

Interview with Anthony Burgess in The New Yorker

Anthony Burgess

1973

1 A duty to distrust the state

We probably have no duty to like Beethoven or hate Coca-Cola, but it is at least conceivable that we have a duty to distrust the state. Thoreau wrote of the duty of civil disobedience; Whitman said, "Resist much, obey little." With those liberals, and with many others, disobedience is a good thing in itself. In small social entities – English parishes, Swiss cantons – the machine that governs can sometimes be identified with the community that is governed. But when the social entity grows large, becomes a megapolis, a state, a federation, the governing machine becomes remote, impersonal, even inhuman. It takes more from us for purposes we do not seem to sanction; it treats us as abstract statistics; it controls an army; it supports a police force whose function does not always appear to be protective.

This, of course, is a generalization that may be regarded as prejudiced nonsense. I personally do not trust politicians or statesmen – very few writers and artists do – and consider that men enter politics for the negative reason that they have little talent for anything else and the positive reason that power is always delicious. Against this must be set the truth that government makes healthful laws to protect the community and, in the great international world, can be the voice of our traditions and aspirations. But the fact remains that, in our own century, the state has been responsible for most of our nightmares.