

## John Anderson and the Syndicalist Moment

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Who was John Anderson? Challis Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney from 1927 to 1958, Anderson was arguably one of the most influential of local intellectuals in modern Australian history. Yet he wrote little: no single book; he lectured and persuaded at a time when the University on the hill was small and even more exclusive than it now is. An oral tradition, perhaps, more than a written one, Anderson's work has attracted much gossip but little analysis: one major critical exegesis, by Jim Baker, and a lone, forthcoming biography by Brian Kennedy.<sup>1</sup> Andersonianism these days is identified vaguely as a kind of libertarian current which—it is typically assumed became naturally right-wing during the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> If Anderson's Marxism is acknowledged, in conversation, it is in that patronising strain of Marxism-as-measles, if you're not a socialist before thirty you've no heart, if you are after thirty you've no head. What I want to suggest is that a certain crimson thread runs through Anderson's thinking, a logic of a peculiar kind which is in its genesis caught up with the syndicalist moment. Marxian without being Marxist, in a sense, it often beckons the thinking of Sorel, for it speaks of the ethics of the producers and takes up a position against servility as the central social ill.

Syndicalism obviously had enormous appeal throughout the west not least of all to those with white hands and scarlet fantasies. It is no exaggeration to speak with Christopher Lasch in *The True and Only Heaven* of a syndicalist moment, when parliament was widely discredited even though it had hardly been tried out, when the Wobblies reigned supreme in socialist circles, when Lenin dreamed of a syndicalist utopia in *State and Revolution* and all and sundry—Sorel included—waxed lyrical for the Bolsheviks because they took them also to be syndicalists. Gramsci, Korsch, Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky all experienced working class spontaneous action and dreamed of more; Mussolini and others shared their dreams, or at least some of them. This was the moment of the deed, when fascism too, we need remember, was a radical movement, committed to the deed and to direct action. Some of these influences were also apparent in the antipodes.

Donald Horne gives a nice sense both of later context and of content in what is arguably his finest book, *The Education of Young Donald*. During the years of the second

\* With thanks to Kenneth Smith and the archivists of the University of Sydney, to Peter Murphy, Brian Kennedy and Alastair Davidson.

<sup>1</sup> See generally J. Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson 1974).

<sup>2</sup> J. Baker, *Anderson's Social Philosophy. The Social Thought and Political Life of Professor John Anderson* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1979); B. Kennedy, forthcoming. And see Baker's *Australian Realism. The Systematic Philosophy of John Anderson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

war as earlier Anderson found himself embroiled in controversy, not least of all because of his enthusiasm for James Joyce and Freud. Anderson was conspicuously the first real intellectual the young Donald had come across: he would not stand for the royal anthem, was to be heard encouraging free thinking, denouncing Wordsworth as drivel and introducing this peculiar language, where the ethics of the producer were to be celebrated over those of the consumer.<sup>3</sup> But more than that, Anderson dared to question the idea of progress, puzzled over the idea of humanism, denied that there was a centre to things, nagged against planning, social engineering and social amelioration. Against these forces were to be pitted the heroes, the producers—scientists, artists and workers.<sup>4</sup> In raising these issues Anderson thus played the role of the outsider, the oppositionist, the whistle blower; and while the logic of some of his arguments may be viewed as conservative, his inflection was always radical.

## I

What then was the content of Anderson's social and political theory? He never spelled this out. Unlike, say, G.D.H. Cole, also a youthful syndicalist, he wrote no book entitled *Social Theory*. The best published encapsulation of his views for our purposes is in his brilliant essay of 1943, 'The Servile State'. Anderson did not share the romanticism, nor the harmonism of Hilaire Belloc's 1912 text: but he did view it as an anticipation of later events. By the 1940s, Anderson claimed, the danger of regimentation had increased enormously.<sup>5</sup> But if Anderson understood that Belloc's hopes were, technically speaking, reactionary, he also knew well enough to identify Belloc as a radical. Indeed, as he observed, Belloc mirrored Marx in his sense that the perniciousness of modernity consisted in its division of humanity into those who possessed property and those who did not. More like Proudhon, though, Belloc sought to return the proletariat to small holdings; only this would overcome the condition of servility. 'Wage slavery', Anderson suggests, might be an inaccurate description of labour today, yet it also captures something of the problem. The larger problem, however, concerns the way in which the modern labour movement has become prepared to trade away freedom in return for the promise of security.<sup>6</sup>

