

## THE COUTURAT–RUSSELL CORRESPONDENCE

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Bertrand Russell. *Correspondance sur la philosophie, la logique et la politique avec Louis Couturat (1897–1913)*. Édition et commentaire par Anne-Françoise Schmid. Transcription et notes sur la langue internationale par Tazio Carlevaro. Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2001. Pp. 737. 68 euros; 448.12 francs.

Russell's exchange of letters with Louis Couturat, extending over sixteen years that include his most fruitful period in logic and philosophy, is among the most important of his correspondences. Couturat was not an original thinker like Russell, so that in some ways the correspondence between the two is less important than those with Frege, Whitehead and Moore (for example). On the other hand, Russell's correspondence with these latter figures is either incomplete or limited in time. In the case of Couturat, virtually all of the letters on both side survive, so that they form an extraordinary record of the evolution of Russell's thinking. The only other correspondence from this period that can be compared in scope with it is that with Philip Jourdain.

The surviving letters, almost complete, were discovered in the 1980s in the basement of the house of M. Henri Meier-Heuké by his wife, and subsequently donated to the Centre de Documentation et d'Études sur les Langues Internationales, in the municipal library of La Chaux-de-Fonds in Switzerland. The originals of some letters remain in the Russell Archives in Hamilton, but the bulk of the letters, from both correspondents, is to be found in Switzerland. The exact history of how both sides of the correspondence came to be united in Meier's basement is not known, but we can certainly be grateful to Couturat for preserving this very illuminating record of a formative period in Russell's career.

The correspondence covers a very large range of topics, including not only logic and the foundations of mathematics, but also the history of philosophy (especially the philosophy of Leibniz), philosophy of science, epistemology and current political events (particularly the Boer war).

The trajectories of Couturat's and Russell's careers show a strong convergence (one might even say pre-established harmony), but then an increasing divergence and estrangement as the correspondence petered out in the years following 1907. Couturat himself, born four years before Russell in 1868, began

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his career in a brilliant fashion, achieving top honours in mathematics and philosophy; Henri Bergson considered him as a possible successor at the Collège de France. However, Couturat, rather than making original contributions in philosophy and logic, confined himself to popularizing and publicizing other people's ideas. His role in the science of his day might be compared with that of Father Mersenne in the seventeenth century, the correspondent of Descartes, Fermat and other important scientists.

Couturat and Russell were brought together in the first place by a review by Russell of the former's *De l'Infini mathématique* in *Mind*. In the succeeding years, Couturat became a kind of disciple of Russell, popularizing mathematical logic in France, together with the new philosophy linked to it. He arranged for a translation of *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* to be published by Gauthier-Villars in 1901, and in 1905 published *Les Principes des mathématiques*, based in part on Russell's own *Principles of Mathematics*, and containing a violent attack on Kant's philosophy of mathematics, a deliberate provocation towards the reigning neo-Kantian orthodoxy in French philosophy.

Couturat entered into polemical debates with gusto, and in 1904 incited a well-known exchange between Russell and Pierre Boutroux, son of the well-known philosopher Émile Boutroux, who was married to Henri Poincaré's sister (*Papers* 4: 521–32). Russell later came to regret the polemics occasioned by Couturat's pugnacity, and referred in print to the misunderstandings caused by certain "indiscreet advocates" of symbolic logic, undoubtedly a hit at his former disciple (*Papers* 8: 53). In the correspondence, though, Russell does not exhibit as much caution as his later remarks suggest. Couturat's book of 1905 was based on a series of articles that aroused the wrath of Poincaré. Russell responded in his letters to Couturat's sometimes importunate demands for material to refute neo-Kantian philosophy, as well as material for his series of lectures at the Collège de France, in which he had the express intention of attacking contemporary philosophical fashions, and "making plenty of people jump up in rage" (p. 556). It is not surprising, that Russell complained to Ottoline Morrell in March 1912 of over-simplification and dogmatism in Couturat's versions of his ideas.

The International Congress of Philosophy of 1900 in Paris was a turning-point for both Couturat and Russell, though for somewhat different reasons. It was in Paris that Russell encountered for the first time the mathematical logic of Peano and his disciples, while, on the other hand, Couturat began his involvement with the movement for an international language. These events would strongly determine the future intellectual evolution of the two men, and their subsequent divergence was closely linked to their different intellectual loyalties.

