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Guy Aldred: theorising revolutionary action

Guy Aldred was a communist propagandist, activist and self-styled rebel. Though his extensive writings have barely made a dent in the history of socialist thought, he occasionally crops up in histories of the British labour and syndicalist movements. For a neglected figure, Aldred is unusual because he divides opinion. Rather than being the cause of universal loathing, love or indifference, he has attracted detractors and devoted admirers alike, but instead of raising his profile by arguing about his legacy, both groups have noted only his failure to leave one. In the eyes of the critics, the causes are practical and theoretical. Nicholas Walter suggested that Aldred's weakness was that 'he belonged to no viable organisation'.ⁱ For Shelia Lahr, too, he remained 'on the periphery of working class politics', particularly in his later life. However she also identifies muddiness in his politics. Aldred won 'fame as a well-known Glasgow eccentric, but his ideas became increasingly inconsistent, swinging from left to right and back again, often at the same time'.ⁱⁱ Because of a shared opposition to the Second World War, Aldred worked with the near-fascist Duke of Bedford and, as Mark Shipway notes, later spoke up in support of communist China and East Germany.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet Aldred remains an interesting figure, not just because of the unwavering strength of his commitment to socialism but also because his politics was informed by an extraordinarily rich set of ideas. Preferring to cast himself as an activist rather than a theoretician, Aldred did not appreciate the tensions that existed between some of the ideas he grappled with. This, perhaps, explains some of the organisational difficulties he faced and the sometimes radical shifts in his policy positions.

Aldred was born in 1886 and grew up in London, strongly influenced by his free-thinking and anti-militarist grandfather. However, he spent the greater part of his life in Glasgow, where he died in 1963.^{iv} As a youth he was a boy preacher, enthused by Christian missionary zeal. His religious beliefs were quite unorthodox, however. He denied the existence of God, was indifferent about Jesus's historical existence and interpreted his teachings as a challenge the rightness of established practices and behaviours. Aldred was goldy but not upright. In 1907 he met Rose Witcop with whom he had a stormy affair. Defying social norms they lived together and refused to marry until 1926, long after the collapse of the relationship, in order to prevent Rose's deportation. For both, the experiment in free love reflected a commitment to revolutionary practice and although it was not successful, it pointed to an idea of political transformation that not only reserved an important place for individual action but which also prioritised direct action over institutional politics.^v Neither Aldred nor Witcop supported the suffrage campaign and instead gravitated towards the militant feminism of Dora Marsden, the editor of The Freewoman and New Freewoman.

In terms of the revolutionary politics of the time, Aldred's general rejection of institutional, parliamentary party-politics drew him closer to anarchism than to social democracy but after flirting briefly with both the Social Democratic Federation and the anarchists of the London Freedom group, he refused to align himself with either and from 1907 operated as an independent. That year Aldred founded the Industrial Union of Direct Action. In order to transform the IUDA from a militant trade union organisation into a tool of revolutionary, anti-capitalist action, Aldred established the Communist Propaganda Group the following year. In 1909 he was jailed for sedition, having published The Indian Sociologist, the organ of the Free India Society, which had been suppressed after the assassination of Sir Curson Wylie, political secretary to the Secretary of State for India.^{vi} On

his release he set up the paper The Herald of Revolt which, on the outbreak of war in 1914, took the title the Spur. In 1913 Aldred helped find a base of operation for Glasgow anarchists. In 1920 this group joined with the longer-standing Glasgow Anarchist Group to call themselves the Glasgow Communist Group, outraged by the decision of the Communist Party of Great Britain to participate in parliamentary politics and affiliate with the Labour Party. An Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation followed in 1921, to organise activity city-wide. This split twice in the period leading up to the Second World War; the first resulted in Aldred's departure. In 1934 he founded the United Socialist Movement and a new paper, The Word, though he maintained links with members of the ACPF, notably Jenny Patrick who was Aldred's partner in another 'irregular marriage' and who worked with Ethel MacDonald to provide Aldred with reports of the 1937 Barcelona May Days.^{vii}