Anderson inveighs against the idea that subsistence is prior to culture: he agrees, that is to say, with those radicals from Cole to Pateman for whom the real problem is not poverty but slavery.<sup>7</sup> Yet the new servility anticipated in the Welfare State is something which the labour movement aspires to. Now enters his second. Anderson introduces Sorel as authority for the claim that the servile mentality, that of the consumer, emphasising ends, things to be secured, is servile to that of the producer, emphasising activity, a way of life, a morality. The working class is noble because it has the scope to develop the productive spirit, an attitude which can only be retarded by proprietary sentiments.<sup>8</sup> This is a fascinating argument. Earlier, while a self-proclaimed Marxist, Anderson rejected social service as

<sup>3</sup> D. Horne, *The Education of Young Donald* (Melbourne: Sun, 1968) pp.204–6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.214, p.221.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, 'The Servile State', reprinted in *Studies in Empirical Philosophy* (Sydney, Angus and Robertson 1962), p.328.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp.328–9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.330; cf. C. Pateman *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1970), *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.331.

social control. Now, in 'The Servile State' it becomes more readily apparent that the problem with social service is that it seeks to bind Prometheus. Anderson wants to define the working class as an actor, not an other. There can be no stability, no social security, no world without risk, no end to history, no return to harmony. To take socialism as an end is already, for Anderson, to succumb to the outlook of servility.<sup>9</sup>

More, into the forties servility is identified as a widespread economic and political tendency. All states which suppress political opposition, and thus all independent enterprise are servile. Here Anderson can be taken to mean by enterprise what today would be associated with the sphere of civil society, rather than market or state. Certainly this sensibility resonates through Anderson's use of the ethic of the producer, which covers roughly the realm not of production, in the economic sense, but of creation. As young Donald was given to understand, the producers were not the proletarians but the scientists, artists and workers. These actors fought for positive rather than negative freedom. Fixation upon freedom 'from' led to the social service, to the servile state.<sup>10</sup>

Anderson thus posits the elements of a sociology of labourism. Planning can, for him, only take the form of the subordination of social life to particular interests. The labour movement has become the standard bearer of these trends: in the name of emancipation, it works steadily toward slavery.<sup>11</sup> The echoes here are deafening, not least of all when Anderson turns his attention to education. As Baker shows, Anderson was a critic of Dawkins *avant la lettre*; the pox he traces to the Utilitarian planners, and back to the Murray Report.<sup>12</sup> There is, in short, for Anderson, a direct opposition between practice and criticism. Any, even attempted subordination of study to other purposes is an attack on study itself; and the principal anti-theoretical attitude at the present time is meliorism, the setting up of betterment as the guide to the conduct of social theory and practice. The student of society should be encouraged not to reform, but to oppose. Servility indicates a failure in responsibility, for it demonstrates a desire to be relieved of troublesome problems. Labourism, in consequence, could only be redeemed if it were oppositional. The name for this kind of Socialism in power, by contrast, was *rationalisation*.<sup>13</sup>

## II

Anderson set out opposing all monological principles, yet espousing Marxism; he ended up attacking communism as the single most dangerous trend. Was he not then drifting into the position indicated by Hayek? Anderson nowhere to my knowledge discusses Hayek, this notwithstanding the local promotion of *The Road to Serfdom* especially in Sydney, where Dymock's published a cheap local edition in 1944.<sup>14</sup> In order to sense the difference we need to cast back to Anderson's Marxist days. The younger Anderson had a position which

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.332.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.333–4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.335.

