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0521024765 - The Social and Political Thought of Bertrand Russell: The Development of an Aristocratic Liberalism

Philip Ironside

Excerpt

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Introduction

Bertrand Russell was a late-Victorian/Edwardian intellectual whose longevity, productivity, and occasional notoriety have set him apart from even the most durable of his contemporaries. However, while it is perhaps appropriate that someone who first achieved prominence as a mathematician should enjoy a career of such statistical extravagance, it is – given the nature of Russell’s philosophical enterprise – somewhat inappropriate (if understandable) that so much of his work has been more often summarised than analysed. Russell’s contributions to philosophy are the exception; carefully examined within a limited context – namely that of the history of the subject – they have been (largely in accord with his own wishes) effectively quarantined from his other writing. Most of the non-philosophical output can be incorporated under the heading ‘Russell’s social and political thought’, a term which includes all gradations from political philosophy to popular journalism; yet even the most substantial of these works have not been included in the political philosophy ‘canon’: students travelling from Rousseau to Rawls rarely encounter Russell. Not thought weighty enough to warrant close analysis, these books are thus excluded from the context of ‘subject’ and, within the more general context of Russell’s own career, are often used merely to signpost seventy years of remorseless productivity.

Aside from all else, Russell’s philosophy and his social and political thought differ on one fundamental point, namely, that the former aspired to be ‘scientific’ whereas the latter was unmistakably ideological. Thus, even though Russell’s philosophical pursuit of truth took place within an established intellectual tradition, the substance of this work is largely independent of its wider cultural background. His social and political thought on the other hand, though it has often been read as if it enjoyed a similarly independent existence, appears insubstantial when abstracted from its context.

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A book which does make some attempt to set Russell in context is Alan Ryan's *Bertrand Russell: A Political Life*. Yet while this is clearly the most satisfactory treatment to date of the social and political thought, Ryan – though an extremely sympathetic reader – seems hard-pressed to find in Russell's theoretical writing passages of sufficient interest to merit the kind of close attention routinely devoted to – for example – the ostensibly similar work of Mill. Even in the case of *Principles of Social Reconstruction* which he acknowledges to be 'the most sustained and original political writing in all Russell's enormous output',¹ its main points are summed up in half a dozen pages. Part of the reason for this is that Ryan covers the whole career in a little over 200 pages, producing a survey in which – perhaps inevitably – the 'summary' approach still dominates. Russell's resistance to abstraction does, however, play a part, for although Ryan provides in the 'little histories' which begin each of his chapters a background to the successive stages of Russell's political life, there is little indication that he regards the intellectual context as being central to an understanding of the work itself.

To a limited extent, of course, it is not. Russell's ideas are in the main uncomplicated, his prose exceptionally clear, and if we add to this the fact that in his *Autobiography* he supplied an influential commentary on his own career, we have what appears to be a collection of texts which is both self-contained and extremely readable. Yet precisely because Russell's social thought has so often been read as if it were entirely self-contained and self-explanatory, it no longer seems grounded in the experience of a late-Victorian/Edwardian intellectual. As he repeated and revised his ideas from the 1890s to the 1960s the original intellectual influences were gradually sloughed off, if not by Russell himself then by a readership looking for what was relevant or by commentators concerned with what was significant, and we are left with a body of work which has acquired a spurious modernity. In short, though Russell is – unlike most of his contemporaries – still widely read, he is not read as they are when they *are* read, that is, in the context of their own time. Vigorously productive and famous long after most of them were forgotten, he seems no longer part of their world.

The irony here is that in early middle age Russell, rather like his exact contemporary Max Beerbohm, was seen as being prematurely old, slightly archaic in dress and manner, and stranded in the past at precisely the point at which, according to Virginia Woolf, 'human

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character changed² and the modern world began. Yet while Max Beerbohm was by 1910 safely mothballed in Rapallo, Russell eluded the confines of intellectual periodisation and assumed an air of permanent contemporaneity which has been hard to dispel. It must be stressed, however, that he *was* a late-Victorian/Edwardian figure and as such his social thought issues out of an intellectual and cultural background which is, if not particularly remote, then certainly of an unusual complexity. That Russell's writing on social and cultural matters has become 'distanced' from its origins is in part due to his being the most famous of English philosophers, for these books have retained their interest as his most accessible work and continue to reappear in a fresh guise almost annually. By way of contrast we might consider the fate of the somewhat similar offerings of Graham Wallas which are usually to be found frankly exhibiting their age, their Edwardian aura shabby but intact.