As a non-aligned revolutionary socialist, Aldred labelled himself 'communist', following the example of William Morris, one of his heroes. He continued to do so after the Russian Revolution, when the term was appropriated by the Soviet system, even though he denied any correspondence between his view and the new orthodoxy. One of the strongest influences on his socialism was Bakunin, but the communist label suited him better. There were a number of reasons why. First, he thought the anarchists he met in London were a dissolute bunch. Malatesta was the exception and Aldred took an active part in the release campaign that was set up in 1912 to protest Malatesta's arrest and fight his deportation. As Caudwell notes, however, Aldred's general view was that 'the anarchists were too hidebound in their intellectual notions, and this made them ineffectual in action'.^{viii} Second, he did not recognise the traditions of thought that Kropotkin, in particular, tied to anarchism. Kropotkin seemed to Aldred to want to establish the credentials of anarchist thought by recruiting irrelevant, genteel philosophers to the cause. This was particularly true, he argued, of his account of British anarchism. Aldred questioned the identification of 'Locke, the timid, and Godwin, the Whig' as the fathers of anarchism and instead put Richard Carlisle, the early nineteenth-century freethinker, 'whose reward for clear thinking was imprisonment' and Tom Paine, the first to argue that 'the abolition of formal government' was the 'beginning of true association' at its head.^{ix} Godwin, he commented, had no standing in anarchism whatsoever since he was 'but a politician for all practical purposes' and 'a gentleman'.^x

Aldred's disaffection with the casting of anarchism as a system of ideas rather than a principle of action was exacerbated by the idiosyncrasy of his Bakuninism. Aldred described himself as a follower of Marx and a Bakuninist critic of Marxism. This was an oversimplification since his socialism in fact drew on a rich mix of sources and Aldred borrowed freely from William Morris, Darwin's 'bulldog' T.H. Huxley, Kropotkin and Nietzsche, amongst others. The point he wanted to make, though, was that Marx's thought had been distorted by his many followers. The German Social Democrats were largely to blame but the fault was also partly Marx's: his personal vanity and authoritarian desire to dominate European socialism had led to the corruption of his own doctrine. The true inheritors of the Marxist tradition were the anarchists, who understood that Marx's critique of capitalism necessitated a disavowal of the state, rejection of authority and the adoption of a politics of anti-parliamentarism. While the principles Aldred took from Marx were shared by large numbers of anarchists, activists like Kropotkin certainly disputed the theoretical dovetailing that he also claimed.

An important upshot of Aldred's understanding was that he underplayed the distinctive theoretical contribution of anarchism to socialism and to talk up its romantic appeal. Aldred argued: 'Marx

DEFINED the Social Revolution, whilst Bakunin EXPRESSED it. The first stood for the invincible logic of the cause. The second concentrated in his own person its unquenchable spirit. Marx was an impregnable rock of first principles, remorselessly composed of facts ... he was the immovable mountain of the revolution. Bakunin, on the other hand, was the tempest. He symbolised the coming flood'.^{xi}

The division of labour that Aldred imposed on Marx and Bakunin not only formalised the simple dichotomy between theory and action that ran through his critique of anarchism it also helped mask the significance of his own theorising to his political practice. As an activist, Aldred was not interested in wrestling with the philosophical problems that his particular combination of doctrines and principles presented and, in any case, he naturally saw only coherence in his own thought. But by thinking of himself as an anarchist, defining anarchists as activists, and trading theory off against action, he wrongly treated his political ideas as simple motors for action and failed to reflect fully on their tensions and implications.

The two outstanding themes of Aldred's writings are duty and freedom. Aldred was not alone in grappling with these ideas. The relationship between individual freedom and the necessity for collective revolutionary action animated much late nineteenth century socialism and towards the turn of the century debates were focussed on the work of Tolstoy, Nietzsche and Max Stirner. The issues that were thrown up were complex and there were significant theoretical divisions within and between different camps, yet opinions tended to polarise along communist and individualist lines – establishing a fracture that is still visible in contemporary anarchism, becoming increasingly pronounced in recent years. One measure of this was the shift in Dora Marsden's politics. In the period leading up to the First World War, Marsden leaned increasingly towards egoism, defining herself as an anti-anarchist and against those she derided as limp humanitarians and clerico-liberals, people who talked up ideas of sacrifice and duty in the name of abstract causes.

Aldred refused to accept the incompatibility that others saw between individual freedom and social duty. The roots of his understanding might be traced to his early religious commitment and to his celebration of heresy and dissent, on the one hand, and proselytising, crusading service on the other. As a Christian who followed Jesus's teachings, it seemed obvious that the rejection of authority, compassion for the oppressed and the commitment to struggle for justice, even to the point of death, were all aspects of the same, single idea. And as a believer, it seemed equally obvious to Aldred that faith was actually measured by the individual's willingness to practically realise Jesus's teaching. Jesus was both a rebel and agitator who could not remain passive once the rebelliousness of his doctrine was made plain. Nor, then, should his disciples. When Aldred's early Christian enthusiasm gave way to socialism, this profound sense of religious duty remained. Activists and revolutionaries, he argued, were heretics who refused to obey the systems of government that oppressed them and crusaders who worked to destroy the capitalist exploitation that government sustained and supported. In short, they were individuals driven by their sense of moral right to do their duty - to challenge, resist and fight immoral practices and behaviours.