<sup>12</sup> Baker, *Anderson's Social Philosophy*, chs. 10–11, and see 'Classicism', chap. 17 in *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Servile State', p.336–7, 338, 339; 'The Applecart', in *Art and Reality. John Anderson on Literature and Aesthetics*, J. Anderson, G. Cullum, K. Lycos (eds), (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1982) p.124.

<sup>14</sup> F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Sydney: Dymocks's, 1944).

Louis Althusser would have envied: he was formally designated Theoretical Adviser to the Communist Party until they fell out, significantly, over a dispute concerning censorship.<sup>15</sup>

Anderson's Marxism is clearly explained in an unpublished lecture entitled 'The Working Class', circa 1932. Like his predecessor, Francis Anderson, John Anderson was a product of the theoretical culture of Glasgow idealism. His father Alexander was a socialist headmaster and his brother William, Professor of Philosophy in Auckland from 1921 to 1955 identified with the cause of guild socialism.<sup>16</sup> If Anderson was a pluralist before the thirties, he suppressed this sensibility in order to embrace Marxism. In 'The Working Class' he poses the analytical-political choice: classes, or groups. In either case, he will not start from individuals:

Social theory does not begin until we recognise that society is not a resultant of the 'wills' of individuals, or a field in which good will and ill will are exercised, but is a *thing* exhibiting definite characteristics, acting in specific ways under specific conditions.<sup>17</sup>

Anderson always rejected solidarism, any version of the idea that society represented a single will or purpose or harmony. In his Marxist phase, he proposes that class theory is opposed to solidarism, a position he was later to reject. What was vital now, he argued, was for the militant workers to reject philanthropy and the ethic of altruism.<sup>18</sup> The working class was held down by the State, by claims concerning goodwill, duty and the necessity of one's station. Socialisation, for Anderson, was to be rejected because it was a scheme and not a program of action; rather than being an activity to be undertaken in existing conditions it was posited from above, as a result to be arrived at.<sup>19</sup> Anderson does not here use the language, but the point is Sorel's: the program of socialisation is a utopia, not a myth, a planner's fantasy and not a producers' ethic. Socialisation, that is to say, is to be done to or for workers and not by them; it is a distributive and therefore a *consumptive* theory, neglecting the class war.<sup>20</sup>

At this point, it becomes possible to offer a provisional explanation of Anderson's life-long connection to the syndicalist moment. Anderson is always opposed to reformism, only he ceases to be a revolutionary. Like Sorel, he rejects political socialism, preferring local activity. Into the forties he substitutes pluralism for Marxism, contingency for revolution; as Baker explains, he adheres to the idea of the producers' ethic, but lets go the sense that it is the labour movement which is the bearer of this ethic.<sup>21</sup> In 'The Working Class' Anderson thinks like Trotsky: he ascribes the producers' ethic to the working class, and the consumers' ethic to the bourgeoisie and its philanthropic lackeys.<sup>22</sup> Thus he momentarily defends Soviet planning, defends classes against groups, the right to strike against arbitration, portrays the producers as globally bound together in their struggle against the acquisitive consumers.<sup>23</sup> And thus he attacks the ALP not as utilitarian but as capitalist,

<sup>15</sup> Baker, *Anderson's Social Philosophy*, p.80.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.79.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, 'The Working Class', n.d. c. 1932, Anderson Papers, University of Sydney Archives, P 42/5, pp.1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.4, p.2. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.6.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.6.

<sup>21</sup> Baker, p.67; *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, p.187.

<sup>22</sup> 'The Working Class', p.9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.10, p.12, p.14-15.

arguing Marx-like that the real intellectuals must choose and must choose the producers.<sup>24</sup> Plainly Anderson for that moment endorses an heroic conception of the proletariat.

