meet ecological ideas (such as Herbert Girardet's Radial House [Vol.4,no.5]), and the more they were spaced to meet overall community considerations, the quicker would the official hackles rise.

But again, I think there are possibilities, with the right people and in the right place, and having regard in advance to bye-laws, services etc. Although it would be hoped that 'services' and much else could be at least in part 'home-grown'. Additional ideas include the very large house, plus cottages and a few acres remaining from a former estate — though I believe large split units inimical to the notion of adaptive community. Which leads to a perhaps more desirable base — an old military, defence ministry, civil service, or work camp — or any old collection of huts, which can form the basis of surprisingly attractive, manageable and alterable dwellings, workshops etc.
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