The autobiographical 'screen' Russell erected in the late sixties also had a distancing effect, for though revelatory rather than Millian, the *Autobiography* is nonetheless a notably seductive text which has been allowed to set the boundaries of any investigation of 'background'.³ While Russell carefully documents his private life and philosophical influences, his social thought tends to receive only casual mention as interesting examples of spontaneous creation. That it is presented as being both ahistorical and marginal can be ascribed to Russell's habit of withdrawing his approval – he was usually ambitious for the work in prospect, but had little time for it in retrospect. His stance was, in essence, defensive – always slightly embarrassed that having been deprived of an academic career he was compelled to write for money, he was prone to dismiss these books as 'pot-boilers'. We should also take into account Russell's sensitivity with regard to his place in history – he had no wish to be remembered for 'Brains Trust' deliberations after the manner of Cyril Joad, and thus sought to isolate his technical philosophy from his 'lesser' creations. Given this concern for his 'professional' reputation, it is not altogether surprising that Russell's social thought should be of uncertain background, widely regarded as an unfavoured, barely acknowledged by-blow or at best the intellectual poor relation of his philosophy – my purpose here, however, is not to make claims on its behalf, but rather to consider the particular circumstances of its conception.

The aim of this book is to restore Bertrand Russell's social and political thought to its intellectual and cultural context, to trace its

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often complicated development, and at the same time to provide an explanation of just why he came to hold the views he did, particularly those which were seemingly at odds with his ostensible Liberalism. In bare outline, Russell's political development can be seen as one of steady 'progress' from the kind of radicalism which allowed principled support for the Boer War to the kind which provided principled opposition to American intervention in Vietnam. When considered in detail, however, Russell's political 'progress' is shown to be a reluctant and tortuous process which went against the grain of his essentially aristocratic Liberalism.⁴ His Liberalism was aristocratic in that he was concerned above all with the role in society of the exceptional individual. For Russell the continued existence of that which he valued in Western civilisation was largely dependent on the ability of exceptional individuals to function as a clerisy – to, in other words, protect, provide, and perpetuate an acceptable culture. He was less interested in questions of material prosperity and economic justice, partly because he had a certain distaste for the kind of abundance which would allow the whims of the ordinary to be indulged, but mainly because he believed the advocates of economic growth to be sufficiently numerous as to make such material abundance inevitable. In Russell's view this inexorable progress towards an achieved 'utopia' would, if over the same period the clerisy culture was extirpated, result in an intellectually stagnant society mired in a complacent and ultimately tedious materialism. The difficult and not entirely selfless task of the intellectual elite, therefore, was to inspire discontent with the mediocre and to promote if not exactly the 'life of the mind' then the notion that those who lived it should be highly valued.

While Russell's Liberalism was aristocratic in content, it was traditional in its intellectual and emotional loyalties and, in the cause of self-preservation, strategically inventive. In politics Russell liked to style himself an English Whig, and it was this Whiggish suspicion of the state which both prevented his endorsement of reforms offered by the Fabians and the New Liberals, and ensured his support for Syndicalist agitation and the weak-state theories of the Guild Socialists. Thus by the time he came to publish *Principles of Social Reconstruction* in 1916 his traditionalism, while unrelinquished, had ceased to be a disagreeable exercise in foot-dragging, allowing instead political alignment with the young radical intelligentsia. Yet whether Russell was busy allying himself with Bloomsbury intellectuals or taking a sympathetic interest in Fabianism, imperialism, eugenics, Guild Socialism, or Wellsian

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utopianism, his work maintained an underlying consistency of purpose, namely, the preservation of certain Liberal values in what he took to be an inimical political environment.

Though Russell found the political culture of the twentieth century generally unappealing, he nonetheless thought the strictly cultural questions to be of more immediate importance than were the strictly political, largely because the intellectual elite or ‘clerisy’ appeared more clearly under threat of extinction than was majoritarian government. Always a democrat with elitist preferences, Russell sought ways to ensure that democracy produced a culture of which he could approve. Like Mill, Russell took the view that ‘a good society’ was one which placed a high value on individuality, encouraged creativity, and tolerated eccentricity. Yet whereas Russell’s ideal was probably Elizabethan England minus a few of its more exuberant barbarities, it is difficult to imagine Mill feeling at home in even a sanitised sixteenth century. Thus, while Russell pursues themes in his work which seem unmistakably Millian, his elaboration of such themes is unmistakably Russellian, and it is the analysis of these aristocratic peculiarities which forms the substance of this book. Offered as an essay in intellectual history, it is written in the belief that a clarification of Russell’s convictions, influences, and intentions provides the basis for a new interpretation of texts which have too often been read as rather idiosyncratic contributions to political philosophy. When read as the work of an Edwardian literary intellectual, the allusive detail attains a new significance and Russell’s thought emerges as being more anachronistic than it has appeared and more interesting than it has seemed when made to do duty as something other than contemporary cultural criticism.