Anderson offers these views in more of a transitional form in a 1936 lecture on 'Social Service'. By the mid thirties Anderson had become a Trotskyist, of course, because he was an oppositionist. But then he also took sides with the dissidents among the Trotskyists, with intellectuals like Sidney Hook and Max Eastman, with whom he had direct contact in his only trip out of Australia, in 1938. Anderson's views on social service were primarily directed against that now most worn of victim groups—social workers. Philanthropy he decried; social workers lived in its pall, as did kindred Stalinist bureaucrats. No jokes about light bulbs here—for Anderson the issue is grave, as social workers take up the attitude of the consumer, and here again Sorel is the tag. The logic of the consumer is that of decadent capitalism. So here he argues Nietzsche-like, using Sorel's *Reflections* and *La Ruine du Monde antique* against Christianity as consumptive.<sup>25</sup> 'The main point is that social service is directed against unrest and for the maintenance of the existing order, against the independent order of the persons supposed to be benefited and for their continued subservience to the propertied class'.<sup>26</sup>

The Marxist Anderson thus glosses over the nuances of his later view that the proletarian condition is not slavery, just as he is wont to insist that the State has no role other than negative. In later lectures on an only apparently bizarre couple—Bernard Bosanquet and Lenin—Anderson proceeds to analyse these concerns with more care. Here we sense the increasing presence of Freud. Anderson began these 1942 lectures on political theory with the suggestion that social engineering arguments, which viewed politics as the theory of policies, mistakenly presume that we know ourselves and that we know what we are doing. In actuality, however, 'people only to a limited extent know what they are doing, [they] are moved by forces which they may not understand at all'.<sup>27</sup> Marx and Freud together, for Anderson, provide the insight that there is much about us which we *do not know* and that we can be *wrong* about our activities.<sup>28</sup> In various places through his writing he sympathises with Croce's sense that we can achieve progress, but reaction is always around the corner.

Theory and policy may thus be bound up, but they are not the same thing, and in this Anderson anticipates his increasing distance from the Marx of the *Theses on Feuerbach*. Here he identifies the similarities between Bosanquet and Lenin: they are both solidarists. Parliament, however, is now important for Anderson, partly because of its basis in argument.<sup>29</sup> Socialism, if it exists, makes sense only as process—'if the working class movement attacks capitalist democracy it may be said to be undermining itself (as it has done), if it destroys capitalism it may be destroying its own freedom'.<sup>30</sup> Bolshevism is servile. Marxism shows its residual idealism in its conception of a final condition, but there

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.16.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson, 'Social Service', *Freethought*, May 1936, p.5. (Sydney Archives, P42/10).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.6.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, 'Political Theory', Sydney Archives P42/1, pp.3-4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.51.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.54.

is no total solution.<sup>31</sup> The premise is expanded, coincidentally, in a 1955 lecture on Greek theories of education:

if we are really to recognise multiplicity, an irreducible variety of things and an irreducible variety of characters of any given thing, then we have to abandon the Socratic conception of harmony, the view that the characters of a thing somehow together make up *one* character, with the corresponding view that things in general somehow make up one thing.<sup>32</sup>

Anderson plainly rejected notions of harmony or totality. What then of his relation to Marx? The major published papers on Marx are not especially edifying: they address the Marx/Engels issue, and puzzle through epistemology, defend the idea of activity in the early Marx, introduce Sorel as a leaven, arguing that the factory instils a kind of disinterested activity which assimilates the worker to the scientist, the artist, the warrior. Sorel follows Proudhon, the French syndicalists and Marx in elevating production over consumption.<sup>33</sup> Among his unpublished papers, there is a condensed series of reflections on Marxism apparently taught in the 1940 Distinction course. What is most striking about these notes is that Anderson evidently both understood the importance of the *Theses on Feuerbach* and was able to identify their flaws. It is the sense of activity in the *Theses* which attracts Anderson: in the first thesis, for example, the significance of developing the active side against the vacantly contemplative mood of traditional philosophy.<sup>34</sup> Yet he also stresses the difference between policy and theory; theory is not politics, even if it is political. Thus the idea of transformative activity attracts: Anderson reads Marx, so to speak, as Sorel, but the exhaustive notion of philosophy as practical repels. Indeed, Anderson refers to Thesis Eleven as the 'last thesis', which may in fact be an appropriate obituary.<sup>35</sup> When it comes to the metaphysics regarding the expropriators, Marx simply departs from social science. For Anderson, history is better described in terms of social movements and their activities. The problem with Marx's Hegelianism is that it leads him away from this kind of historicism. Anderson would not have known of Marx's answer to the Victorian questionnaire which requested his strongest dislike but he would have agreed with his answer: servility.