In the letters of 1900–05, however, this divergence is not clearly apparent. To a contemporary reader, the close kinship between the early development of symbolic logic and the movement for an international language comes as a

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surprise. The two streams of thought, ultimately quite different, had a good deal in common initially. Peano, one of the founders of modern symbolic logic, was a strong proponent of various forms of international languages, including his own invention, *Latino sine flexione*, Latin without inflexions. Couturat himself, originally an adherent of Esperanto, became a devotee of Ido, a fact that led Russell to an irresistible pun. On 24 March 1912, he wrote in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell:

I enclose 2 letters (which please return), one from Peano and one from Couturat, both occupied with the international language (or rather languages). First there was Vollapük, then Esperanto, then an improvement on Esperanto called Ido (its proficientes are called Idiots), then Peano's "Latin without Inflections". These various sects hate each other like poison, but Esperantists and Idiots hate each other most because they are nearest akin. Couturat is an Idiot. I am ashamed to confess that he was my earliest disciple.

These sarcastic and disdainful remarks, though, date from the end of the friendship between the two men. In the correspondence from the early years of the century, Russell exhibits much more sympathy for Couturat's new-born enthusiasm. On 8 December 1900, Russell wrote in reply to Couturat:

I have been too busy lately to be able to reply earlier to your letter on the subject of Esperanto. I read with great interest the pamphlets you sent me; it is an extremely simple and ingenious language. I am highly favourable to the project, in so far as it concerns scientific books, and memoirs of scientific societies. I will make it known to my friends, though we are much too conservative here to adopt a similar reform in publications. (P. 209)

After a detailed discussion of the greater merits of an uninflected, tenseless language like the symbolic logic of Peano for the purposes of philosophy, Russell continues:

However, I do not at all deny that the project is a good one; in particular, if one could assure its adoption by Russians, Danes, etc. For it would be intolerable if it would become necessary to learn as well all these barbaric languages. And in spite of these theoretical reservations, I shall make as much propaganda as I can for Esperanto. (P. 210)

The fact that Russell at this time considered Esperanto and symbolic logic as rivals reminds us of the closeness of their origins. A key feature distinguishing the symbolic logic of Peano, Frege, Whitehead and Russell from the earlier work of algebraic logicians like Boole, Venn and Schröder is the attempt to parallel the linguistic structures of ordinary language rather than mathematical equations. Hence, it is not surprising to find Couturat objecting to symbolic logic that it cannot be used to order dinner in a hotel or find one's way in a

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railway station (p. 217). Couturat remained faithful to the methods of the algebraic tradition in logic, and argued for the dissociation of “logical symbolism, incorporating an algorithm and involving the analysis of thoughts, on the one hand, and on the other hand, a universal language” (p. 217). Modern readers will certainly sympathize with Couturat’s arguments here. Perhaps the only remaining contemporary relic of Russell’s vision of logic as a universal language is the touching devotion of analytic philosophers to first-order logic.

Couturat’s enthusiasm for a universal language was aroused not only by his desire for international scientific collaboration, but even more importantly by his strong socialist, internationalist and pacifist leanings. A good deal of the correspondence in 1899 and 1900 is taken up with the Boer war. The initial reverses suffered by the British in that conflict aroused Russell’s patriotic ardour, and some of the letters of those years show Russell as a fire-breathing imperialist. On 16 January 1900, he wrote that he had originally thought the war to be very unjust, but then realized that the Boers were planning to take advantage of England’s Russian preoccupations in order to take over all of the English possessions in Southern Africa. For England, it was a war of defence, the only way of preventing the loss of the empire, and the rise of militarism in South Africa (pp. 157–8). Elsewhere in the correspondence, Russell indulges himself in fantasies of benign imperialism:

In general, it seems to me that large empires are more valuable than small, because there are fewer frontiers, wars are neither so disastrous nor so frequent, and there is a greater chance of able rulers. In any case, the consolidations of frontiers diminishes the chance of wars. For that reason, I would like to see all of Asia (including the Indies) belong to Russia, all of Africa to England, and all America to the United States. Then we could expect everywhere a durable peace and civilized government. (Pp. 160–1)

Russell later expressed his regret over such views and sentiments (*Auto.*, 1: 134). Couturat, who replied to them with sweetly reasonable arguments in favour of peace and arbitration, generally comes off much better in this part of the correspondence, whereas Russell does not scruple to base his arguments on an absurd journalistic interview with an American Methodist bishop (pp. 174–5). In a famous passage of his autobiography, Russell traced the change in his political views to a transformative conversion experience of 1901 aroused by the sufferings of Evelyn Whitehead (*Auto.*, 1: 146). David Blitz has argued convincingly (*Russell*, 19: 117–42) that this change can more plausibly be traced to the effect of Couturat’s strongly argued letters of this period.