The period examined is that in which he produced his most notable work in this area – a period bounded by *German Social Democracy*, written not long after he graduated from Cambridge, and *Power*, published as he left England to pursue an academic career in the United States at the age of sixty-six. These years saw the completion of his development as a distinctively *English* thinker, a development which can in some respects be characterised as a gradual approach to, then gradual departure from, those ideas contained in *Principles of Social Reconstruction*. His writing is treated chronologically, from his ‘Fabian’ episode in the 1890s through to the utopian and dystopian work of the 1920s and 1930s. These later texts are seen as being essentially Wellsian and therefore best understood as a product of Edwardian rationalism. Indeed, it is argued that Russell’s most significant writing – irrespective

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of whether it stresses the creative/romantic or the scientific/rational side of his thinking – issues out of an Edwardian matrix.

Most of Russell's themes were established by the 1920s and fully worked through by the end of the 1930s. After this period he took increasingly to the world stage, and as his concerns became 'international' so the 'English context' became less important. From 1938 Russell's thought tends to become detached from its origins, impervious to new ideas, somewhat repetitious, and to my mind distinctly less interesting. It was, therefore, never my intention to produce an 'overview' of Russell's career (something which, in any case, Alan Ryan provides), but rather to bring out by close textual analysis the extent to which his most important work in this area was 'of its time', being a product of the tension between nineteenth-century intellectual traditions and Edwardian preoccupations.

This is of course not to say that the writing and the political activities of the later Russell are without interest, but it must be allowed that the term 'the later Russell' has rather different connotations than has, for example, 'the later Marx' or 'the later Mill'. Indeed, both these writers died at approximately the same age as was Russell when he set out on his 'international' career. Nor is it the case that Russell's preoccupation with the apparently tyrannical ambitions of the majority meant that he was a writer fundamentally and permanently suspicious of democracy.⁵ Russell's doubts concerning democracy were genuine and of a piece with his aristocratic Liberalism, but by the time he published *Power* he had come to accept that the tyranny of the majority was much less tangible and hence more bearable than the other forms currently on offer. It is in fact at this point in 1938 that the complex notion of Russell's development begins to coincide with the simplified version and his career attains a kind of retrospective cohesion as being one of consistent radicalism.

I am, however, less interested in the extent to which his political 'development' brought him into line with late-twentieth-century opinion than with the manner in which he elaborated on the central themes in his writing. Moreover, I am not concerned to rid Russell's social thought of inconsistencies, an endeavour which is in any case as regularly unsuccessful as related attempts to attach to him a political label that will stick. For my part I see no need, for example, when considering his interest in eugenics along with his anarchist tendencies, to play down either in an endeavour to provide an acceptable level of intellectual coherence. Indeed, one of the main advantages of ap-

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proaching Russell as an intellectual historian as against, say, a philosopher or a political scientist, is that there are rather fewer temptations to dismiss his antipathies, prejudices, and enthusiasms as ‘aberrations’, that is, as regrettable examples of personal excess or unavoidable contagion which have no place in an assessment of his relevance. Bereft of excess and its – often tactical – engagement with a number of currently impermissible beliefs, Russell’s cultural criticism would lose much of its vitality and value. By restoring his social thought to its cultural and intellectual context, and analysing it with regard to its development rather than its consistency, I hope to show that its chief interest lies not in the ‘contribution’ it makes (or fails to make) to political philosophy, but in its energetic continuance of the nineteenth-century tradition of general social criticism. As such, emphasis is placed on Russell’s role as a cultural critic, a writer who persisted with the ‘idea of the clerisy’ well into the twentieth century, an heir to Arnold and Mill and a predecessor of Leavis and Eliot.

Although the English tradition of cultural criticism begins with the middle class disparaging the middle class, after Matthew Arnold the number of influential intellectuals who were at once English, middle class, heterosexual, male, and educated at both public school and Oxbridge is extremely small. To this extent Russell – neither middle class nor educated at public school – was a typical intellectual perched on the fringes of polite society. He was exceptional only in that his authority as an intellectual derived from his being an aristocratic philosopher, a combination altogether more impressive than being, for example, an American poet, an Irish playwright, or a working-class novelist. Though his social and intellectual superiority carried pleasing Platonic overtones and comported well with Coleridgean notions of a ‘clerisy’, it had its disadvantages, the main one being that Russell’s social criticism – unlike that of intellectuals such as Eliot, Leavis, Shaw, Wells, and Orwell – was entirely divorced from the professional work which underpinned its authority.