Yet if Anderson never quite became a conservative, nor did he return to the ethical idealism which was Glasgow. In 1941 he gave a series of lectures on T.H. Green's *Principles of Political Obligation* which make this clear. He refers inter alia to Hobhouse's *Metaphysical Theory of the State*, a sure sign of distance from Hegelian thinking.<sup>36</sup> The State is not the representative of the general interest, but is itself a particular interest. Green, he charges, takes orderliness as the essence of goodness, failing to realise that the question is not one of order versus disorder but of different kinds of order. Green is a solidarist, and therefore a quietist: he presumes rebellion to be evil, because of the ideal of consistency. Against Green, Anderson's claim is that

If we can say that goodness is never *established* in a recognised order but is one tendency having to fight for survival (the good life lived in opposition to *the world*),

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.55.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson, 'Greek Theories on Education, #2', Sydney Archives, P42/1, p.20.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, 'Marxist Ethics' (1937), *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, pp.325-7.

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, 'The Nature of Mental Science', Sydney Archives, P42/1, p.22.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.25.

<sup>36</sup> Anderson, 'Lectures on Green's Principles of Political Obligation', Sydney Archives, P42/1, p.1.

we have the important point that the opposing forces will be represented in the government just as much as the goods themselves.<sup>37</sup>

The logic of pluralism indicated that even within any particular institution different organisational principles would compete with each other. For Anderson, the division of civil society into different groups offers a latent theory of subsystems. Different rules can regulate each subsystem with no common rules for the whole system. Against this,

the individualistic point of view is connected with a society in which there has been a considerable loss of freedom ... it substitutes an imaginary freedom in the form of abstract citizenship for a real freedom in the form of devotion to particular causes.<sup>38</sup>

Society had no centre, which was as it should be.

### III

Did Anderson then reject his earlier thinking in order to become a cold warrior? The image of cold warrior is arguably misplaced. Anderson's sense was that communism became public enemy number one. Free thought indicated that the only defensible intellectual attitude was critical suspicion toward all current superstition, all systems of consolation, protection or salvation. By 1949 Anderson supported Chifley in the Coal Strike, opposing the ban on the CPA but himself repudiating communism. He refused to allow the Freethought Society to hear the NO Case against the ban.<sup>39</sup> Baker suggests that this be explained as a 'hardening of the categories'.<sup>40</sup> The problem seems rather to consist in closing lines of vision.

Anderson's earlier world seemed open. His favourites were Cézanne and Mozart; he admired Orage and Melville, even Kenneth Grahame, more predictably Dostoyevsky. He was a devastating critic of Fabian utopians such as Shaw and Wells.<sup>41</sup> His collected educational writings make up a volume in their own right.<sup>42</sup> How could it be that he became transfixed upon communism? The capitalism of his own time was evidently less rapacious in its claims than it is in the era of economic rationalism. Anderson saw socialism as oppositional, as compromised by its own advocacy. Even late in his life—as late as 1960—he admired Guild Socialism as presenting the view of craft, or the producer in society.<sup>43</sup> Easily, too easily had he set upon the notion of a producers' ethic. The narrowing of his later view is in one sense already implicit in this earlier insistence. As has been seen, Anderson did not restrict the idea to the proletariat; the motivating motif was activity rather than production in the workerist or syndicalist sense.

Today we would say that the metaphor cannot stretch; if by production is meant creation, then we ought speak of creation. Anderson evidently rejected the notion of empty activity, action and order almost for its own sake as enthused for example by Shaw.<sup>44</sup> But he was closer to Cole, with his identification of the human as producer-creator, than to the

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.10; p.8.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.38; p.15.