Aldred recognised that his socialism contained a strong moral component and he argued that it was for each heretic and dissenter to decide questions of morality. Moreover, he argued that there was an important difference between individual persuasion and government prohibition. One was freedom, the other was tyranny. In socialist action a similar distinction applied. The idea that

individuals might be corralled by political elites to follow particular policies was abhorrent to Aldred. Genuine socialist struggle was driven solely by the decisions that individuals made about the conduct of their own lives and it could only be advanced by campaigns they decided to support in collaboration with others. Nevertheless, by conflating his political theory with his commitment to action, Aldred advanced an agenda for moral change and incorporated into this agenda a set of basic principles that he considered fundamental to socialist transformation as if these were uncomplicated. When these principles conflicted, he responded rebelliously, following one course of action rather than another by considering the impulsion to action. In the case of the 1909 sedition trial, for example, he published the banned Indian Sociologist only to defy the order of suppression, not because he supported the Indian nationalist cause or because he condoned political assassination. On the contrary, as Caldwell notes,ⁱ he did not believe in political assassination and opposed the Statism [that nationalism] implied'.^{xii} Defending free speech was also an ideal, but it took priority as an action, notwithstanding the thrust of his own theoretical commitments. Equally, where his commitment to action ran counter to those he tried to work with, the result was policy disagreement and ultimately factionalism.

Aldred, then, was not an easy man to get along with and though he did not lack organisational skill, he found co-operation difficult. The pleasure he took in the pun of his name – 'the man they all dread' – was indicative of the problem. His evangelical roots make his work an acquired taste: Aldred writes with moral certainty and conviction that leaves little room for debate. Nonetheless, many of the judgements he made in his early life were revolutionary, libertarian and anarchistic. He campaigned against marriage and for birth control in support of women's liberation before the First World War; he encouraged conscientious objection in both world conflicts and publicised the vindictive abuse that COs suffered for taking their stance. In all his early writings, he elevated the struggles of common people – from religious non-conformists to convicts – and this helped him open up the anarchist canon to influences beyond philosophy. In his early life he consistently opposed the dogmatism of orthodox Marxism, whether it was expressed in the theoretical pieties of the European social democratic movement or, after the Russian Revolution, in the cold, physical brutality of the Stalinist regime. And not only did he refuse to give up his service for the cause, he injected socialism with principles of freethinking to espouse an attractively libertarian creed. His political thought was based on ideas of individual rebellion and the struggle for common goals which anticipated notions of personal liberation and anti-capitalist action that continue to resonate in contemporary radical politics and which find real strength in their combination. Yet by introducing a simple division between theory and action, he reserved little room for reflection and denied himself the space to resolve the practical, organisational difficulties that his political theory created.

ⁱ Nicholas Walter, 'Guy A. Aldred (1886-1963), The Raven, 1 (1) 1986, p. 82.

ⁱⁱ S. Lahr, review of John Taylor Caldwell, Come Dungeons Dark: The Life and Times of Guy Aldred, Glasgow Anarchist <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backiss/vol2/no1/caldwell.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ M. Shipway, 'History of the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation', in J.T. Calwell and M. Shipway An Introduction to Guy Alfred Aldred and the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation (Hobnail Press, 2006), p. 8.

^{iv} For an account of Aldred's life, see John Taylor Caldwell, Come Dungeons Dark: The Life and Times of Guy Aldred, Glasgow Anarchist (Barr, Ayrshire: Luath Press Ltd., 1988).

^v The relationship is discussed by Ginger Frost in 'love is always free': anarchism, free unions, and utopianism in Edwardian England', Anarchist Studies, 17 (1), 73-94.

^{vi} See Guy Aldred, ed. Rex v. Aldred, London Trial, 1909, India Sedition Glasgow Sedition Trial, 1921 (Glasgow: Strickland Press, 1948).

^{vii} John Taylor Caldwell, 'Guy Aldred and the background to the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation', in J.T. Calwell and M. Shipway An Introduction (Hobnail Press, 2006), pp. 2-4; Rhona M. Hodgart, Ethel MacDonald Glasgow Woman Anarchist (London/Berkely, CA.: Kate Sharpley Press, 2nd edn. 2003).

^{viii} Caldwell, Come Dungeons Dark, p. 108.

^{ix} Aldred, Studies in Communism, in Essays in Revolt, p. 33.

^x Aldred, Socialism and Parliament part 1, in Essays in Revolt, vol. 2, p. 47.

^{xi} Guy Aldred, Bakunin in Essays in Revolt vol. II, p. 46.

^{xii} Caldwell, Come Dungeons Dark, p. 95.