In many ways, therefore, Russell seemed to have more in common with a nineteenth-century predecessor such as Mill than with the public intellectuals of the twentieth century, many of whom even when they were not directly involved in English studies participated in a literary culture. Like Mill, Russell combined remarkable intellectual breadth with a somewhat restricted capacity for aesthetic enjoyment: his passionate love of beauty, for example, was never translated into a fondness for art, much as his other passions rarely issued in affection

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for individuals. Yet while both writers tended to be advocates of the strenuous pursuit of the higher pleasures rather than wholehearted pursuers, Russell was not so averse to the lower pleasures as was Mill. Indeed, if there is credit to be had for the elevation of sexual activity into one of the higher pleasures of the twentieth century, then some of it must be Russell's.

Some of it must also belong to those who, in forming the Bloomsbury Group, discarded Victorian middle-class morality; but in neither case did the celebration of the lower self indicate a reversal of values – less chaste than Mill, they were no less conscious of their needs and, as they saw it, their responsibilities as intellectuals. Though on Bloomsbury's terms Russell was hardly an aesthete, he was – despite a taste for pulp fiction – no philistine either, and his intellect, wit, energy, and independence of mind lent an aristocratic edge to his cultural criticism. To what extent this work was compatible with even the most liberal interpretation of Liberalism is another matter. While doubtless aware that the idea of a 'clerisy' was a somewhat elitist notion, Russell, having waived his patrician rights, might be forgiven for expecting some deference in the area where his evident superiority was 'natural' rather than artificial. As an aristocratic member of the intellectual aristocracy he could, however, be seen as being merely twice favoured by birth, for he certainly accepted Galton's 'evidence' to the effect that genius ran in families. His defence of the 'life of the mind' against an encroaching democracy concerned mainly with matters pertaining to the body was thus even more at odds with the Benthamite tradition than Mill's similarly stubborn refusal to give ground to the mediocre. In both cases the preferred individual possessed autonomy but there was a feeling that his choice of values might require guidance, if only by example.

In the pursuit of his aims Russell was unconventionally, and perhaps even unconsciously, eclectic; therefore, in dealing with his social thought, it is necessary to establish an intellectual context rather wider than that normally associated with work of this kind. Particularly in the period up to 1920, Russell was as much influenced by a literary as a political culture. His Liberal inheritance was of course important, as was his involvement with the Guild Socialist movement, but the initial impetus for his most original social analysis derived not only from the Cambridge/Bloomsbury milieu with which he is most often identified, but from writers such as Lawrence, Conrad, and Eliot. What must also be emphasised is the extent to which the psychological difficulties he experienced at the turn of the century went some way towards

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determining the direction in which his thought developed, and for this reason I have in the early chapters given detailed attention to the 'problems of personality' and the transformation of his 'character'. In general, though, while I think biography in intellectual history is undervalued, my main interest is in tracing the development of his ideas, and, as the central themes become established, his private life is given less attention.

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CHAPTER I

A young man of character

Bertrand Russell was born on 18 May 1872 into the Whig aristocracy. His mother was Kate Spencer, the daughter of Lord Stanley of Alderly, his father, Lord Amberley, the son of Lord John Russell. Both grandfathers were Liberal politicians – Stanley only modestly successful, Russell twice Prime Minister and Leader of the Party until shortly before Gladstone formed his first administration in 1868. Russell's parents were Liberal intellectuals, friends and followers of John Stuart Mill, and as a consequence of this relationship he acquired Mill as a godfather. Although Amberley had political ambitions he was only briefly a Member of Parliament, his career being hampered – in his son's opinion – as much by his 'rigid intellectual honesty' as by his Millian views, particularly on birth control and female emancipation.

The listing of Russell's Liberal credentials is both irresistible and somewhat misleading, for, although connected at all points with the complexities of mid-Victorian Liberalism, the direct influence of this tradition was drastically reduced by a rapid sequence of deaths. Mill died in France a few days before his godson's first birthday. Russell's mother and sister died of diphtheria in 1874, his father of bronchitis in 1876. His grandfather, Lord John Russell, had retired to Pembroke Lodge in 1868 to – as one commentator remarks – 'spend his last days in unhinged petulance',¹ and, following the death of their father, Bertrand and his elder brother Frank were placed in the old man's care. Lord John died in 1878 and, with Frank away at school accumulating undesirable habits, Russell was brought up by his grandmother in protective semi-isolation.

Pembroke Lodge, possessing eleven acres of garden and situated in Richmond Park, was in the gift of the sovereign and had been placed at the disposal of Lord and Lady Russell for the duration of their lives. Russell's childhood memories of the house are associated with the beauty of its surroundings, while the record of a doggedly introspective