Another common interest that brought together the two friends was their work on Leibniz. Oddly enough, they came to this quite independently of each other, Russell because he had to take over a course of lectures from McTaggart, Couturat because of his reading of Whitehead and Grassmann. Russell’s book

on Leibniz forms a significant but minor episode in his philosophical career, whereas Couturat's work on the German philosopher led to his most lasting contributions, his great book of 1901, *La Logique de Leibniz*, and his groundbreaking 1903 edition of unpublished manuscripts. The correspondence makes clear that Leibniz, in spite of the gap of over two centuries, provided direct inspiration to both thinkers.

For historians of logic and philosophy, this extraordinary correspondence is an indispensable source of information on the evolution of Russell's ideas. During the years of active correspondence, Russell kept Couturat informed of the development of his ideas on the foundations of logic and mathematics, even including detailed technical developments in his letters. Russell's letters of 8 December 1900 and 17 January 1901 are particularly interesting and significant, since they represent his thinking just before the emergence of the Contradiction. Russell maintains that Cantor's diagonal argument is in error, because it does not apply to the universal class. Shortly afterwards, he reworked Cantor's proof into a paradox, and the logical crisis emerged that was not resolved until the final version of the theory of types.

When Couturat announced his intention in 1904 of writing an introductory monograph on mathematical logic (which never appeared), Russell sent him a summary of his current thinking on logical fundamentals, titled "Outlines of Symbolic Logic" (*Papers* 4: 77–84). However, Couturat was ultimately a disappointment to Russell as a logical interlocutor. The "Outlines", with their new ideas, were of no use to him. He complained of the subtleties and complications of the later developments of mathematical logic, as compared with the algorithmic simplicity of algebraic logic, and expressed his fatigue and disgust with technical labours (p. 494). It is not surprising that with Couturat's turning away from logical technique, and increasing obsession with international languages, and Russell's engagement with the subtleties and complications of the substitutional theory, and then the theory of types, the correspondence rapidly declined from 1907 onwards.

Russell's later disdainful remarks about Couturat conceal their warm and fruitful relationship in the years from 1897 to 1906. Russell visited Couturat and his wife in Caen in November 1898, together with Alys, and later encountered Couturat at the Paris Congress in 1900. Their last meeting was in a hotel in Paris in February 1906, various proposals from Russell that the Couturats should visit him in England having come to naught. Russell's last gesture of friendship was an invitation to Couturat to speak at the philosophical section of a mathematical congress in Cambridge in 1912 (p. 639), an invitation that Couturat did not accept, justifying his refusal by saying that he could not "preach for his saint, that is to say, the international language" (p. 640). At this time, he was deeply embroiled in feuds with the proponents of rival interna-

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tional languages. In a later letter, he complains of the underhanded attacks of Peano, in collusion with the Esperantists (p. 643).

It is a mistake, though, to dwell on the period of estrangement, as it conveys a false impression of the importance of Couturat in Russell's early career. It is better to conclude this picture of their personal relationship with a quotation from Russell himself, who wrote to Couturat on 5 February 1905:

What you say of the intellectual sympathy between us gives me great pleasure. I too have found in this sympathy encouragement to follow the path which seemed good to me, even when almost everyone was of another opinion. Before the Congress of 1900, I hardly had the courage of my convictions; after, I hoped at first that Peano or his disciples would see that their system was not yet perfect. But I soon saw this to be a vain hope; so, if I had not been able to find appreciation on your part and Whitehead's, I would probably have thought that my ideas were of no importance. (P. 470)

The correspondence is entirely in French; the translations above are by the reviewer. Russell's writing is fluent and idiomatic. The reader can verify the accuracy of his French because all his mistakes are meticulously pointed out in the notes to the letters. On the other hand, there are frequent mistakes in the English passages.

This is a very fine edition of the correspondence. The editor has provided detailed and informative annotations to the letters, explaining allusions and references and explicating some of the more difficult material. Tazio Carlevaro, who performed the tedious work of transcription, has provided the notes on the international language. In addition to the annotations, there is a useful introduction, a table of logical notation, a bibliographic index, an index of names, a subject index, and finally a detailed bibliography. Russell scholars are greatly in the debt of Schmid and Carlevaro for providing such an excellent edition of this important correspondence.

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