<sup>39</sup> Baker, p.128.

<sup>40</sup> Baker, p.145.

<sup>41</sup> See the essays collected together in *Art and Reality*.

<sup>42</sup> See D.Z. Phillips ed., *Education and Inquiry: John Anderson* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

<sup>43</sup> Anderson, 'Orange and the New Age Circle', in *Art and Reality*, p.242.

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, 'The Perfect Wagnerite', in *Art and Reality*, p.135, cf. Beilharz, *Labour's Utopias* (London: Routledge, 1992) chap. 3.

Webbs, who attempted to adjust for difference by speaking of humans as simultaneously producers, consumers and citizens.<sup>45</sup> Anderson does not seem adequately to have entertained the possibility that the syndicalist anthropology was either too narrow, masculinist or premodern. His argument is thus too readily vulnerable to the reading that societies are based on some kind of struggle between the two organisational principles of production and consumption. Thus he wrote in his essay on 'Marxist Ethics' (1937) that the 'truth of the 'economic interpretation' is that society is production, and that consumption is only incidental to its history'.<sup>46</sup>

If we step outside of the circle of his own reasoning, it then becomes possible to question the questioner himself. Anderson seems to associate servitude, servility and service. He plays on the manifold unsavoury connotations of consumption in ways that would have done both Ruskin and Marcuse proud. But even Ruskin, who made so much of the ambiguity in words like 'possession', had more nuanced sensibilities about consumption. The sense that consumption was also a determinant of production was elaborated by Beatrice Webb, in her argument that demand for cheap goods called out sweatshop labour conditions.<sup>47</sup> In our own times, many would argue that the sources of human identity have become even more pluralised and diverse, and certainly some—not only postmodernists—would choose to identify consumption as a positive process. The figure of the *flâneur* is no longer lonely, these days; it is less controversial than it once was both to criticise shopping malls and to stroll in them. To modify Bakunin somewhat, the urge to consume can also be a productive act; and somewhat like the firm distinction between mental and manual labour, it may be less than clear precisely what the defining line between production and consumption actually is.

Some of the echoes from the syndicalist moment may thus be hard to hear, today, for the muzak and the squabbling of children. There are other parts of Anderson's voice which are also hard to hear, or to sympathise with. The most obvious of these is arguably Anderson's contempt for the idea of welfare. Anderson's perspective is awkward: he is the secure person taking risks, advocating from the quad that we all live dangerously. One echo here is in the hard distinction suggested by Hannah Arendt, between politics proper and the social question. Arendt's penetrating but frightening view was that the interference of the social into the political meant the end of politics.<sup>48</sup> While the argument stings, it is nevertheless somehow difficult to say that it is of this world. Like the ethic of the producers, the purity of politics is gone, like the small, independent university which Anderson knew. Citizens know that they are limited and constrained in their capacity to be active by the limits of the life-chances into which they are born. Anderson knew that humans were interrelated in the beginning; and he did by example serve. It may simply be that the choices are less stark than he imagined. If he was a pragmatist, it may perhaps then be said that he was not, finally, pragmatist enough. Anderson in one place speaks about the desire for unity and the need to recognise and face absolute insecurity.<sup>49</sup> The choice is too stark: it would surely be more apt to advocate the recognition of contingency. If history is

<sup>45</sup> See for example Cole, *Guild Socialism Re-Stated* (London: Parsons, 1920); B. and S. Webb *A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain* (London: Longmans, 1920).

<sup>46</sup> 'Marxist Ethics', in *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, p.327.

<sup>47</sup> See Beilharz, *Labour's Utopias*, p.73.

<sup>48</sup> H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958).

<sup>49</sup> 'Political Theory', pp.17–18.

activity in context, then the servile state remains one force among others: if there is, as Anderson thought, no final result, then the future remains more open than he, or the syndicalist moment, could allow. As Sorel would have it, the struggle is more important than victory. Not the arrival, but the journey matters.